

ТОМАС ДЕ КВИНСИ

THE ENGLISH
MAIL-COACH AND JOAN
OF ARC

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The English Mail-Coach and Joan of Arc:

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Thomas De Quincey

The English Mail-Coach and Joan of Arc

PREFACE

Some portions of this Introduction have been taken from the Athenæum Press *Selections from De Quincey*; many of the notes have also been transferred from that volume. A number of the new notes I owe to a review of the *Selections* by Dr. Lane Cooper, of Cornell University. I wish also to thank for many favors the Committee and officers of the Glasgow University Library.

If a word by way of suggestion to teachers be pertinent, I would venture to remark that the object of the teacher of literature is, of course, only to fulfill the desire of the author—to make clear his facts and to bring home his ideas in all their power and beauty. Introductions and notes are only means to this end. Teachers, I think, sometimes lose sight of this fact; I know it is fatally easy for students to forget it. That teacher will have rendered a great service who has kept his pupils alive to the real aim of their studies,—to know the author, not to know of him.

M.H.T

INTRODUCTION

I. LIFE

Thomas de Quincey was born in Manchester on the 15th of August, 1785. His father was a man of high character and great taste for literature as well as a successful man of business; he died, most unfortunately, when Thomas was quite young. Very soon after our author's birth the family removed to The Farm, and later to Greenhay, a larger country place near Manchester. In 1796 De Quincey's mother, now for some years a widow, removed to Bath and placed him in the grammar school there.

Thomas, the future opium-eater, was a weak and sickly child. His first years were spent in solitude, and when his elder brother, William, a real boy, came home, the young author followed in humility mingled with terror the diversions of that ingenious and pugnacious "son of eternal racket." De Quincey's mother was a woman of strong character and emotions, as well as excellent mind, but she was excessively formal, and she seems to have inspired more awe than affection in her children, to whom she was for all that deeply devoted. Her notions of conduct in general and of child rearing in particular were very strict. She took Thomas out of Bath School, after three years' excellent work there, because he was too much praised, and kept him for a year

at an inferior school at Winkfield in Wiltshire.

In 1800, at the age of fifteen, De Quincey was ready for Oxford; he had not been praised without reason, for his scholarship was far in advance of that of ordinary pupils of his years. "That boy," his master at Bath School had said, "that boy could harangue an Athenian mob better than you or I could address an English one." He was sent to Manchester Grammar School, however, in order that after three years' stay he might secure a scholarship at Brasenose College, Oxford. He remained there—strongly protesting against a situation which deprived him "of health, of society, of amusement, of liberty, of congeniality of pursuits"—for nineteen months, and then ran away.

His first plan had been to reach Wordsworth, whose *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) had solaced him in fits of melancholy and had awakened in him a deep reverence for the neglected poet. His timidity preventing this, he made his way to Chester, where his mother then lived, in the hope of seeing a sister; was apprehended by the older members of the family; and through the intercession of his uncle, Colonel Penson, received the promise of a guinea a week to carry out his later project of a solitary tramp through Wales. From July to November, 1802, De Quincey then led a wayfarer's life. [Footnote: For a most interesting account of this period see the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Athenæum Press *Selections from De Quincey*, pp. 165-171, and notes.] He soon lost his guinea, however, by ceasing to keep his family informed of his whereabouts, and subsisted for a

time with great difficulty. Still apparently fearing pursuit, with a little borrowed money he broke away entirely from his home by exchanging the solitude of Wales for the greater wilderness of London. Failing there to raise money on his expected patrimony, he for some time deliberately clung to a life of degradation and starvation rather than return to his lawful governors.

Discovered by chance by his friends, De Quincey was brought home and finally allowed (1803) to go to Worcester College, Oxford, on a reduced income. Here, we are told, "he came to be looked upon as a strange being who associated with no one." During this time he learned to take opium. He left, apparently about 1807, without a degree. In the same year he made the acquaintance of Coleridge and Wordsworth; Lamb he had sought out in London several years before.

His acquaintance with Wordsworth led to his settlement in 1809 at Grasmere, in the beautiful English Lake District; his home for ten years was Dove Cottage, which Wordsworth had occupied for several years and which is now held in trust as a memorial of the poet. De Quincey was married in 1816, and soon after, his patrimony having been exhausted, he took up literary work in earnest.

In 1821 he went to London to dispose of some translations from German authors, but was persuaded first to write and publish an account of his opium experiences, which accordingly appeared in the *London Magazine* in that year. This new sensation eclipsed Lamb's *Essays of Elia*, which were appearing

in the same periodical. The *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was forthwith published in book form. De Quincey now made literary acquaintances. Tom Hood found the shrinking author "at home in a German ocean of literature, in a storm, flooding all the floor, the tables, and the chairs—billows of books." Richard Woodhouse speaks of the "depth and reality of his knowledge. . . . His conversation appeared like the elaboration of a mine of results. . . . Taylor led him into political economy, into the Greek and Latin accents, into antiquities, Roman roads, old castles, the origin and analogy of languages; upon all these he was informed to considerable minuteness. The same with regard to Shakespeare's sonnets, Spenser's minor poems, and the great writers and characters of Elizabeth's age and those of Cromwell's time."

From this time on De Quincey maintained himself by contributing to various magazines. He soon exchanged London and the Lakes for Edinburgh and its suburb, Lasswade, where the remainder of his life was spent. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and its rival *Tait's Magazine* received a large number of contributions. *The English Mail-Coach* appeared in 1849 in Blackwood. *Joan of Arc* had already been published (1847) in *Tait*. De Quincey continued to drink laudanum throughout his life,—twice after 1821 in very great excess. During his last years he nearly completed a collected edition of his works. He died in Edinburgh on the 8th of December, 1859.

II. CRITICAL REMARKS

The Opium-Eater had been a weak, lonely, and over-studious child, and he was a solitary and ill-developed man. His character and his work present strange contradictions. He is most precise in statement, yet often very careless of fact; he is most courteous in manner, yet inexcusably inconsiderate in his behavior. Again, he sets up a high standard of purity of diction, yet uses slang quite unnecessarily and inappropriately; and though a great master of style, he is guilty, at times, of digression within digression until all trace of the original subject is lost.

De Quincey divides his writings into three groups: first, that class which "proposes primarily to amuse the reader, but which, in doing so, may or may not happen occasionally to reach a higher station, at which the amusement passes into an impassioned interest." To this class would belong the *Autobiographic Sketches* and the *Literary Reminiscences*. As a second class he groups "those papers which address themselves purely to the understanding as an insulated faculty, or do so primarily." These essays would include, according to Professor Masson's subdivision, (a) Biographies, such as *Shakespeare* or *Pope*—*Joan of Arc* falls here, yet has some claim to a place in the first class; (b) Historical essays, like *The Cæsars*; (c) Speculative and Theological essays; (d) Essays in Political Economy and Politics; (e) Papers of Literary Theory and Criticism, such as the

brilliant discussions of *Rhetoric, Style, and Conversation*, and the famous *On the Knocking at the Gate in 'Macbeth.'* As a third and "far higher" class the author ranks the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, and also (but more emphatically) the *Suspiria de Profundis*. "On these," he says, "as modes of impassioned prose ranging under no precedents that I am aware of in any literature, it is much more difficult to speak justly, whether in a hostile or a friendly character."

Of De Quincey's essays in general it may be said that they bear witness alike to the diversity of his knowledge and the penetrative power of his intellect. The wide range of his subjects, however, deprives his papers when taken together of the weight which might attach to a series of related discussions. And, remarkable as is De Quincey's aptitude for analysis and speculation, more than once we have to regret the lack of the "saving common-sense" possessed by many far less gifted men. His erudition and insight are always a little in advance of his good judgment.

As to the works of the first class, the *Reminiscences* are defaced by the shrewish spirit shown in the accounts of Wordsworth and other friends; nor can we depend upon them as records of fact. But our author had had exceptional opportunities to observe these famous men and women, and he possessed no little insight into literature and personality. As to the *Autobiographic Sketches*, the handling of events is hopelessly arbitrary and fragmentary. In truth, De Quincey is drawing an idealized picture of childhood,—creating a type rather than re-

creating a person; it is a study of a child of talent that we receive from him, and as such these sketches form one of the most satisfactory products of his pen.

The *Confessions* as a narrative is related to the Autobiography, while its poetical passages range it with the *Suspiria* and the *Mail-Coach*. De Quincey seems to have believed that he was creating in such writings a new literary type of prose poetry or prose phantasy; he had, with his splendid dreams as subject-matter, lifted prose to heights hitherto scaled only by the poet. In reality his style owed much to the seventeenth-century writers, such as Milton and Sir Thomas Browne. He took part with Coleridge, Lamb, and others in the general revival of interest in earlier modern English prose, which is a feature of the Romantic Movement. Still none of his contemporaries wrote as he did; evidently De Quincey has a distinct quality of his own. Ruskin, in our own day, is like him, but never the same.

Yet De Quincey's prose poetry is a very small portion of his work, and it is not in this way only that he excels. Mr. Saintsbury has spoken of the strong appeal that De Quincey makes to boys. [Footnote: "Probably more boys have in the last forty years been brought to a love of literature proper by De Quincy than by any other writer whatever."—*History of Nineteenth-Century Literature*, p.198.] It is not without significance that he mentions as especially attractive to the young only writings with a large narrative element. [Footnote: "To read the *Essay on Murder*, the *English Mail-Coach*, *The Spanish Nun*, *The Cæsars*, and half

a score other things at the age of about fifteen or sixteen is, or ought to be, to fall in love with them."—*Essays in English Literature*, 1780-1860, p.307.] Few boys read poetry, whether in verse or prose, and fewer still criticism or philosophy; to every normal boy the gate of good literature is the good story. It is the narrative skill of De Quincey that has secured for him, in preference to other writers of his class, the favor of youthful readers.

It would be too much to say that the talent that attracts the young to him must needs be the Opium-Eater's grand talent, though the notion is defensible, seeing that only salient qualities in good writing appeal to inexperienced readers. I believe, however, that this skill in narration is De Quincey's most persistent quality,—the golden thread that unites all his most distinguished and most enduring work. And it is with him a part of his genius for style. Creative power of the kind that goes to the making of plots De Quincey had not; he has proved that forever by the mediocrity of *Klosterheim*. Give him Bergmann's account of the Tartar Migration, or the story of the Fighting Nun,—give him the matter,—and a brilliant narrative will result. Indeed, De Quincey loved a story for its own sake; he rejoiced to see it extend its winding course before him; he delighted to follow it, touch it, color it, see it grow into body and being under his hand. That this enthusiasm should now and then tend to endanger the integrity of the facts need not surprise us; as I have said elsewhere, accuracy in these matters is hardly to be expected of De Quincey. And

we can take our pleasure in the skillful unfolding of the dramatic narrative of the Tartar Flight—we can feel the author's joy in the scenic possibilities of his theme—even if we know that here and there an incident appears that is quite in its proper place—but is unknown to history.

In his *Confessions* the same constructive power bears its part in the author's triumph. A peculiar end was to be reached in that narrative,—an end in which the writer had a deep personal interest. What is an opium-eater? Says a character in a recent work of fiction, of a social wreck: "If it isn't whisky with him, it's opium; if it isn't opium, it's whisky." This speech establishes the popular category in which De Quincey's habit had placed him. Our attention was to be drawn from these degrading connections. And this is done not merely by the correction of some widespread fallacies as to the effects of the drug; far more it is the result of narrative skill. As we follow with ever-increasing sympathy the lonely and sensitive child, the wandering youth, the neuralgic patient, into the terrible grasp of opium, who realizes, amid the gorgeous delights and the awful horrors of the tale, that the writer is after all the victim of the worst of bad habits? We can hardly praise too highly the art which even as we look beneath it throws its glamour over us still.

Nor is it only in this constructive power, in the selection and arrangement of details, that De Quincey excels as a narrator; a score of minor excellences of his style, such as the fine Latin words or the sweeping periodic sentences, contribute to the

effective progress of his narrative prose. Mr. Lowell has said that "there are no such vistas and avenues of verse as Milton's." The comparison is somewhat hazardous, still I should like to venture the parallel claim that there are no such streams of prose as De Quincey's. The movement of his discourse is that of the broad river, not in its weight or force perhaps, but in its easy flowing progress, in its serene, unhurried certainty of its end. To be sure, only too often the waters overflow their banks and run far afield in alien channels. Yet, when great power over the instrument of language is joined to so much constructive skill, the result is narrative art of high quality,—an achievement that must be in no small measure the solid basis of De Quincey's fame.

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SECTION I—THE GLORY OF MOTION

Some twenty or more years before I matriculated at Oxford, Mr. Palmer, at that time M.P. for Bath, had accomplished two things, very hard to do on our little planet, the Earth, however cheap they may be held by eccentric people in comets: he had invented mail-coaches, and he had married the daughter of a duke. He was, therefore, just twice as great a man as Galileo, who did certainly invent (or, which is the same thing, [Footnote: "*The same thing*":—Thus, in the calendar of the Church Festivals, the discovery of the true cross (by Helen, the mother of Constantine) is recorded (and, one might think, with the express consciousness of sarcasm) as the *Invention* of the Cross.] discover) the satellites of Jupiter, those very next things extant to mail-coaches in the two capital pretensions of speed and keeping time, but, on the other hand, who did *not* marry the daughter of a duke.

These mail-coaches, as organised by Mr. Palmer, are entitled to a circumstantial notice from myself, having had so large a share in developing the anarchies of my subsequent dreams: an agency which they accomplished, 1st, through velocity at that time unprecedented—for they first revealed the glory of motion; 2dly, through grand effects for the eye between lamplight and the darkness upon solitary roads; 3dly, through animal beauty and

power so often displayed in the class of horses selected for this mail service; 4thly, through the conscious presence of a central intellect, that, in the midst of vast distances [Footnote: "Vast distances":—One case was familiar to mail-coach travellers where two mails in opposite directions, north and south, starting at the same minute from points six hundred miles apart, met almost constantly at a particular bridge which bisected the total distance.]—of storms, of darkness, of danger—overruled all obstacles into one steady co-operation to a national result. For my own feeling, this post-office service spoke as by some mighty orchestra, where a thousand instruments, all disregarding each other, and so far in danger of discord, yet all obedient as slaves to the supreme *baton* of some great leader, terminate in a perfection of harmony like that of heart, brain, and lungs in a healthy animal organisation. But, finally, that particular element in this whole combination which most impressed myself, and through which it is that to this hour Mr. Palmer's mail-coach system tyrannises over my dreams by terror and terrific beauty, lay in the awful *political* mission which at that time it fulfilled. The mail-coach it was that distributed over the face of the land, like the opening of apocalyptic vials, the heart-shaking news of Trafalgar, of Salamanca, of Vittoria, of Waterloo. These were the harvests that, in the grandeur of their reaping, redeemed the tears and blood in which they had been sown. Neither was the meanest peasant so much below the grandeur and the sorrow of the times as to confound battles such as these, which were gradually

moulding the destinies of Christendom, with the vulgar conflicts of ordinary warfare, so often no more than gladiatorial trials of national prowess. The victories of England in this stupendous contest rose of themselves as natural *Te Deums* to heaven; and it was felt by the thoughtful that such victories, at such a crisis of general prostration, were not more beneficial to ourselves than finally to France, our enemy, and to the nations of all western or central Europe, through whose pusillanimity it was that the French domination had prospered.

The mail-coach, as the national organ for publishing these mighty events, thus diffusively influential, became itself a spiritualised and glorified object to an impassioned heart; and naturally, in the Oxford of that day, *all* hearts were impassioned, as being all (or nearly all) in *early* manhood. In most universities there is one single college; in Oxford there were five-and-twenty, all of which were peopled by young men, the *élite* of their own generation; not boys, but men: none under eighteen. In some of these many colleges the custom permitted the student to keep what are called "short terms"; that is, the four terms of Michaelmas, Lent, Easter, and Act, were kept by a residence, in the aggregate, of ninety-one days, or thirteen weeks. Under this interrupted residence, it was possible that a student might have a reason for going down to his home four times in the year. This made eight journeys to and fro. But, as these homes lay dispersed through all the shires of the island, and most of us disdained all coaches except his Majesty's mail, no city out of London

could pretend to so extensive a connexion with Mr. Palmer's establishment as Oxford. Three mails, at the least, I remember as passing every day through Oxford, and benefiting by my personal patronage—viz., the Worcester, the Gloucester, and the Holyhead mail. Naturally, therefore, it became a point of some interest with us, whose journeys revolved every six weeks on an average, to look a little into the executive details of the system. With some of these Mr. Palmer had no concern; they rested upon bye-laws enacted by posting-houses for their own benefit, and upon other bye-laws, equally stern, enacted by the inside passengers for the illustration of their own haughty exclusiveness. These last were of a nature to rouse our scorn; from which the transition was not very long to systematic mutiny. Up to this time, say 1804, or 1805 (the year of Trafalgar), it had been the fixed assumption of the four inside people (as an old tradition of all public carriages derived from the reign of Charles II) that they, the illustrious quaternion, constituted a porcelain variety of the human race, whose dignity would have been compromised by exchanging one word of civility with the three miserable delf-ware outsides. Even to have kicked an outsider might have been held to attain the foot concerned in that operation, so that, perhaps, it would have required an act of Parliament to restore its purity of blood. What words, then, could express the horror, and the sense of treason, in that case, which *had* happened, where all three outsides (the trinity of Pariahs) made a vain attempt to sit down at the same breakfast-table or dinner-table

with the consecrated four? I myself witnessed such an attempt; and on that occasion a benevolent old gentleman endeavoured to soothe his three holy associates, by suggesting that, if the outsiders were indicted for this criminal attempt at the next assizes, the court would regard it as a case of lunacy or *delirium tremens* rather than of treason. England owes much of her grandeur to the depth of the aristocratic element in her social composition, when pulling against her strong democracy. I am not the man to laugh at it. But sometimes, undoubtedly, it expressed itself in comic shapes. The course taken with the infatuated outsiders, in the particular attempt which I have noticed, was that the waiter, beckoning them away from the privileged *salle-à-manger*, sang out, "This way, my good men," and then enticed these good men away to the kitchen. But that plan had not always answered. Sometimes, though rarely, cases occurred where the intruders, being stronger than usual, or more vicious than usual, resolutely refused to budge, and so far carried their point as to have a separate table arranged for themselves in a corner of the general room. Yet, if an Indian screen could be found ample enough to plant them out from the very eyes of the high table, or *dais*, it then became possible to assume as a fiction of law that the three delf fellows, after all, were not present. They could be ignored by the porcelain men, under the maxim that objects not appearing and objects not existing are governed by the same logical construction. [Footnote: *De non apparentibus*, etc.]

Such being, at that time, the usage of mail-coaches, what was

to be done by us of young Oxford? We, the most aristocratic of people, who were addicted to the practice of looking down superciliously even upon the insides themselves as often very questionable characters—were we, by voluntarily going outside, to court indignities? If our dress and bearing sheltered us generally from the suspicion of being "raff" (the name at that period for "snobs" [Footnote: "*Snobs*," and its antithesis, "*nobs*," arose among the internal factions of shoemakers perhaps ten years later. Possibly enough, the terms may have existed much earlier; but they were then first made known, picturesquely and effectively, by a trial at some assizes which happened to fix the public attention.]), we really *were* such constructively by the place we assumed. If we did not submit to the deep shadow of eclipse, we entered at least the skirts of its penumbra. And the analogy of theatres was valid against us,—where no man can complain of the annoyances incident to the pit or gallery, having his instant remedy in paying the higher price of the boxes. But the soundness of this analogy we disputed. In the case of the theatre, it cannot be pretended that the inferior situations have any separate attractions, unless the pit may be supposed to have an advantage for the purposes of the critic or the dramatic reporter. But the critic or reporter is a rarity. For most people, the sole benefit is in the price. Now, on the contrary, the outside of the mail had its own incommunicable advantages. These we could not forego. The higher price we would willingly have paid, but not the price connected with the condition of riding

inside; which condition we pronounced insufferable. The air, the freedom of prospect, the proximity to the horses, the elevation of seat: these were what we required; but, above all, the certain anticipation of purchasing occasional opportunities of driving.

Such was the difficulty which pressed us; and under the coercion of this difficulty we instituted a searching inquiry into the true quality and valuation of the different apartments about the mail. We conducted this inquiry on metaphysical principles; and it was ascertained satisfactorily that the roof of the coach, which by some weak men had been called the attics, and by some the garrets, was in reality the drawing-room; in which drawing-room the box was the chief ottoman or sofa; whilst it appeared that the *inside* which had been traditionally regarded as the only room tenable by gentlemen, was, in fact, the coal-cellar in disguise.

Great wits jump. The very same idea had not long before struck the celestial intellect of China. Amongst the presents carried out by our first embassy to that country was a state-coach. It had been specially selected as a personal gift by George III; but the exact mode of using it was an intense mystery to Peking. The ambassador, indeed (Lord Macartney), had made some imperfect explanations upon this point; but, as His Excellency communicated these in a diplomatic whisper at the very moment of his departure, the celestial intellect was very feebly illuminated, and it became necessary to call a cabinet council on the grand state question, "Where was the Emperor

to sit?" The hammer-cloth happened to be unusually gorgeous; and, partly on that consideration, but partly also because the box offered the most elevated seat, was nearest to the moon, and undeniably went foremost, it was resolved by acclamation that the box was the imperial throne, and, for the scoundrel who drove,—he might sit where he could find a perch. The horses, therefore, being harnessed, solemnly his imperial majesty ascended his new English throne under a flourish of trumpets, having the first lord of the treasury on his right hand, and the chief jester on his left. Pekin gloried in the spectacle; and in the whole flowery people, constructively present by representation, there was but one discontented person, and *that* was the coachman. This mutinous individual audaciously shouted, "Where am *I* to sit?" But the privy council, incensed by his disloyalty, unanimously opened the door, and kicked him into the inside. He had all the inside places to himself; but such is the rapacity of ambition that he was still dissatisfied. "I say," he cried out in an extempore petition addressed to the Emperor through the window—"I say, how am I to catch hold of the reins?"—"Anyhow," was the imperial answer; "don't trouble *me*, man, in my glory. How catch the reins? Why, through the windows, through the keyholes—*anyhow*." Finally this contumacious coachman lengthened the check-strings into a sort of jury-reins communicating with the horses; with these he drove as steadily as Pekin had any right to expect. The Emperor returned after the briefest of circuits; he descended in great pomp from his throne, with the severest

resolution never to remount it. A public thanksgiving was ordered for his majesty's happy escape from the disease of a broken neck; and the state-coach was dedicated thenceforward as a votive offering to the god Fo Fo—whom the learned more accurately called Fi Fi.

A revolution of this same Chinese character did young Oxford of that era effect in the constitution of mail-coach society. It was a perfect French Revolution; and we had good reason to say, *ça ira*. In fact, it soon became *too* popular. The "public"—a well-known character, particularly disagreeable, though slightly respectable, and notorious for affecting the chief seats in synagogues—had at first loudly opposed this revolution; but, when the opposition showed itself to be ineffectual, our disagreeable friend went into it with headlong zeal. At first it was a sort of race between us; and, as the public is usually from thirty to fifty years old, naturally we of young Oxford, that averaged about twenty, had the advantage. Then the public took to bribing, giving fees to horse-keepers, &c., who hired out their persons as warming-pans on the box seat. *That*, you know, was shocking to all moral sensibilities. Come to bribery, said we, and there is an end to all morality,—Aristotle's, Zeno's, Cicero's, or anybody's. And, besides, of what use was it? For *we* bribed also. And, as our bribes, to those of the public, were as five shillings to sixpence, here again young Oxford had the advantage. But the contest was ruinous to the principles of the stables connected with the mails. This whole corporation was constantly bribed, rebribed,

and often surrebribed; a mail-coach yard was like the hustings in a contested election; and a horse-keeper, ostler, or helper, was held by the philosophical at that time to be the most corrupt character in the nation.

There was an impression upon the public mind, natural enough from the continually augmenting velocity of the mail, but quite erroneous, that an outside seat on this class of carriages was a post of danger. On the contrary, I maintained that, if a man had become nervous from some gipsy prediction in his childhood, allocating to a particular moon now approaching some unknown danger, and he should inquire earnestly, "Whither can I fly for shelter? Is a prison the safest retreat? or a lunatic hospital? or the British Museum?" I should have replied, "Oh no; I'll tell you what to do. Take lodgings for the next forty days on the box of his Majesty's mail. Nobody can touch you there. If it is by bills at ninety days after date that you are made unhappy—if noters and protesters are the sort of wretches whose astrological shadows darken the house of life—then note you what I vehemently protest: viz., that, no matter though the sheriff and under-sheriff in every county should be running after you with his *posse*, touch a hair of your head he cannot whilst you keep house and have your legal domicile on the box of the mail. It is felony to stop the mail; even the sheriff cannot do that. And an *extra* touch of the whip to the leaders (no great matter if it grazes the sheriff) at any time guarantees your safety." In fact, a bedroom in a quiet house seems a safe enough retreat; yet it is liable to its own

notorious nuisances—to robbers by night, to rats, to fire. But the mail laughs at these terrors. To robbers, the answer is packed up and ready for delivery in the barrel of the guard's blunderbuss. Rats again! there *are* none about mail-coaches any more than snakes in Von Troil's Iceland; [Footnote: "*Von Troil's Iceland*".—The allusion is to a well-known chapter in Von Troil's work, entitled, "Concerning the Snakes of Iceland." The entire chapter consists of these six words—"*There art no snakes in Iceland.*"] except, indeed, now and then a parliamentary rat, who always hides his shame in what I have shown to be the "coal-cellar." And, as to fire, I never knew but one in a mail-coach; which was in the Exeter mail, and caused by an obstinate sailor bound to Devonport. Jack, making light of the law and the lawgiver that had set their faces against his offence, insisted on taking up a forbidden seat [Footnote: "*Forbidden seat*":—The very sternest code of rules was enforced upon the mails by the Post-office. Throughout England, only three outsides were allowed, of whom one was to sit on the box, and the other two immediately behind the box; none, under any pretext, to come near the guard; an indispensable caution; since else, under the guise of a passenger, a robber might by any one of a thousand advantages—which sometimes are created, but always are favoured, by the animation of frank social intercourse—have disarmed the guard. Beyond the Scottish border, the regulation was so far relaxed as to allow of *four* outsides, but not relaxed at all as to the mode of placing them. One, as before, was seated on the box, and the other three

on the front of the roof, with a determinate and ample separation from the little insulated chair of the guard. This relaxation was conceded by way of compensating to Scotland her disadvantages in point of population. England, by the superior density of her population, might always count upon a large fund of profits in the fractional trips of chance passengers riding for short distances of two or three stages. In Scotland this chance counted for much less. And therefore, to make good the deficiency, Scotland was allowed a compensatory profit upon one *extra* passenger.] in the rear of the roof, from which he could exchange his own yarns with those of the guard. No greater offence was then known to mail-coaches; it was treason, it was *læsa majestas*, it was by tendency arson; and the ashes of Jack's pipe, falling amongst the straw of the hinder boot, containing the mail-bags, raised a flame which (aided by the wind of our motion) threatened a revolution in the republic of letters. Yet even this left the sanctity of the box unviolated. In dignified repose, the coachman and myself sat on, resting with benign composure upon our knowledge that the fire would have to burn its way through four inside passengers before it could reach ourselves. I remarked to the coachman, with a quotation from Virgil's "Æneid" really too hackneyed—

"Jam proximus ardet
Ucalegon."

But, recollecting that the Virgilian part of the coachman's

education might have been neglected, I interpreted so far as to say that perhaps at that moment the flames were catching hold of our worthy brother and inside passenger, Ucalegon. The coachman made no answer,—which is my own way when a stranger addresses me either in Syriac or in Coptic; but by his faint sceptical smile he seemed to insinuate that he knew better,—for that Ucalegon, as it happened, was not in the way-bill, and therefore could not have been booked.

No dignity is perfect which does not at some point ally itself with the mysterious. The connexion of the mail with the state and the executive government—a connexion obvious, but yet not strictly defined—gave to the whole mail establishment an official grandeur which did us service on the roads, and invested us with seasonable terrors. Not the less impressive were those terrors because their legal limits were imperfectly ascertained. Look at those turnpike gates: with what deferential hurry, with what an obedient start, they fly open at our approach! Look at that long line of carts and carters ahead, audaciously usurping the very crest of the road. Ah! traitors, they do not hear us as yet; but, as soon as the dreadful blast of our horn reaches them with proclamation of our approach, see with what frenzy of trepidation they fly to their horses' heads, and deprecate our wrath by the precipitation of their crane-neck quarterings. Treason they feel to be their crime; each individual carter feels himself under the ban of confiscation and attainder; his blood is attainted through six generations; and nothing is wanting but

the headsman and his axe, the block and the sawdust, to close up the vista of his horrors. What! shall it be within benefit of clergy to delay the king's message on the high road?—to interrupt the great respirations, ebb and flood, *systole* and *diastole*, of the national intercourse?—to endanger the safety of tidings running day and night between all nations and languages? Or can it be fancied, amongst the weakest of men, that the bodies of the criminals will be given up to their widows for Christian burial? Now, the doubts which were raised as to our powers did more to wrap them in terror, by wrapping them in uncertainty, than could have been effected by the sharpest definitions of the law from the Quarter Sessions. We, on our parts (we, the collective mail, I mean), did our utmost to exalt the idea of our privileges by the insolence with which we wielded them. Whether this insolence rested upon law that gave it a sanction, or upon conscious power that haughtily dispensed with that sanction, equally it spoke from a potential station; and the agent, in each particular insolence of the moment, was viewed reverentially, as one having authority.

Sometimes after breakfast his Majesty's mail would become frisky; and, in its difficult wheelings amongst the intricacies of early markets, it would upset an apple-cart, a cart loaded with eggs, &c. Huge was the affliction and dismay, awful was the smash. I, as far as possible, endeavoured in such a case to represent the conscience and moral sensibilities of the mail; and, when wildernesses of eggs were lying poached under our horses' hoofs, then would I stretch forth my hands in sorrow,

saying (in words too celebrated at that time, from the false echoes [Footnote: "*False echoes*":—Yes, false! for the words ascribed to Napoleon, as breathed to the memory of Desaix, never were uttered at all. They stand in the same category of theatrical fictions as the cry of the foundering line-of-battle ship *Vengeur*, as the vaunt of General Cambronne at Waterloo, "La Garde meurt, mais ne se rend pas," or as the repartees of Talleyrand.] of Marengo), "Ah! wherefore have we not time to weep over you?"—which was evidently impossible, since, in fact, we had not time to laugh over them. Tied to post-office allowance in some cases of fifty minutes for eleven miles, could the royal mail pretend to undertake the offices of sympathy and condolence? Could it be expected to provide tears for the accidents of the road? If even it seemed to trample on humanity, it did so, I felt, in discharge of its own more peremptory duties.

Upholding the morality of the mail, *a fortiori* I upheld its rights; as a matter of duty, I stretched to the uttermost its privilege of imperial precedence, and astonished weak minds by the feudal powers which I hinted to be lurking constructively in the charters of this proud establishment. Once I remember being on the box of the Holyhead mail, between Shrewsbury and Oswestry, when a tawdry thing from Birmingham, some "Tallyho" or "Highflyer," all flaunting with green and gold, came up alongside of us. What a contrast to our royal simplicity of form and colour in this plebeian wretch! The single ornament on our dark ground of chocolate colour was the mighty shield of

the imperial arms, but emblazoned in proportions as modest as a signet-ring bears to a seal of office. Even this was displayed only on a single panel, whispering, rather than proclaiming, our relations to the mighty state; whilst the beast from Birmingham, our green-and-gold friend from false, fleeting, perjured Brummagem, had as much writing and painting on its sprawling flanks as would have puzzled a decipherer from the tombs of Luxor. For some time this Birmingham machine ran along by our side—a piece of familiarity that already of itself seemed to me sufficiently Jacobinical. But all at once a movement of the horses announced a desperate intention of leaving us behind. "Do you see *that*?" I said to the coachman.—"I see," was his short answer. He was wide awake,—yet he waited longer than seemed prudent; for the horses of our audacious opponent had a disagreeable air of freshness and power. But his motive was loyal; his wish was that the Birmingham conceit should be full-blown before he froze it. When *that* seemed right, he unloosed, or, to speak by a stronger word, he *sprang*, his known resources: he slipped our royal horses like cheetahs, or hunting-leopards, after the affrighted game. How they could retain such a reserve of fiery power after the work they had accomplished seemed hard to explain. But on our side, besides the physical superiority, was a tower of moral strength, namely the king's name, "which they upon the adverse faction wanted." Passing them without an effort, as it seemed, we threw them into the rear with so lengthening an interval between us as proved

in itself the bitterest mockery of their presumption; whilst our guard blew back a shattering blast of triumph that was really too painfully full of derision.

I mention this little incident for its connexion with what followed. A Welsh rustic, sitting behind me, asked if I had not felt my heart burn within me during the progress of the race? I said, with philosophic calmness, *No*; because we were not racing with a mail, so that no glory could be gained. In fact, it was sufficiently mortifying that such a Birmingham thing should dare to challenge us. The Welshman replied that he didn't see *that*; for that a cat might look at a king, and a Brummagem coach might lawfully race the Holyhead mail. "*Race* us, if you like," I replied, "though even *that* has an air of sedition; but not *beat* us. This would have been treason; and for its own sake I am glad that the 'Tallyho' was disappointed." So dissatisfied did the Welshman seem with this opinion that at last I was obliged to tell him a very fine story from one of our elder dramatists: viz., that once, in some far Oriental kingdom, when the sultan of all the land, with his princes, ladies, and chief omrahs, were flying their falcons, a hawk suddenly flew at a majestic eagle, and, in defiance of the eagle's natural advantages, in contempt also of the eagle's traditional royalty, and before the whole assembled field of astonished spectators from Agra and Lahore, killed the eagle on the spot. Amazement seized the sultan at the unequal contest, and burning admiration for its unparalleled result. He commanded that the hawk should be brought before him; he

caressed the bird with enthusiasm; and he ordered that, for the commemoration of his matchless courage, a diadem of gold and rubies should be solemnly placed on the hawk's head, but then that, immediately after this solemn coronation, the bird should be led off to execution, as the most valiant indeed of traitors, but not the less a traitor, as having dared to rise rebelliously against his liege lord and anointed sovereign, the eagle. "Now," said I to the Welshman, "to you and me, as men of refined sensibilities, how painful it would have been that this poor Brummagem brute, the 'Tallyho,' in the impossible case of a victory over us, should have been crowned with Birmingham tinsel, with paste diamonds and Roman pearls, and then led off to instant execution." The Welshman doubted if that could be warranted by law. And, when I hinted at the 6th of Edward Longshanks, chap. 18, for regulating the precedency of coaches, as being probably the statute relied on for the capital punishment of such offences, he replied drily that, if the attempt to pass a mail really were treasonable, it was a pity that the "Tallyho" appeared to have so imperfect an acquaintance with law.

The modern modes of travelling cannot compare with the old mail-coach system in grandeur and power. They boast of more velocity,—not, however, as a consciousness, but as a fact of our lifeless knowledge, resting upon *alien* evidence: as, for instance, because somebody *says* that we have gone fifty miles in the hour, though we are far from feeling it as a personal experience; or upon the evidence of a result, as that actually

we find ourselves in York four hours after leaving London. Apart from such an assertion, or such a result, I myself am little aware of the pace. But, seated on the old mail-coach, we needed no evidence out of ourselves to indicate the velocity. On this system the word was not *magna loquimur*, as upon railways, but *vivimus*. Yes, "*magna vivimus*"; we do not make verbal ostentation of our grandeurs, we realise our grandeurs in act, and in the very experience of life. The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed; we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling; and this speed was not the product of blind insensate agencies, that had no sympathy to give, but was incarnated in the fiery eyeballs of the noblest amongst brutes, in his dilated nostril, spasmodic muscles, and thunder-beating hoofs. The sensibility of the horse, uttering itself in the maniac light of his eye, might be the last vibration of such a movement; the glory of Salamanca might be the first. But the intervening links that connected them, that spread the earthquake of battle into the eyeballs of the horse, were the heart of man and its electric thrillings—kindling in the rapture of the fiery strife, and then propagating its own tumults by contagious shouts and gestures to the heart of his servant the horse. But now, on the new system of travelling, iron tubes and boilers have disconnected man's heart from the ministers of his locomotion. Nile nor Trafalgar has power to raise an extra bubble in a steam-kettle. The galvanic cycle is broken up for ever; man's imperial nature no longer sends itself

forward through the electric sensibility of the horse; the inter-agencies are gone in the mode of communication between the horse and his master out of which grew so many aspects of sublimity under accidents of mists that hid, or sudden blazes that revealed, of mobs that agitated, or midnight solitudes that awed. Tidings fitted to convulse all nations must henceforwards travel by culinary process; and the trumpet that once announced from afar the laurelled mail, heart-shaking when heard screaming on the wind and proclaiming itself through the darkness to every village or solitary house on its route, has now given way for ever to the pot-walloping of the boiler. Thus have perished multiform openings for public expressions of interest, scenical yet natural, in great national tidings,—for revelations of faces and groups that could not offer themselves amongst the fluctuating mobs of a railway station. The gatherings of gazers about a laurelled mail had one centre, and acknowledged one sole interest. But the crowds attending at a railway station have as little unity as running water, and own as many centres as there are separate carriages in the train.

How else, for example, than as a constant watcher for the dawn, and for the London mail that in summer months entered about daybreak amongst the lawny thickets of Maryborough forest, couldst thou, sweet Fanny of the Bath road, have become the glorified inmate of my dreams? Yet Fanny, as the loveliest young woman for face and person that perhaps in my whole life I have beheld, merited the station which even now, from a distance

of forty years, she holds in my dreams; yes, though by links of natural association she brings along with her a troop of dreadful creatures, fabulous and not fabulous, that are more abominable to the heart than Fanny and the dawn are delightful.

Miss Fanny of the Bath road, strictly speaking, lived at a mile's distance from that road, but came so continually to meet the mail that I on my frequent transits rarely missed her, and naturally connected her image with the great thoroughfare where only I had ever seen her. Why she came so punctually I do not exactly know; but I believe with some burden of commissions, to be executed in Bath, which had gathered to her own residence as a central rendezvous for converging them. The mail-coachman who drove the Bath mail and wore the royal livery [Footnote: "Wore the royal livery":—The general impression was that the royal livery belonged of right to the mail-coachmen as their professional dress. But that was an error. To the guard it *did* belong, I believe, and was obviously essential as an official warrant, and as a means of instant identification for his person, in the discharge of his important public duties. But the coachman, and especially if his place in the series did not connect him immediately with London and the General Post-Office, obtained the scarlet coat only as an honorary distinction after long (or, if not long, trying and special) service.] happened to be Fanny's grandfather. A good man he was, that loved his beautiful granddaughter, and, loving her wisely, was vigilant over her deportment in any case where young Oxford might happen

to be concerned. Did my vanity then suggest that I myself, individually, could fall within the line of his terrors? Certainly not, as regarded any physical pretensions that I could plead; for Fanny (as a chance passenger from her own neighbourhood once told me) counted in her train a hundred and ninety-nine professed admirers, if not open aspirants to her favour; and probably not one of the whole brigade but excelled myself in personal advantages. Ulysses even, with the unfair advantage of his accursed bow, could hardly have undertaken that amount of suitors. So the danger might have seemed slight—only that woman is universally aristocratic; it is amongst her nobilities of heart that she *is* so. Now, the aristocratic distinctions in my favour might easily with Miss Fanny have compensated my physical deficiencies. Did I then make love to Fanny? Why, yes; about as much love as one *could* make whilst the mail was changing horses—a process which, ten years later, did not occupy above eighty seconds; but *then*,—viz., about Waterloo—it occupied five times eighty. Now, four hundred seconds offer a field quite ample enough for whispering into a young woman's ear a great deal of truth, and (by way of parenthesis) some trifle of falsehood. Grandpapa did right, therefore, to watch me. And yet, as happens too often to the grandpapas of earth in a contest with the admirers of granddaughters, how vainly would he have watched me had I meditated any evil whispers to Fanny! She, it is my belief, would have protected herself against any man's evil suggestions. But he, as the result showed, could not have intercepted the opportunities

for such suggestions. Yet, why not? Was he not active? Was he not blooming? Blooming he was as Fanny herself.

"Say, all our praises why should lords—"

Stop, that's not the line.

"Say, all our roses why should girls engross?"

The coachman showed rosy blossoms on his face deeper even than his granddaughter's—*his* being drawn from the ale-cask, Fanny's from the fountains of the dawn. But, in spite of his blooming face, some infirmities he had; and one particularly in which he too much resembled a crocodile. This lay in a monstrous inaptitude for turning round. The crocodile, I presume, owes that inaptitude to the absurd *length* of his back; but in our grandpapa it arose rather from the absurd *breadth* of his back, combined, possibly, with some growing stiffness in his legs. Now, upon this crocodile infirmity of his I planted a human advantage for tendering my homage to Miss Fanny. In defiance of all his honourable vigilance, no sooner had he presented to us his mighty Jovian back (what a field for displaying to mankind his royal scarlet!), whilst inspecting professionally the buckles, the straps, and the silvery turrets [Footnote: "*Turrets*":—As one who loves and venerates Chaucer for his unrivalled merits of tenderness, of picturesque characterisation, and of narrative skill, I noticed with great pleasure that the word *torrettes* is used by him to designate the little devices through which the reins are made to pass. This same word, in the same exact sense, I heard uniformly used by many scores of illustrious mail-coachmen to

whose confidential friendship I had the honour of being admitted in my younger days.] of his harness, than I raised Miss Fanny's hand to my lips, and, by the mixed tenderness and respectfulness of my manner, caused her easily to understand how happy it would make me to rank upon her list as No. 10 or 12: in which case a few casualties amongst her lovers (and, observe, they *hanged* liberally in those days) might have promoted me speedily to the top of the tree; as, on the other hand, with how much loyalty of submission I acquiesced by anticipation in her award, supposing that she should plant me in the very rearward of her favour, as No. 199 + 1. Most truly I loved this beautiful and ingenuous girl; and, had it not been for the Bath mail, timing all courtships by post-office allowance, heaven only knows what might have come of it. People talk of being over head and ears in love; now, the mail was the cause that I sank only over ears in love,—which, you know, still left a trifle of brain to overlook the whole conduct of the affair.

Ah, reader! when I look back upon those days, it seems to me that all things change—all things perish. "Perish the roses and the palms of kings": perish even the crowns and trophies of Waterloo: thunder and lightning are not the thunder and lightning which I remember. Roses are degenerating. The Fannies of our island—though this I say with reluctance—are not visibly improving; and the Bath road is notoriously superannuated. Crocodiles, you will say, are stationary. Mr. Waterton tells me that the crocodile does *not change*,—that a cayman, in fact, or

an alligator, is just as good for riding upon as he was in the time of the Pharaohs. *That* may be; but the reason is that the crocodile does not live fast—he is a slow coach. I believe it is generally understood among naturalists that the crocodile is a blockhead. It is my own impression that the Pharaohs were also blockheads. Now, as the Pharaohs and the crocodile domineered over Egyptian society, this accounts for a singular mistake that prevailed through innumerable generations on the Nile. The crocodile made the ridiculous blunder of supposing man to be meant chiefly for his own eating. Man, taking a different view of the subject, naturally met that mistake by another: he viewed the crocodile as a thing sometimes to worship, but always to run away from. And this continued till Mr. Waterton [Footnote: "*Mr. Waterton*":—Had the reader lived through the last generation, he would not need to be told that, some thirty or thirty-five years back, Mr. Waterton, a distinguished country gentleman of ancient family in Northumberland, publicly mounted and rode in top-boots a savage old crocodile, that was restive and very impertinent, but all to no purpose. The crocodile jibbed and tried to kick, but vainly. He was no more able to throw the squire than Sinbad was to throw the old scoundrel who used his back without paying for it, until he discovered a mode (slightly immoral, perhaps, though some think not) of murdering the old fraudulent jockey, and so circuitously of unhorsing him.] changed the relations between the animals. The mode of escaping from the reptile he showed to be not by running away, but by leaping on its

back booted and spurred. The two animals had misunderstood each other. The use of the crocodile has now been cleared up—viz., to be ridden; and the final cause of man is that he may improve the health of the crocodile by riding him a-fox-hunting before breakfast. And it is pretty certain that any crocodile who has been regularly hunted through the season, and is master of the weight he carries, will take a six-barred gate now as well as ever he would have done in the infancy of the pyramids.

If, therefore, the crocodile does *not* change, all things else undeniably *do*: even the shadow of the pyramids grows less. And often the restoration in vision of Fanny and the Bath road makes me too pathetically sensible of that truth. Out of the darkness, if I happen to call back the image of Fanny, up rises suddenly from a gulf of forty years a rose in June; or, if I think for an instant of the rose in June, up rises the heavenly face of Fanny. One after the other, like the antiphonies in the choral service, rise Fanny and the rose in June, then back again the rose in June and Fanny. Then come both together, as in a chorus—roses and Fannies, Fannies and roses, without end, thick as blossoms in paradise. Then comes a venerable crocodile, in a royal livery of scarlet and gold, with sixteen capes; and the crocodile is driving four-in-hand from the box of the Bath mail. And suddenly we upon the mail are pulled up by a mighty dial, sculptured with the hours, that mingle with the heavens and the heavenly host. Then all at once we are arrived at Marlborough forest, amongst the lovely households [Footnote: "*Households*":—Roe-deer do

not congregate in herds like the fallow or the red deer, but by separate families, parents and children; which feature of approximation to the sanctity of human hearths, added to their comparatively miniature and graceful proportions, conciliates to them an interest of peculiar tenderness, supposing even that this beautiful creature is less characteristically impressed with the grandeurs of savage and forest life.] of the roe-deer; the deer and their fawns retire into the dewy thickets; the thickets are rich with roses; once again the roses call up the sweet countenance of Fanny; and she, being the granddaughter of a crocodile, awakens a dreadful host of semi-legendary animals—griffins, dragons, basilisks, sphinxes—till at length the whole vision of fighting images crowds into one towering armorial shield, a vast emblazonry of human charities and human loveliness that have perished, but quartered heraldically with unutterable and demoniac natures, whilst over all rises, as a surmounting crest, one fair female hand, with the forefinger pointing, in sweet, sorrowful admonition, upwards to heaven, where is sculptured the eternal writing which proclaims the frailty of earth and her children.

GOING DOWN WITH VICTORY

But the grandest chapter of our experience within the whole mail-coach service was on those occasions when we went down from London with the news of victory. A period of about ten years stretched from Trafalgar to Waterloo; the second and third years of which period (1806 and 1807) were comparatively sterile; but the other nine (from 1805 to 1815 inclusively) furnished a long succession of victories, the least of which, in such a contest of Titans, had an inappreciable value of position: partly for its absolute interference with the plans of our enemy, but still more from its keeping alive through central Europe the sense of a deep-seated vulnerability in France. Even to tease the coasts of our enemy, to mortify them by continual blockades, to insult them by capturing if it were but a baubling schooner under the eyes of their arrogant armies, repeated from time to time a sullen proclamation of power lodged in one quarter to which the hopes of Christendom turned in secret. How much more loudly must this proclamation have spoken in the audacity [Footnote: "*Audacity*":—Such the French accounted it; and it has struck me that Soult would not have been so popular in London, at the period of her present Majesty's coronation, or in Manchester, on occasion of his visit to that town, if they had been aware of the insolence with which he spoke of us in notes written at intervals from the field of Waterloo. As though it had been mere

felony in our army to look a French one in the face, he said in more notes than one, dated from two to four P.M. on the field of Waterloo, "Here are the English—we have them; they are caught *en flagrant délit*

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