

CHAPTER II. In Which Morris takes Action

Some days later, accordingly, the three males of this depressing family might have been observed (by a reader of G. P. R. James) taking their departure from the East Station of Bournemouth. The weather was raw and changeable, and Joseph was arrayed in consequence according to the principles of Sir Faraday Bond, a man no less strict (as is well known) on costume than on diet. There are few polite invalids who have not lived, or tried to live, by that punctilious physician's orders. 'Avoid tea, madam,' the reader has doubtless heard him say, 'avoid tea, fried liver, antimonial wine, and bakers' bread. Retire nightly at 10.45; and clothe yourself (if you please) throughout in hygienic flannel. Externally, the fur of the marten is indicated. Do not forget to procure a pair of health boots at Messrs Dail and Crumbie's.' And he has probably called you back, even after you have paid your fee, to add with stentorian emphasis: 'I had forgotten one caution: avoid kippered sturgeon as you would the very devil.' The unfortunate Joseph was cut to the pattern of Sir Faraday in every button; he was shod with the health boot; his suit was of genuine ventilating cloth; his shirt of hygienic flannel, a somewhat dingy fabric; and he was draped to the knees in the inevitable greatcoat of marten's fur. The very railway porters at Bournemouth (which was a favourite station of the doctor's) marked the old gentleman for a creature of Sir Faraday. There was but one evidence of personal taste, a vizarded forage cap; from this form of headpiece, since he had fled from a dying jackal on the plains of Ephesus, and weathered a bora in the Adriatic, nothing could divorce our traveller.

The three Finsburys mounted into their compartment, and fell immediately to quarrelling, a step unseemly in itself and (in this case) highly unfortunate for Morris. Had he lingered a moment longer by the window, this tale need never have been written. For he might then have observed (as the porters did not fail to do) the arrival of a second passenger in the uniform of Sir Faraday Bond. But he had other matters on hand, which he judged (God knows how erroneously) to be more important.

'I never heard of such a thing,' he cried, resuming a discussion which had scarcely ceased all morning. 'The bill is not yours; it is mine.'

'It is payable to me,' returned the old gentleman, with an air of bitter obstinacy. 'I will do what I please with my own property.'

The bill was one for eight hundred pounds, which had been given him at breakfast to endorse, and which he had simply pocketed.

'Hear him, Johnny!' cried Morris. 'His property! the very clothes upon his back belong to me.'

'Let him alone,' said John. 'I am sick of both of you.'

'That is no way to speak of your uncle, sir,' cried Joseph. 'I will not endure this disrespect. You are a pair of exceedingly forward, impudent, and ignorant young men, and I have quite made up my mind to put an end

to the whole business.'

'O skittles!' said the graceful John.

But Morris was not so easy in his mind. This unusual act of insubordination had already troubled him; and these mutinous words now sounded ominously in his ears. He looked at the old gentleman uneasily. Upon one occasion, many years before, when Joseph was delivering a lecture, the audience had revolted in a body; finding their entertainer somewhat dry, they had taken the question of amusement into their own hands; and the lecturer (along with the board schoolmaster, the Baptist clergyman, and a working-man's candidate, who made up his bodyguard) was ultimately driven from the scene. Morris had not been present on that fatal day; if he had, he would have recognized a certain fighting glitter in his uncle's eye, and a certain chewing movement of his lips, as old acquaintances. But even to the inexpert these symptoms breathed of something dangerous.

'Well, well,' said Morris. 'I have no wish to bother you further till we get to London.'

Joseph did not so much as look at him in answer; with tremulous hands he produced a copy of the British Mechanic, and ostentatiously buried himself in its perusal.

'I wonder what can make him so cantankerous?' reflected the nephew. 'I don't like the look of it at all.' And he dubiously scratched his nose.

The train travelled forth into the world, bearing along with it the customary freight of obliterated voyagers, and along with these old Joseph, affecting immersion in his paper, and John slumbering over the columns of the Pink Un, and Morris revolving in his mind a dozen grudges, and suspicions, and alarms. It passed Christchurch by the sea, Herne with its pinewoods, Ringwood on its mazy river. A little behind time, but not much for the South-Western, it drew up at the platform of a station, in the midst of the New Forest, the real name of which (in case the railway company 'might have the law of me') I shall veil under the alias of Browndean.

Many passengers put their heads to the window, and among the rest an old gentleman on whom I willingly dwell, for I am nearly done with him now, and (in the whole course of the present narrative) I am not in the least likely to meet another character so decent. His name is immaterial, not so his habits. He had passed his life wandering in a tweed suit on the continent of Europe; and years of Galignani's Messenger having at length undermined his eyesight, he suddenly remembered the rivers of Assyria and came to London to consult an oculist. From the oculist to the dentist, and from both to the physician, the step appears inevitable; presently he was in the hands of Sir Faraday, robed in ventilating cloth and sent to Bournemouth; and to that domineering baronet (who was his only friend upon his native soil) he was now returning to report. The

case of these tweedsuited wanderers is unique. We have all seen them entering the table d'hote (at Spezzia, or Grdtz, or Venice) with a genteel melancholy and a faint appearance of having been to India and not succeeded. In the offices of many hundred hotels they are known by name; and yet, if the whole of this wandering cohort were to disappear tomorrow, their absence would be wholly unremarked. How much more, if only one--say this one in the ventilating cloth--should vanish! He had paid his bills at Bournemouth; his worldly effects were all in the van in two portmanteaux, and these after the proper interval would be sold as unclaimed baggage to a Jew; Sir Faraday's butler would be a half-crown poorer at the year's end, and the hotelkeepers of Europe about the same date would be mourning a small but quite observable decline in profits. And that would be literally all. Perhaps the old gentleman thought something of the sort, for he looked melancholy enough as he pulled his bare, grey head back into the carriage, and the train smoked under the bridge, and forth, with ever quickening speed, across the mingled heaths and woods of the New Forest.

Not many hundred yards beyond Browndean, however, a sudden jarring of brakes set everybody's teeth on edge, and there was a brutal stoppage. Morris Finsbury was aware of a confused uproar of voices, and sprang to the window. Women were screaming, men were tumbling from the windows on the track, the guard was crying to them to stay where they were; at the same time the train began to gather way and move very slowly backward toward Browndean; and the next moment--, all these various sounds were

blotted out in the apocalyptic whistle and the thundering onslaught of the down express.

The actual collision Morris did not hear. Perhaps he fainted. He had a wild dream of having seen the carriage double up and fall to pieces like a pantomime trick; and sure enough, when he came to himself, he was lying on the bare earth and under the open sky. His head ached savagely; he carried his hand to his brow, and was not surprised to see it red with blood. The air was filled with an intolerable, throbbing roar, which he expected to find die away with the return of consciousness; and instead of that it seemed but to swell the louder and to pierce the more cruelly through his ears. It was a raging, bellowing thunder, like a boiler-riveting factory.

And now curiosity began to stir, and he sat up and looked about him. The track at this point ran in a sharp curve about a wooded hillock; all of the near side was heaped with the wreckage of the Bournemouth train; that of the express was mostly hidden by the trees; and just at the turn, under clouds of vomiting steam and piled about with cairns of living coal, lay what remained of the two engines, one upon the other. On the heathy margin of the line were many people running to and fro, and crying aloud as they ran, and many others lying motionless like sleeping tramps.

Morris suddenly drew an inference. 'There has been an accident' thought he, and was elated at his perspicacity. Almost at the same time his eye

lighted on John, who lay close by as white as paper. 'Poor old John! poor old cove!' he thought, the schoolboy expression popping forth from some forgotten treasury, and he took his brother's hand in his with childish tenderness. It was perhaps the touch that recalled him; at least John opened his eyes, sat suddenly up, and after several ineffectual movements of his lips, 'What's the row?' said he, in a phantom voice.

The din of that devil's smithy still thundered in their ears. 'Let us get away from that,' Morris cried, and pointed to the vomit of steam that still spouted from the broken engines. And the pair helped each other up, and stood and quaked and wavered and stared about them at the scene of death.

Just then they were approached by a party of men who had already organized themselves for the purposes of rescue.

'Are you hurt?' cried one of these, a young fellow with the sweat streaming down his pallid face, and who, by the way he was treated, was evidently the doctor.

Morris shook his head, and the young man, nodding grimly, handed him a bottle of some spirit.

'Take a drink of that,' he said; 'your friend looks as if he needed it badly. We want every man we can get,' he added; 'there's terrible work

before us, and nobody should shirk. If you can do no more, you can carry a stretcher.'

The doctor was hardly gone before Morris, under the spur of the dram, awoke to the full possession of his wits.

'My God!' he cried. 'Uncle Joseph!'

'Yes,' said John, 'where can he be? He can't be far off. I hope the old party isn't damaged.'

'Come and help me to look,' said Morris, with a snap of savage determination strangely foreign to his ordinary bearing; and then, for one moment, he broke forth. 'If he's dead!' he cried, and shook his fist at heaven.

To and fro the brothers hurried, staring in the faces of the wounded, or turning the dead upon their backs. They must have thus examined forty people, and still there was no word of Uncle Joseph. But now the course of their search brought them near the centre of the collision, where the boilers were still blowing off steam with a deafening clamour. It was a part of the field not yet gleaned by the rescuing party. The ground, especially on the margin of the wood, was full of inequalities--here a pit, there a hillock surmounted with a bush of furze. It was a place where many bodies might lie concealed, and they beat it like pointers after game. Suddenly Morris, who was leading, paused and reached forth

his index with a tragic gesture. John followed the direction of his brother's hand.

In the bottom of a sandy hole lay something that had once been human. The face had suffered severely, and it was unrecognizable; but that was not required. The snowy hair, the coat of marten, the ventilating cloth, the hygienic flannel--everything down to the health boots from Messrs Dail and Crumbie's, identified the body as that of Uncle Joseph. Only the forage cap must have been lost in the convulsion, for the dead man was bareheaded.

'The poor old beggar!' said John, with a touch of natural feeling; 'I would give ten pounds if we hadn't chivvied him in the train!'

But there was no sentiment in the face of Morris as he gazed upon the dead. Gnawing his nails, with introverted eyes, his brow marked with the stamp of tragic indignation and tragic intellectual effort, he stood there silent. Here was a last injustice; he had been robbed while he was an orphan at school, he had been lashed to a decadent leather business, he had been saddled with Miss Hazeltine, his cousin had been defrauding him of the tontine, and he had borne all this, we might almost say, with dignity, and now they had gone and killed his uncle!

'Here!' he said suddenly, 'take his heels, we must get him into the woods. I'm not going to have anybody find this.'

'O, fudge!' said John, 'where's the use?'

'Do what I tell you,' spirted Morris, as he took the corpse by the shoulders. 'Am I to carry him myself?'

They were close upon the borders of the wood; in ten or twelve paces they were under cover; and a little further back, in a sandy clearing of the trees, they laid their burthen down, and stood and looked at it with loathing.

'What do you mean to do?' whispered John.

'Bury him, to be sure,' responded Morris, and he opened his pocket-knife and began feverishly to dig.

'You'll never make a hand of it with that,' objected the other.

'If you won't help me, you cowardly shirk,' screamed Morris, 'you can go to the devil!'

'It's the childishest folly,' said John; 'but no man shall call me a coward,' and he began to help his brother grudgingly.

The soil was sandy and light, but matted with the roots of the surrounding firs. Gorse tore their hands; and as they baled the sand from the grave, it was often discoloured with their blood. An hour

passed of unremitting energy upon the part of Morris, of lukewarm help on that of John; and still the trench was barely nine inches in depth. Into this the body was rudely flung: sand was piled upon it, and then more sand must be dug, and gorse had to be cut to pile on that; and still from one end of the sordid mound a pair of feet projected and caught the light upon their patent-leather toes. But by this time the nerves of both were shaken; even Morris had enough of his grisly task; and they skulked off like animals into the thickest of the neighbouring covert.

'It's the best that we can do,' said Morris, sitting down.

'And now,' said John, 'perhaps you'll have the politeness to tell me what it's all about.'

'Upon my word,' cried Morris, 'if you do not understand for yourself, I almost despair of telling you.'

'O, of course it's some rot about the tontine,' returned the other. 'But it's the merest nonsense. We've lost it, and there's an end.'

'I tell you,' said Morris, 'Uncle Masterman is dead. I know it, there's a voice that tells me so.'

'Well, and so is Uncle Joseph,' said John.

'He's not dead, unless I choose,' returned Morris.

'And come to that,' cried John, 'if you're right, and Uncle Masterman's been dead ever so long, all we have to do is to tell the truth and expose Michael.'

'You seem to think Michael is a fool,' sneered Morris. 'Can't you understand he's been preparing this fraud for years? He has the whole thing ready: the nurse, the doctor, the undertaker, all bought, the certificate all ready but the date! Let him get wind of this business, and you mark my words, Uncle Masterman will die in two days and be buried in a week. But see here, Johnny; what Michael can do, I can do. If he plays a game of bluff, so can I. If his father is to live for ever, by God, so shall my uncle!'

'It's illegal, ain't it?' said John.

'A man must have SOME moral courage,' replied Morris with dignity.

'And then suppose you're wrong? Suppose Uncle Masterman's alive and kicking?'

'Well, even then,' responded the plotter, 'we are no worse off than we were before; in fact, we're better. Uncle Masterman must die some day; as long as Uncle Joseph was alive, he might have died any day; but we're out of all that trouble now: there's no sort of limit to the game that I

propose--it can be kept up till Kingdom Come.'

'If I could only see how you meant to set about it' sighed John. 'But you know, Morris, you always were such a bungler.'

'I'd like to know what I ever bungled,' cried Morris; 'I have the best collection of signet rings in London.'

'Well, you know, there's the leather business,' suggested the other. 'That's considered rather a hash.'

It was a mark of singular self-control in Morris that he suffered this to pass unchallenged, and even unresented.

'About the business in hand,' said he, 'once we can get him up to Bloomsbury, there's no sort of trouble. We bury him in the cellar, which seems made for it; and then all I have to do is to start out and find a venal doctor.'

'Why can't we leave him where he is?' asked John.

'Because we know nothing about the country,' retorted Morris. 'This wood may be a regular lovers' walk. Turn your mind to the real difficulty. How are we to get him up to Bloomsbury?'

Various schemes were mooted and rejected. The railway station at

Browndean was, of course, out of the question, for it would now be a centre of curiosity and gossip, and (of all things) they would be least able to dispatch a dead body without remark. John feebly proposed getting an ale-cask and sending it as beer, but the objections to this course were so overwhelming that Morris scorned to answer. The purchase of a packing-case seemed equally hopeless, for why should two gentlemen without baggage of any kind require a packing-case? They would be more likely to require clean linen.

'We are working on wrong lines,' cried Morris at last. 'The thing must be gone about more carefully. Suppose now,' he added excitedly, speaking by fits and starts, as if he were thinking aloud, 'suppose we rent a cottage by the month. A householder can buy a packing-case without remark. Then suppose we clear the people out today, get the packing-case tonight, and tomorrow I hire a carriage or a cart that we could drive ourselves--and take the box, or whatever we get, to Ringwood or Lyndhurst or somewhere; we could label it "specimens", don't you see? Johnny, I believe I've hit the nail at last.'

'Well, it sounds more feasible,' admitted John.

'Of course we must take assumed names,' continued Morris. 'It would never do to keep our own. What do you say to "Masterman" itself? It sounds quiet and dignified.'

'I will NOT take the name of Masterman,' returned his brother; 'you may,

if you like. I shall call myself Vance--the Great Vance; positively the last six nights. There's some go in a name like that.'

'Vance?' cried Morris. 'Do you think we are playing a pantomime for our amusement? There was never anybody named Vance who wasn't a music-hall singer.'

'That's the beauty of it,' returned John; 'it gives you some standing at once. You may call yourself Fortescue till all's blue, and nobody cares; but to be Vance gives a man a natural nobility.'

'But there's lots of other theatrical names,' cried Morris. 'Leybourne, Irving, Brough, Toole--'

'Devil a one will I take!' returned his brother. 'I am going to have my little lark out of this as well as you.'

'Very well,' said Morris, who perceived that John was determined to carry his point, 'I shall be Robert Vance.'

'And I shall be George Vance,' cried John, 'the only original George Vance! Rally round the only original!'

Repairing as well as they were able the disorder of their clothes, the Finsbury brothers returned to Browndean by a circuitous route in quest

of luncheon and a suitable cottage. It is not always easy to drop at a moment's notice on a furnished residence in a retired locality; but fortune presently introduced our adventurers to a deaf carpenter, a man rich in cottages of the required description, and unaffectedly eager to supply their wants. The second place they visited, standing, as it did, about a mile and a half from any neighbours, caused them to exchange a glance of hope. On a nearer view, the place was not without depressing features. It stood in a marshy-looking hollow of a heath; tall trees obscured its windows; the thatch visibly rotted on the rafters; and the walls were stained with splashes of unwholesome green. The rooms were small, the ceilings low, the furniture merely nominal; a strange chill and a haunting smell of damp pervaded the kitchen; and the bedroom boasted only of one bed.

Morris, with a view to cheapening the place, remarked on this defect.

'Well,' returned the man; 'if you can't sleep two abed, you'd better take a villa residence.'

'And then,' pursued Morris, 'there's no water. How do you get your water?'

'We fill THAT from the spring,' replied the carpenter, pointing to a big barrel that stood beside the door. 'The spring ain't so VERY far off, after all, and it's easy brought in buckets. There's a bucket there.'

Morris nudged his brother as they examined the water-butt. It was new, and very solidly constructed for its office. If anything had been wanting to decide them, this eminently practical barrel would have turned the scale. A bargain was promptly struck, the month's rent was paid upon the nail, and about an hour later the Finsbury brothers might have been observed returning to the blighted cottage, having along with them the key, which was the symbol of their tenancy, a spirit-lamp, with which they fondly told themselves they would be able to cook, a pork pie of suitable dimensions, and a quart of the worst whisky in Hampshire. Nor was this all they had effected; already (under the plea that they were landscape-painters) they had hired for dawn on the morrow a light but solid two-wheeled cart; so that when they entered in their new character, they were able to tell themselves that the back of the business was already broken.

John proceeded to get tea; while Morris, foraging about the house, was presently delighted by discovering the lid of the water-butt upon the kitchen shelf. Here, then, was the packing-case complete; in the absence of straw, the blankets (which he himself, at least, had not the smallest intention of using for their present purpose) would exactly take the place of packing; and Morris, as the difficulties began to vanish from his path, rose almost to the brink of exultation. There was, however, one difficulty not yet faced, one upon which his whole scheme depended. Would John consent to remain alone in the cottage? He had not yet dared to put the question.

It was with high good-humour that the pair sat down to the deal table, and proceeded to fall-to on the pork pie. Morris retailed the discovery of the lid, and the Great Vance was pleased to applaud by beating on the table with his fork in true music-hall style.

'That's the dodge,' he cried. 'I always said a water-butt was what you wanted for this business.'

'Of course,' said Morris, thinking this a favourable opportunity to prepare his brother, 'of course you must stay on in this place till I give the word; I'll give out that uncle is resting in the New Forest. It would not do for both of us to appear in London; we could never conceal the absence of the old man.'

John's jaw dropped.

'O, come!' he cried. 'You can stay in this hole yourself. I won't.'

The colour came into Morris's cheeks. He saw that he must win his brother at any cost.

'You must please remember, Johnny,' he said, 'the amount of the tontine. If I succeed, we shall have each fifty thousand to place to our bank account; ay, and nearer sixty.'

'But if you fail,' returned John, 'what then? What'll be the colour of

our bank account in that case?'

'I will pay all expenses,' said Morris, with an inward struggle; 'you shall lose nothing.'

'Well,' said John, with a laugh, 'if the ex-s are yours, and half-profits mine, I don't mind remaining here for a couple of days.'

'A couple of days!' cried Morris, who was beginning to get angry and controlled himself with difficulty; 'why, you would do more to win five pounds on a horse-race!'

'Perhaps I would,' returned the Great Vance; 'it's the artistic temperament.'

'This is monstrous!' burst out Morris. 'I take all risks; I pay all expenses; I divide profits; and you won't take the slightest pains to help me. It's not decent; it's not honest; it's not even kind.'

'But suppose,' objected John, who was considerably impressed by his brother's vehemence, 'suppose that Uncle Masterman is alive after all, and lives ten years longer; must I rot here all that time?'

'Of course not,' responded Morris, in a more conciliatory tone; 'I only ask a month at the outside; and if Uncle Masterman is not dead by that time you can go abroad.'

'Go abroad?' repeated John eagerly. 'Why shouldn't I go at once? Tell 'em that Joseph and I are seeing life in Paris.'

'Nonsense,' said Morris.

'Well, but look here,' said John; 'it's this house, it's such a pig-sty, it's so dreary and damp. You said yourself that it was damp.'

'Only to the carpenter,' Morris distinguished, 'and that was to reduce the rent. But really, you know, now we're in it, I've seen worse.'

'And what am I to do?' complained the victim. 'How can I entertain a friend?'

'My dear Johnny, if you don't think the tontine worth a little trouble, say so, and I'll give the business up.'

'You're dead certain of the figures, I suppose?' asked John.

'Well'--with a deep sigh--'send me the Pink Un and all the comic papers regularly. I'll face the music.'

As afternoon drew on, the cottage breathed more thrillingly of its native marsh; a creeping chill inhabited its chambers; the fire smoked, and a shower of rain, coming up from the channel on a slant of wind, tingled on the window-panes. At intervals, when the gloom deepened

toward despair, Morris would produce the whisky-bottle, and at first John welcomed the diversion--not for long. It has been said this spirit was the worst in Hampshire; only those acquainted with the county can appreciate the force of that superlative; and at length even the Great Vance (who was no connoisseur) waved the decoction from his lips. The approach of dusk, feebly combated with a single tallow candle, added a touch of tragedy; and John suddenly stopped whistling through his fingers--an art to the practice of which he had been reduced--and bitterly lamented his concessions.

'I can't stay here a month,' he cried. 'No one could. The thing's nonsense, Morris. The parties that lived in the Bastille would rise against a place like this.'

With an admirable affectation of indifference, Morris proposed a game of pitch-and-toss. To what will not the diplomatist condescend! It was John's favourite game; indeed his only game--he had found all the rest too intellectual--and he played it with equal skill and good fortune. To Morris himself, on the other hand, the whole business was detestable; he was a bad pitcher, he had no luck in tossing, and he was one who suffered torments when he lost. But John was in a dangerous humour, and his brother was prepared for any sacrifice.

By seven o'clock, Morris, with incredible agony, had lost a couple of half-crowns. Even with the tontine before his eyes, this was as much as he could bear; and, remarking that he would take his revenge some other

time, he proposed a bit of supper and a grog.

Before they had made an end of this refreshment it was time to be at work. A bucket of water for present necessities was withdrawn from the water-butt, which was then emptied and rolled before the kitchen fire to dry; and the two brothers set forth on their adventure under a starless heaven.