CHAPTER III. The Lecturer at Large

Whether mankind is really partial to happiness is an open question. Not a month passes by but some cherished son runs off into the merchant service, or some valued husband decamps to Texas with a lady help; clergymen have fled from their parishioners; and even judges have been known to retire. To an open mind, it will appear (upon the whole) less strange that Joseph Finsbury should have been led to entertain ideas of escape. His lot (I think we may say) was not a happy one. My friend, Mr Morris, with whom I travel up twice or thrice a week from Snaresbrook Park, is certainly a gentleman whom I esteem; but he was scarce a model nephew. As for John, he is of course an excellent fellow; but if he was the only link that bound one to a home, I think the most of us would vote for foreign travel. In the case of Joseph, John (if he were a link at all) was not the only one; endearing bonds had long enchained the old gentleman to Bloomsbury; and by these expressions I do not in the least refer to Julia Hazeltine (of whom, however, he was fond enough), but to that collection of manuscript notebooks in which his life lay buried. That he should ever have made up his mind to separate himself from these collections, and go forth upon the world with no other resources than his memory supplied, is a circumstance highly pathetic in itself, and but little creditable to the wisdom of his nephews.

The design, or at least the temptation, was already some months old; and when a bill for eight hundred pounds, payable to himself, was suddenly placed in Joseph's hand, it brought matters to an issue. He retained

that bill, which, to one of his frugality, meant wealth; and he promised himself to disappear among the crowds at Waterloo, or (if that should prove impossible) to slink out of the house in the course of the evening and melt like a dream into the millions of London. By a peculiar interposition of Providence and railway mismanagement he had not so long to wait.

He was one of the first to come to himself and scramble to his feet after the Browndean catastrophe, and he had no sooner remarked his prostrate nephews than he understood his opportunity and fled. A man of upwards of seventy, who has just met with a railway accident, and who is cumbered besides with the full uniform of Sir Faraday Bond, is not very likely to flee far, but the wood was close at hand and offered the fugitive at least a temporary covert. Hither, then, the old gentleman skipped with extraordinary expedition, and, being somewhat winded and a good deal shaken, here he lay down in a convenient grove and was presently overwhelmed by slumber. The way of fate is often highly entertaining to the looker-on, and it is certainly a pleasant circumstance, that while Morris and John were delving in the sand to conceal the body of a total stranger, their uncle lay in dreamless sleep a few hundred yards deeper in the wood.

He was awakened by the jolly note of a bugle from the neighbouring high road, where a char-a-banc was bowling by with some belated tourists. The sound cheered his old heart, it directed his steps into the bargain, and soon he was on the highway, looking east and west from under his vizor,

and doubtfully revolving what he ought to do. A deliberate sound of wheels arose in the distance, and then a cart was seen approaching, well filled with parcels, driven by a good-natured looking man on a double bench, and displaying on a board the legend, 'I Chandler, carrier'. In the infamously prosaic mind of Mr Finsbury, certain streaks of poetry survived and were still efficient; they had carried him to Asia Minor as a giddy youth of forty, and now, in the first hours of his recovered freedom, they suggested to him the idea of continuing his flight in Mr Chandler's cart. It would be cheap; properly broached, it might even cost nothing, and, after years of mittens and hygienic flannel, his heart leaped out to meet the notion of exposure.

Mr Chandler was perhaps a little puzzled to find so old a gentleman, so strangely clothed, and begging for a lift on so retired a roadside. But he was a good-natured man, glad to do a service, and so he took the stranger up; and he had his own idea of civility, and so he asked no questions. Silence, in fact, was quite good enough for Mr Chandler; but the cart had scarcely begun to move forward ere he found himself involved in a one-sided conversation.

'I can see,' began Mr Finsbury, 'by the mixture of parcels and boxes that are contained in your cart, each marked with its individual label, and by the good Flemish mare you drive, that you occupy the post of carrier in that great English system of transport which, with all its defects, is the pride of our country.'

'Yes, sir,' returned Mr Chandler vaguely, for he hardly knew what to reply; 'them parcels posts has done us carriers a world of harm.'

'I am not a prejudiced man,' continued Joseph Finsbury. 'As a young man I travelled much. Nothing was too small or too obscure for me to acquire. At sea I studied seamanship, learned the complicated knots employed by mariners, and acquired the technical terms. At Naples, I would learn the art of making macaroni; at Nice, the principles of making candied fruit. I never went to the opera without first buying the book of the piece, and making myself acquainted with the principal airs by picking them out on the piano with one finger.'

'You must have seen a deal, sir,' remarked the carrier, touching up his horse; 'I wish I could have had your advantages.'

'Do you know how often the word whip occurs in the Old Testament?' continued the old gentleman. 'One hundred and (if I remember exactly) forty-seven times.'

'Do it indeed, sir?' said Mr Chandler. 'I never should have thought it.'

'The Bible contains three million five hundred and one thousand two hundred and forty-nine letters. Of verses I believe there are upward of eighteen thousand. There have been many editions of the Bible; Wycliff was the first to introduce it into England about the year 1300. The "Paragraph Bible", as it is called, is a well-known edition, and is so

called because it is divided into paragraphs. The "Breeches Bible" is another well-known instance, and gets its name either because it was printed by one Breeches, or because the place of publication bore that name.'

The carrier remarked drily that he thought that was only natural, and turned his attention to the more congenial task of passing a cart of hay; it was a matter of some difficulty, for the road was narrow, and there was a ditch on either hand.

'I perceive,' began Mr Finsbury, when they had successfully passed the cart, 'that you hold your reins with one hand; you should employ two.'

'Well, I like that!' cried the carrier contemptuously. 'Why?'

'You do not understand,' continued Mr Finsbury. 'What I tell you is a scientific fact, and reposes on the theory of the lever, a branch of mechanics. There are some very interesting little shilling books upon the field of study, which I should think a man in your station would take a pleasure to read. But I am afraid you have not cultivated the art of observation; at least we have now driven together for some time, and I cannot remember that you have contributed a single fact. This is a very false principle, my good man. For instance, I do not know if you observed that (as you passed the hay-cart man) you took your left?'

'Of course I did,' cried the carrier, who was now getting belligerent;

'he'd have the law on me if I hadn't.'

'In France, now,' resumed the old man, 'and also, I believe, in the

United States of America, you would have taken the right.'

'I would not,' cried Mr Chandler indignantly. 'I would have taken the left.'

'I observe again,' continued Mr Finsbury, scorning to reply, 'that you mend the dilapidated parts of your harness with string. I have always protested against this carelessness and slovenliness of the English poor. In an essay that I once read before an appreciative audience--'

'It ain't string,' said the carrier sullenly, 'it's pack-thread.'

'I have always protested,' resumed the old man, 'that in their private and domestic life, as well as in their labouring career, the lower classes of this country are improvident, thriftless, and extravagant. A stitch in time--'

'Who the devil ARE the lower classes?' cried the carrier. 'You are the lower classes yourself! If I thought you were a blooming aristocrat, I shouldn't have given you a lift.'

The words were uttered with undisguised ill-feeling; it was plain the

pair were not congenial, and further conversation, even to one of Mr Finsbury's pathetic loquacity, was out of the question. With an angry gesture, he pulled down the brim of the forage-cap over his eyes, and, producing a notebook and a blue pencil from one of his innermost pockets, soon became absorbed in calculations.

On his part the carrier fell to whistling with fresh zest; and if (now and again) he glanced at the companion of his drive, it was with mingled feelings of triumph and alarm--triumph because he had succeeded in arresting that prodigy of speech, and alarm lest (by any accident) it should begin again. Even the shower, which presently overtook and passed them, was endured by both in silence; and it was still in silence that they drove at length into Southampton.

Dusk had fallen; the shop windows glimmered forth into the streets of the old seaport; in private houses lights were kindled for the evening meal; and Mr Finsbury began to think complacently of his night's lodging. He put his papers by, cleared his throat, and looked doubtfully at Mr Chandler.

'Will you be civil enough,' said he, 'to recommend me to an inn?' Mr Chandler pondered for a moment.

'Well,' he said at last, 'I wonder how about the "Tregonwell Arms".'

'The "Tregonwell Arms" will do very well,' returned the old man, 'if

it's clean and cheap, and the people civil.'

'I wasn't thinking so much of you,' returned Mr Chandler thoughtfully. 'I was thinking of my friend Watts as keeps the 'ouse; he's a friend of mine, you see, and he helped me through my trouble last year. And I was thinking, would it be fair-like on Watts to saddle him with an old party like you, who might be the death of him with general information. Would it be fair to the 'ouse?' enquired Mr Chandler, with an air of candid appeal.

'Mark me,' cried the old gentleman with spirit. 'It was kind in you to bring me here for nothing, but it gives you no right to address me in such terms. Here's a shilling for your trouble; and, if you do not choose to set me down at the "Tregonwell Arms", I can find it for myself.'

Chandler was surprised and a little startled; muttering something apologetic, he returned the shilling, drove in silence through several intricate lanes and small streets, drew up at length before the bright windows of an inn, and called loudly for Mr Watts.

'Is that you, Jem?' cried a hearty voice from the stableyard. 'Come in and warm yourself.'

'I only stopped here,' Mr Chandler explained, 'to let down an old gent that wants food and lodging. Mind, I warn you agin him; he's worse nor a

temperance lecturer.'

Mr Finsbury dismounted with difficulty, for he was cramped with his long drive, and the shaking he had received in the accident. The friendly Mr Watts, in spite of the carter's scarcely agreeable introduction, treated the old gentleman with the utmost courtesy, and led him into the back parlour, where there was a big fire burning in the grate. Presently a table was spread in the same room, and he was invited to seat himself before a stewed fowl--somewhat the worse for having seen service before--and a big pewter mug of ale from the tap.

He rose from supper a giant refreshed; and, changing his seat to one nearer the fire, began to examine the other guests with an eye to the delights of oratory. There were near a dozen present, all men, and (as Joseph exulted to perceive) all working men. Often already had he seen cause to bless that appetite for disconnected fact and rotatory argument which is so marked a character of the mechanic. But even an audience of working men has to be courted, and there was no man more deeply versed in the necessary arts than Joseph Finsbury. He placed his glasses on his nose, drew from his pocket a bundle of papers, and spread them before him on a table. He crumpled them, he smoothed them out; now he skimmed them over, apparently well pleased with their contents; now, with tapping pencil and contracted brows, he seemed maturely to consider some particular statement. A stealthy glance about the room assured him of the success of his manoeuvres; all eyes were turned on the performer, mouths were open, pipes hung suspended; the birds were charmed. At the

same moment the entrance of Mr Watts afforded him an opportunity.

'I observe,' said he, addressing the landlord, but taking at the same time the whole room into his confidence with an encouraging look, 'I observe that some of these gentlemen are looking with curiosity in my direction; and certainly it is unusual to see anyone immersed in literary and scientific labours in the public apartment of an inn. I have here some calculations I made this morning upon the cost of living in this and other countries--a subject, I need scarcely say, highly interesting to the working classes. I have calculated a scale of living for incomes of eighty, one hundred and sixty, two hundred, and two hundred and forty pounds a year. I must confess that the income of eighty pounds has somewhat baffled me, and the others are not so exact as I could wish; for the price of washing varies largely in foreign countries, and the different cokes, coals and firewoods fluctuate surprisingly. I will read my researches, and I hope you won't scruple to point out to me any little errors that I may have committed either from oversight or ignorance. I will begin, gentlemen, with the income of eighty pounds a year.'

Whereupon the old gentleman, with less compassion than he would have had
for brute beasts, delivered himself of all his tedious calculations. As he occasionally gave nine versions of a single income, placing the imaginary person in London, Paris, Bagdad, Spitzbergen, Bassorah, Heligoland, the Scilly Islands, Brighton, Cincinnati, and

Nijni-Novgorod, with an appropriate outfit for each locality, it is no wonder that his hearers look back on that evening as the most tiresome they ever spent.

Long before Mr Finsbury had reached Nijni-Novgorod with the income of one hundred and sixty pounds, the company had dwindled and faded away to a few old topers and the bored but affable Watts. There was a constant stream of customers from the outer world, but so soon as they were served they drank their liquor quickly and departed with the utmost celerity for the next public-house.

By the time the young man with two hundred a year was vegetating in the Scilly Islands, Mr Watts was left alone with the economist; and that imaginary person had scarce commenced life at Brighton before the last of his pursuers desisted from the chase.

Mr Finsbury slept soundly after the manifold fatigues of the day. He rose late, and, after a good breakfast, ordered the bill. Then it was that he made a discovery which has been made by many others, both before and since: that it is one thing to order your bill, and another to discharge it. The items were moderate and (what does not always follow) the total small; but, after the most sedulous review of all his pockets, one and nine pence halfpenny appeared to be the total of the old gentleman's available assets. He asked to see Mr Watts.

'Here is a bill on London for eight hundred pounds,' said Mr Finsbury, as that worthy appeared. 'I am afraid, unless you choose to discount it yourself, it may detain me a day or two till I can get it cashed.'

Mr Watts looked at the bill, turned it over, and dogs-eared it with his fingers. 'It will keep you a day or two?' he said, repeating the old man's words. 'You have no other money with you?'

'Some trifling change,' responded Joseph. 'Nothing to speak of.'

'Then you can send it me; I should be pleased to trust you.'

'To tell the truth,' answered the old gentleman, 'I am more than half inclined to stay; I am in need of funds.'

'If a loan of ten shillings would help you, it is at your service,' responded Watts, with eagerness.

'No, I think I would rather stay,' said the old man, 'and get my bill discounted.'

'You shall not stay in my house,' cried Mr Watts. 'This is the last time you shall have a bed at the "Tregonwell Arms".'

'I insist upon remaining,' replied Mr Finsbury, with spirit; 'I remain by Act of Parliament; turn me out if you dare.'

'Then pay your bill,' said Mr Watts.

'Take that,' cried the old man, tossing him the negotiable bill.

'It is not legal tender,' replied Mr Watts. 'You must leave my house at once.'

'You cannot appreciate the contempt I feel for you, Mr Watts,' said the old gentleman, resigning himself to circumstances. 'But you shall feel it in one way: I refuse to pay my bill.'

'I don't care for your bill,' responded Mr Watts. 'What I want is your absence.'

'That you shall have!' said the old gentleman, and, taking up his forage cap as he spoke, he crammed it on his head. 'Perhaps you are too insolent,' he added, 'to inform me of the time of the next London train?'

'It leaves in three-quarters of an hour,' returned the innkeeper with alacrity. 'You can easily catch it.'

Joseph's position was one of considerable weakness. On the one hand, it would have been well to avoid the direct line of railway, since it was there he might expect his nephews to lie in wait for his recapture; on

the other, it was highly desirable, it was even strictly needful, to get the bill discounted ere it should be stopped. To London, therefore, he decided to proceed on the first train; and there remained but one point to be considered, how to pay his fare.

Joseph's nails were never clean; he ate almost entirely with his knife. I doubt if you could say he had the manners of a gentleman; but he had better than that, a touch of genuine dignity. Was it from his stay in Asia Minor? Was it from a strain in the Finsbury blood sometimes alluded to by customers? At least, when he presented himself before the station-master, his salaam was truly Oriental, palm-trees appeared to crowd about the little office, and the simoom or the bulbul--but I leave this image to persons better acquainted with the East. His appearance, besides, was highly in his favour; the uniform of Sir Faraday, however inconvenient and conspicuous, was, at least, a costume in which no swindler could have hoped to prosper; and the exhibition of a valuable watch and a bill for eight hundred pounds completed what deportment had begun. A quarter of an hour later, when the train came up, Mr Finsbury was introduced to the guard and installed in a first-class compartment, the station-master smilingly assuming all responsibility.

As the old gentleman sat waiting the moment of departure, he was the witness of an incident strangely connected with the fortunes of his house. A packing-case of cyclopean bulk was borne along the platform by some dozen of tottering porters, and ultimately, to the delight of a considerable crowd, hoisted on board the van. It is often the cheering

task of the historian to direct attention to the designs and (if it may be reverently said) the artifices of Providence. In the luggage van, as Joseph was borne out of the station of Southampton East upon his way to London, the egg of his romance lay (so to speak) unhatched. The huge packing-case was directed to lie at Waterloo till called for, and addressed to one 'William Dent Pitman'; and the very next article, a goodly barrel jammed into the corner of the van, bore the superscription, 'M. Finsbury, 16 John Street, Bloomsbury. Carriage paid.'

In this juxtaposition, the train of powder was prepared; and there was now wanting only an idle hand to fire it off.