

CHAPTER IV. The Magistrate in the Luggage Van

The city of Winchester is famed for a cathedral, a bishop--but he was unfortunately killed some years ago while riding--a public school, a considerable assortment of the military, and the deliberate passage of the trains of the London and South-Western line. These and many similar associations would have doubtless crowded on the mind of Joseph Finsbury; but his spirit had at that time flitted from the railway compartment to a heaven of populous lecture-halls and endless oratory. His body, in the meanwhile, lay doubled on the cushions, the forage-cap rakishly tilted back after the fashion of those that lie in wait for nursery-maids, the poor old face quiescent, one arm clutching to his heart Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper.

To him, thus unconscious, enter and exeunt again a pair of voyagers. These two had saved the train and no more. A tandem urged to its last speed, an act of something closely bordering on brigandage at the ticket office, and a spasm of running, had brought them on the platform just as the engine uttered its departing snort. There was but one carriage easily within their reach; and they had sprung into it, and the leader and elder already had his feet upon the floor, when he observed Mr Finsbury.

'Good God!' he cried. 'Uncle Joseph! This'll never do.'

And he backed out, almost upsetting his companion, and once more closed

the door upon the sleeping patriarch.

The next moment the pair had jumped into the baggage van.

'What's the row about your Uncle Joseph?' enquired the younger traveller, mopping his brow. 'Does he object to smoking?'

'I don't know that there's anything the row with him,' returned the other. 'He's by no means the first comer, my Uncle Joseph, I can tell you! Very respectable old gentleman; interested in leather; been to Asia Minor; no family, no assets--and a tongue, my dear Wickham, sharper than a serpent's tooth.'

'Cantankerous old party, eh?' suggested Wickham.

'Not in the least,' cried the other; 'only a man with a solid talent for being a bore; rather cheery I dare say, on a desert island, but on a railway journey insupportable. You should hear him on Tontine, the ass that started tontines. He's incredible on Tontine.'

'By Jove!' cried Wickham, 'then you're one of these Finsbury tontine fellows. I hadn't a guess of that.'

'Ah!' said the other, 'do you know that old boy in the carriage is worth a hundred thousand pounds to me? There he was asleep, and nobody there but you! But I spared him, because I'm a Conservative in politics.'

Mr Wickham, pleased to be in a luggage van, was flitting to and fro like a gentlemanly butterfly.

'By Jingo!' he cried, 'here's something for you! "M. Finsbury, 16 John Street, Bloomsbury, London." M. stands for Michael, you sly dog; you keep two establishments, do you?'

'O, that's Morris,' responded Michael from the other end of the van, where he had found a comfortable seat upon some sacks. 'He's a little cousin of mine. I like him myself, because he's afraid of me. He's one of the ornaments of Bloomsbury, and has a collection of some kind--birds' eggs or something that's supposed to be curious. I bet it's nothing to my clients!'

'What a lark it would be to play billy with the labels!' chuckled Mr Wickham. 'By George, here's a tack-hammer! We might send all these things skipping about the premises like what's-his-name!'

At this moment, the guard, surprised by the sound of voices, opened the door of his little cabin.

'You had best step in here, gentlemen,' said he, when he had heard their story.

'Won't you come, Wickham?' asked Michael.

'Catch me--I want to travel in a van,' replied the youth.

And so the door of communication was closed; and for the rest of the run Mr Wickham was left alone over his diversions on the one side, and on the other Michael and the guard were closeted together in familiar talk.

'I can get you a compartment here, sir,' observed the official, as the train began to slacken speed before Bishopstoke station. 'You had best get out at my door, and I can bring your friend.'

Mr Wickham, whom we left (as the reader has shrewdly suspected) beginning to 'play billy' with the labels in the van, was a young gentleman of much wealth, a pleasing but sandy exterior, and a highly vacant mind. Not many months before, he had contrived to get himself blackmailed by the family of a Wallachian Hospodar, resident for political reasons in the gay city of Paris. A common friend (to whom he had confided his distress) recommended him to Michael; and the lawyer was no sooner in possession of the facts than he instantly assumed the offensive, fell on the flank of the Wallachian forces, and, in the inside of three days, had the satisfaction to behold them routed and fleeing for the Danube. It is no business of ours to follow them on this retreat, over which the police were so obliging as to preside paternally. Thus relieved from what he loved to refer to as the Bulgarian Atrocity, Mr Wickham returned to London with the most unbounded and embarrassing gratitude and admiration for his saviour.

These sentiments were not repaid either in kind or degree; indeed, Michael was a trifle ashamed of his new client's friendship; it had taken many invitations to get him to Winchester and Wickham Manor; but he had gone at last, and was now returning. It has been remarked by some judicious thinker (possibly J. F. Smith) that Providence despises to employ no instrument, however humble; and it is now plain to the dullest that both Mr Wickham and the Wallachian Hospodar were liquid lead and wedges in the hand of Destiny.

Smitten with the desire to shine in Michael's eyes and show himself a person of original humour and resources, the young gentleman (who was a magistrate, more by token, in his native county) was no sooner alone in the van than he fell upon the labels with all the zeal of a reformer; and, when he rejoined the lawyer at Bishopstoke, his face was flushed with his exertions, and his cigar, which he had suffered to go out was almost bitten in two.

'By George, but this has been a lark!' he cried. 'I've sent the wrong thing to everybody in England. These cousins of yours have a packing-case as big as a house. I've muddled the whole business up to that extent, Finsbury, that if it were to get out it's my belief we should get lynched.'

It was useless to be serious with Mr Wickham. 'Take care,' said Michael. 'I am getting tired of your perpetual scrapes; my reputation is beginning to suffer.'

'Your reputation will be all gone before you finish with me,' replied his companion with a grin. 'Clap it in the bill, my boy. "For total loss of reputation, six and eightpence." But,' continued Mr Wickham with more seriousness, 'could I be bowled out of the Commission for this little jest? I know it's small, but I like to be a JP. Speaking as a professional man, do you think there's any risk?'

'What does it matter?' responded Michael, 'they'll chuck you out sooner or later. Somehow you don't give the effect of being a good magistrate.'

'I only wish I was a solicitor,' retorted his companion, 'instead of a poor devil of a country gentleman. Suppose we start one of those tontine affairs ourselves; I to pay five hundred a year, and you to guarantee me against every misfortune except illness or marriage.'

'It strikes me,' remarked the lawyer with a meditative laugh, as he lighted a cigar, 'it strikes me that you must be a cursed nuisance in this world of ours.'

'Do you really think so, Finsbury?' responded the magistrate, leaning back in his cushions, delighted with the compliment. 'Yes, I suppose I am a nuisance. But, mind you, I have a stake in the country: don't forget that, dear boy.'