

CHAPTER VI. The Tribulations of Morris: Part the First

As the hansom span through the streets of London, Morris sought to rally the forces of his mind. The water-butt with the dead body had miscarried, and it was essential to recover it. So much was clear; and if, by some blest good fortune, it was still at the station, all might be well. If it had been sent out, however, if it were already in the hands of some wrong person, matters looked more ominous. People who receive unexplained packages are usually keen to have them open; the example of Miss Hazeltine (whom he cursed again) was there to remind him of the circumstance; and if anyone had opened the water-butt--'O Lord!' cried Morris at the thought, and carried his hand to his damp forehead. The private conception of any breach of law is apt to be inspiriting, for the scheme (while yet inchoate) wears dashing and attractive colours. Not so in the least that part of the criminal's later reflections which deal with the police. That useful corps (as Morris now began to think) had scarce been kept sufficiently in view when he embarked upon his enterprise. 'I must play devilish close,' he reflected, and he was aware of an exquisite thrill of fear in the region of the spine.

'Main line or loop?' enquired the cabman, through the scuttle.

'Main line,' replied Morris, and mentally decided that the man should have his shilling after all. 'It would be madness to attract attention,' thought he. 'But what this thing will cost me, first and last, begins to

be a nightmare!

He passed through the booking-office and wandered disconsolately on the platform. It was a breathing-space in the day's traffic. There were few people there, and these for the most part quiescent on the benches. Morris seemed to attract no remark, which was a good thing; but, on the other hand, he was making no progress in his quest. Something must be done, something must be risked. Every passing instant only added to his dangers. Summoning all his courage, he stopped a porter, and asked him if he remembered receiving a barrel by the morning train. He was anxious to get information, for the barrel belonged to a friend. 'It is a matter of some moment,' he added, 'for it contains specimens.'

'I was not here this morning, sir,' responded the porter, somewhat reluctantly, 'but I'll ask Bill. Do you recollect, Bill, to have got a barrel from Bournemouth this morning containing specimens?'

'I don't know about specimens,' replied Bill; 'but the party as received the barrel I mean raised a sight of trouble.'

'What's that?' cried Morris, in the agitation of the moment pressing a penny into the man's hand.

'You see, sir, the barrel arrived at one-thirty. No one claimed it till about three, when a small, sickly--looking gentleman (probably a curate) came up, and sez he, "Have you got anything for Pitman?" or "Wili'm Bent

Pitman," if I recollect right. "I don't exactly know," sez I, "but I rather fancy that there barrel bears that name." The little man went up to the barrel, and seemed regularly all took aback when he saw the address, and then he pitched into us for not having brought what he wanted. "I don't care a damn what you want," sez I to him, "but if you are Will'm Bent Pitman, there's your barrel."

'Well, and did he take it?' cried the breathless Morris.

'Well, sir,' returned Bill, 'it appears it was a packing-case he was after. The packing-case came; that's sure enough, because it was about the biggest packing-case ever I clapped eyes on. And this Pitman he seemed a good deal cut up, and he had the superintendent out, and they got hold of the vanman--him as took the packing-case. Well, sir,' continued Bill, with a smile, 'I never see a man in such a state.

Everybody about that van was mortal, bar the horses. Some gen'leman (as well as I could make out) had given the vanman a sov.; and so that was where the trouble come in, you see.'

'But what did he say?' gasped Morris.

'I don't know as he SAID much, sir,' said Bill. 'But he offered to fight this Pitman for a pot of beer. He had lost his book, too, and the receipts, and his men were all as mortal as himself. O, they were all like'--and Bill paused for a simile--'like lords! The superintendent sacked them on the spot.'

'O, come, but that's not so bad,' said Morris, with a bursting sigh. 'He couldn't tell where he took the packing-case, then?'

'Not he,' said Bill, 'nor yet nothink else.'

'And what--what did Pitman do?' asked Morris.

'O, he went off with the barrel in a four-wheeler, very trembling like,' replied Bill. 'I don't believe he's a gentleman as has good health.'

'Well, so the barrel's gone,' said Morris, half to himself.

'You may depend on that, sir,' returned the porter. 'But you had better see the superintendent.'

'Not in the least; it's of no account,' said Morris. 'It only contained specimens.' And he walked hastily away.

Ensnconced once more in a hansom, he proceeded to reconsider his position. Suppose (he thought), suppose he should accept defeat and declare his uncle's death at once? He should lose the tontine, and with that the last hope of his seven thousand eight hundred pounds. But on the other hand, since the shilling to the hansom cabman, he had begun to see that crime was expensive in its course, and, since the loss of the water-butt, that it was uncertain in its consequences. Quietly at first,

and then with growing heat, he reviewed the advantages of backing out. It involved a loss; but (come to think of it) no such great loss after all; only that of the tontine, which had been always a toss-up, which at bottom he had never really expected. He reminded himself of that eagerly; he congratulated himself upon his constant moderation. He had never really expected the tontine; he had never even very definitely hoped to recover his seven thousand eight hundred pounds; he had been hurried into the whole thing by Michael's obvious dishonesty. Yes, it would probably be better to draw back from this high-flying venture, settle back on the leather business--

'Great God!' cried Morris, bounding in the hansom like a Jack-in-a-box. 'I have not only not gained the tontine--I have lost the leather business!'

Such was the monstrous fact. He had no power to sign; he could not draw a cheque for thirty shillings. Until he could produce legal evidence of his uncle's death, he was a penniless outcast--and as soon as he produced it he had lost the tontine! There was no hesitation on the part of Morris; to drop the tontine like a hot chestnut, to concentrate all his forces on the leather business and the rest of his small but legitimate inheritance, was the decision of a single instant. And the next, the full extent of his calamity was suddenly disclosed to him. Declare his uncle's death? He couldn't! Since the body was lost Joseph had (in a legal sense) become immortal.

There was no created vehicle big enough to contain Morris and his woes. He paid the hansom off and walked on he knew not whither.

'I seem to have gone into this business with too much precipitation,' he reflected, with a deadly sigh. 'I fear it seems too ramified for a person of my powers of mind.'

And then a remark of his uncle's flashed into his memory: If you want to think clearly, put it all down on paper. 'Well, the old boy knew a thing or two,' said Morris. 'I will try; but I don't believe the paper was ever made that will clear my mind.'

He entered a place of public entertainment, ordered bread and cheese, and writing materials, and sat down before them heavily. He tried the pen. It was an excellent pen, but what was he to write? 'I have it,' cried Morris. 'Robinson Crusoe and the double columns!' He prepared his paper after that classic model, and began as follows:

Bad. ---- Good.

1. I have lost my uncle's body.

1. But then Pitman has found it.

'Stop a bit,' said Morris. 'I am letting the spirit of antithesis run away with me. Let's start again.'

Bad. ---- Good.

1. I have lost my uncle's body.

1. But then I no longer require to bury it.

2. I have lost the tontine.

2. But I may still save that if Pitman disposes of the body, and if I can find a physician who will stick at nothing.

3. I have lost the leather business and the rest of my uncle's succession.

3. But not if Pitman gives the body up to the police.

'O, but in that case I go to gaol; I had forgot that,' thought Morris.

'Indeed, I don't know that I had better dwell on that hypothesis at all;

it's all very well to talk of facing the worst; but in a case of this

kind a man's first duty is to his own nerve. Is there any answer to No.

3? Is there any possible good side to such a beastly bungle? There must

be, of course, or where would be the use of this double-entry business?

And--by George, I have it!' he exclaimed; 'it's exactly the same as the

last! And he hastily re-wrote the passage:

Bad. ---- Good.

3. I have lost the leather business and the rest of my uncle's succession.

3. But not if I can find a physician who will stick at nothing.

'This venal doctor seems quite a desideratum,' he reflected. 'I want him first to give me a certificate that my uncle is dead, so that I may get the leather business; and then that he's alive--but here we are again at the incompatible interests!' And he returned to his tabulation:

Bad. ---- Good.

4. I have almost no money.

4. But there is plenty in the bank.

5. Yes, but I can't get the money in the bank.

5. But--well, that seems unhappily to be the case.

6. I have left the bill for eight hundred pounds in Uncle Joseph's pocket.

6. But if Pitman is only a dishonest man, the presence of this bill may lead him to keep the whole thing dark and throw the body into the New Cut.

7. Yes, but if Pitman is dishonest and finds the bill, he will know who Joseph is, and he may blackmail me.

7. Yes, but if I am right about Uncle Masterman, I can blackmail Michael.

8. But I can't blackmail Michael (which is, besides, a very dangerous thing to do) until I find out.

8. Worse luck!

9. The leather business will soon want money for current expenses, and I have none to give.

9. But the leather business is a sinking ship.

10. Yes, but it's all the ship I have.

10. A fact.

11. John will soon want money, and I have none to give.

11.

12. And the venal doctor will want money down.

12.

13. And if Pitman is dishonest and don't send me to gaol, he will want a fortune.

13.

'O, this seems to be a very one-sided business,' exclaimed Morris.

'There's not so much in this method as I was led to think.' He crumpled the paper up and threw it down; and then, the next moment, picked it up again and ran it over. 'It seems it's on the financial point that my position is weakest,' he reflected. 'Is there positively no way of

raising the wind? In a vast city like this, and surrounded by all the resources of civilization, it seems not to be conceived! Let us have no more precipitation. Is there nothing I can sell? My collection of signet--' But at the thought of scattering these loved treasures the blood leaped into Morris's check. 'I would rather die!' he exclaimed, and, cramming his hat upon his head, strode forth into the streets.

'I MUST raise funds,' he thought. 'My uncle being dead, the money in the bank is mine, or would be mine but for the cursed injustice that has pursued me ever since I was an orphan in a commercial academy. I know what any other man would do; any other man in Christendom would forge; although I don't know why I call it forging, either, when Joseph's dead, and the funds are my own. When I think of that, when I think that my uncle is really as dead as mutton, and that I can't prove it, my gorge rises at the injustice of the whole affair. I used to feel bitterly about that seven thousand eight hundred pounds; it seems a trifle now! Dear me, why, the day before yesterday I was comparatively happy.'

And Morris stood on the sidewalk and heaved another sobbing sigh.

'Then there's another thing,' he resumed; 'can I? Am I able? Why didn't I practise different handwritings while I was young? How a fellow regrets those lost opportunities when he grows up! But there's one comfort: it's not morally wrong; I can try it on with a clear conscience, and even if I was found out, I wouldn't greatly care--morally, I mean. And then, if I succeed, and if Pitman is staunch,

there's nothing to do but find a venal doctor; and that ought to be simple enough in a place like London. By all accounts the town's alive with them. It wouldn't do, of course, to advertise for a corrupt physician; that would be impolitic. No, I suppose a fellow has simply to spot along the streets for a red lamp and herbs in the window, and then you go in and--and--and put it to him plainly; though it seems a delicate step.'

He was near home now, after many devious wanderings, and turned up John Street. As he thrust his latchkey in the lock, another mortifying reflection struck him to the heart.

'Not even this house is mine till I can prove him dead,' he snarled, and slammed the door behind him so that the windows in the attic rattled.

Night had long fallen; long ago the lamps and the shop-fronts had begun to glitter down the endless streets; the lobby was pitch--dark; and, as the devil would have it, Morris barked his shins and sprawled all his length over the pedestal of Hercules. The pain was sharp; his temper was already thoroughly undermined; by a last misfortune his hand closed on the hammer as he fell; and, in a spasm of childish irritation, he turned and struck at the offending statue. There was a splintering crash.

'O Lord, what have I done next?' wailed Morris; and he groped his way to find a candle. 'Yes,' he reflected, as he stood with the light in his hand and looked upon the mutilated leg, from which about a pound of

muscle was detached. 'Yes, I have destroyed a genuine antique; I may be in for thousands!' And then there sprung up in his bosom a sort of angry hope. 'Let me see,' he thought. 'Julia's got rid of--, there's nothing to connect me with that beast Forsyth; the men were all drunk, and (what's better) they've been all discharged. O, come, I think this is another case of moral courage! I'll deny all knowledge of the thing.'

A moment more, and he stood again before the Hercules, his lips sternly compressed, the coal-axe and the meat-cleaver under his arm. The next, he had fallen upon the packing-case. This had been already seriously undermined by the operations of Gideon; a few well-directed blows, and it already quaked and gaped; yet a few more, and it fell about Morris in a shower of boards followed by an avalanche of straw.

And now the leather-merchant could behold the nature of his task: and at the first sight his spirit quailed. It was, indeed, no more ambitious a task for De Lesseps, with all his men and horses, to attack the hills of Panama, than for a single, slim young gentleman, with no previous experience of labour in a quarry, to measure himself against that bloated monster on his pedestal. And yet the pair were well encountered: on the one side, bulk--on the other, genuine heroic fire.

'Down you shall come, you great big, ugly brute!' cried Morris aloud, with something of that passion which swept the Parisian mob against the walls of the Bastille. 'Down you shall come, this night. I'll have none of you in my lobby.'

The face, from its indecent expression, had particularly animated the zeal of our iconoclast; and it was against the face that he began his operations. The great height of the demigod--for he stood a fathom and half in his stocking-feet--offered a preliminary obstacle to this attack. But here, in the first skirmish of the battle, intellect already began to triumph over matter. By means of a pair of library steps, the injured householder gained a posture of advantage; and, with great swipes of the coal-axe, proceeded to decapitate the brute.

Two hours later, what had been the erect image of a gigantic coal-porter turned miraculously white, was now no more than a medley of disjunct members; the quadragenarian torso prone against the pedestal; the lascivious countenance leering down the kitchen stair; the legs, the arms, the hands, and even the fingers, scattered broadcast on the lobby floor. Half an hour more, and all the debris had been laboriously carted to the kitchen; and Morris, with a gentle sentiment of triumph, looked round upon the scene of his achievements. Yes, he could deny all knowledge of it now: the lobby, beyond the fact that it was partly ruinous, betrayed no trace of the passage of Hercules. But it was a weary Morris that crept up to bed; his arms and shoulders ached, the palms of his hands burned from the rough kisses of the coal-axe, and there was one smarting finger that stole continually to his mouth. Sleep long delayed to visit the dilapidated hero, and with the first peep of day it had again deserted him.

The morning, as though to accord with his disastrous fortunes, dawned inclemently. An easterly gale was shouting in the streets; flaws of rain angrily assailed the windows; and as Morris dressed, the draught from the fireplace vividly played about his legs.

'I think,' he could not help observing bitterly, 'that with all I have to bear, they might have given me decent weather.'

There was no bread in the house, for Miss Hazeltine (like all women left to themselves) had subsisted entirely upon cake. But some of this was found, and (along with what the poets call a glass of fair, cold water) made up a semblance of a morning meal, and then down he sat undauntedly to his delicate task.

Nothing can be more interesting than the study of signatures, written (as they are) before meals and after, during indigestion and intoxication; written when the signer is trembling for the life of his child or has come from winning the Derby, in his lawyer's office, or under the bright eyes of his sweetheart. To the vulgar, these seem never the same; but to the expert, the bank clerk, or the lithographer, they are constant quantities, and as recognizable as the North Star to the night-watch on deck.

To all this Morris was alive. In the theory of that graceful art in which he was now embarking, our spirited leather-merchant was beyond

all reproach. But, happily for the investor, forgery is an affair of practice. And as Morris sat surrounded by examples of his uncle's signature and of his own incompetence, insidious depression stole upon his spirits. From time to time the wind wuthered in the chimney at his back; from time to time there swept over Bloomsbury a squall so dark that he must rise and light the gas; about him was the chill and the mean disorder of a house out of commission--the floor bare, the sofa heaped with books and accounts enveloped in a dirty table-cloth, the pens rusted, the paper glazed with a thick film of dust; and yet these were but adminicles of misery, and the true root of his depression lay round him on the table in the shape of misbegotten forgeries.

'It's one of the strangest things I ever heard of,' he complained. 'It almost seems as if it was a talent that I didn't possess.' He went once more minutely through his proofs. 'A clerk would simply gibe at them,' said he. 'Well, there's nothing else but tracing possible.'

He waited till a squall had passed and there came a blink of scowling daylight. Then he went to the window, and in the face of all John Street traced his uncle's signature. It was a poor thing at the best. 'But it must do,' said he, as he stood gazing woefully on his handiwork. 'He's dead, anyway.' And he filled up the cheque for a couple of hundred and sallied forth for the Anglo-Patagonian Bank.

There, at the desk at which he was accustomed to transact business, and with as much indifference as he could assume, Morris presented the

forged cheque to the big, red-bearded Scots teller. The teller seemed to view it with surprise; and as he turned it this way and that, and even scrutinized the signature with a magnifying-glass, his surprise appeared to warm into disfavour. Begging to be excused for a moment, he passed away into the rearmost quarters of the bank; whence, after an appreciable interval, he returned again in earnest talk with a superior, an oldish and a baldish, but a very gentlemanly man.

'Mr Morris Finsbury, I believe,' said the gentlemanly man, fixing Morris with a pair of double eye-glasses.

'That is my name,' said Morris, quavering. 'Is there anything wrong.'

'Well, the fact is, Mr Finsbury, you see we are rather surprised at receiving this,' said the other, flicking at the cheque. 'There are no effects.'

'No effects?' cried Morris. 'Why, I know myself there must be eight-and-twenty hundred pounds, if there's a penny.'

'Two seven six four, I think,' replied the gentlemanly man; 'but it was drawn yesterday.'

'Drawn!' cried Morris.

'By your uncle himself, sir,' continued the other. 'Not only that, but

we discounted a bill for him for--let me see--how much was it for, Mr Bell?'

'Eight hundred, Mr Judkin,' replied the teller.

'Bent Pitman!' cried Morris, staggering back.

'I beg your pardon,' said Mr Judkin.

'It's--it's only an expletive,' said Morris.

'I hope there's nothing wrong, Mr Finsbury,' said Mr Bell.

'All I can tell you,' said Morris, with a harsh laugh, 'is that the whole thing's impossible. My uncle is at Bournemouth, unable to move.'

'Really!' cried Mr Bell, and he recovered the cheque from Mr Judkin.

'But this cheque is dated in London, and today,' he observed. 'How d'ye account for that, sir?'

'O, that was a mistake,' said Morris, and a deep tide of colour dyed his face and neck.

'No doubt, no doubt,' said Mr Judkin, but he looked at his customer enquiringly.

'And--and--' resumed Morris, 'even if there were no effects--this is a very trifling sum to overdraw--our firm--the name of Finsbury, is surely good enough for such a wretched sum as this.'

'No doubt, Mr Finsbury,' returned Mr Judkin; 'and if you insist I will take it into consideration; but I hardly think--in short, Mr Finsbury, if there had been nothing else, the signature seems hardly all that we could wish.'

'That's of no consequence,' replied Morris nervously. 'I'll get my uncle to sign another. The fact is,' he went on, with a bold stroke, 'my uncle is so far from well at present that he was unable to sign this cheque without assistance, and I fear that my holding the pen for him may have made the difference in the signature.'

Mr Judkin shot a keen glance into Morris's face; and then turned and looked at Mr Bell.

'Well,' he said, 'it seems as if we had been victimized by a swindler. Pray tell Mr Finsbury we shall put detectives on at once. As for this cheque of yours, I regret that, owing to the way it was signed, the bank can hardly consider it--what shall I say?--businesslike,' and he returned the cheque across the counter.

Morris took it up mechanically; he was thinking of something very different.

'In a--case of this kind,' he began, 'I believe the loss falls on us; I mean upon my uncle and myself.'

'It does not, sir,' replied Mr Bell; 'the bank is responsible, and the bank will either recover the money or refund it, you may depend on that.'

Morris's face fell; then it was visited by another gleam of hope.

'I'll tell you what,' he said, 'you leave this entirely in my hands. I'll sift the matter. I've an idea, at any rate; and detectives,' he added appealingly, 'are so expensive.'

'The bank would not hear of it,' returned Mr Judkin. 'The bank stands to lose between three and four thousand pounds; it will spend as much more if necessary. An undiscovered forger is a permanent danger. We shall clear it up to the bottom, Mr Finsbury; set your mind at rest on that.'

'Then I'll stand the loss,' said Morris boldly. 'I order you to abandon the search.' He was determined that no enquiry should be made.

'I beg your pardon,' returned Mr Judkin, 'but we have nothing to do with you in this matter, which is one between your uncle and ourselves. If he should take this opinion, and will either come here himself or let me see him in his sick-room--'

'Quite impossible,' cried Morris.

'Well, then, you see,' said Mr Judkin, 'how my hands are tied. The whole affair must go at once into the hands of the police.'

Morris mechanically folded the cheque and restored it to his pocket--book.

'Good--morning,' said he, and scrambled somehow out of the bank.

'I don't know what they suspect,' he reflected; 'I can't make them out, their whole behaviour is thoroughly unbusinesslike. But it doesn't matter; all's up with everything. The money has been paid; the police are on the scent; in two hours that idiot Pitman will be nabbed--and the whole story of the dead body in the evening papers.'

If he could have heard what passed in the bank after his departure he would have been less alarmed, perhaps more mortified.

'That was a curious affair, Mr Bell,' said Mr Judkin.

'Yes, sir,' said Mr Bell, 'but I think we have given him a fright.'

'O, we shall hear no more of Mr Morris Finsbury,' returned the other; 'it was a first attempt, and the house have dealt with us so long that

I was anxious to deal gently. But I suppose, Mr Bell, there can be no mistake about yesterday? It was old Mr Finsbury himself?

'There could be no possible doubt of that,' said Mr Bell with a chuckle.

'He explained to me the principles of banking.'

'Well, well,' said Mr Judkin. 'The next time he calls ask him to step into my room. It is only proper he should be warned.'