

CHAPTER VII. In Which William Dent Pitman takes Legal Advice

Norfolk Street, King's Road--jocularly known among Mr Pitman's lodgers as 'Norfolk Island'--is neither a long, a handsome, nor a pleasing thoroughfare. Dirty, undersized maids-of-all-work issue from it in pursuit of beer, or linger on its sidewalk listening to the voice of love. The cat's-meat man passes twice a day. An occasional organ-grinder wanders in and wanders out again, disgusted. In holiday-time the street is the arena of the young bloods of the neighbourhood, and the householders have an opportunity of studying the manly art of self-defence. And yet Norfolk Street has one claim to be respectable, for it contains not a single shop--unless you count the public-house at the corner, which is really in the King's Road.

The door of No. 7 bore a brass plate inscribed with the legend 'W. D. Pitman, Artist'. It was not a particularly clean brass plate, nor was No. 7 itself a particularly inviting place of residence. And yet it had a character of its own, such as may well quicken the pulse of the reader's curiosity. For here was the home of an artist--and a distinguished artist too, highly distinguished by his ill-success--which had never been made the subject of an article in the illustrated magazines. No wood-engraver had ever reproduced 'a corner in the back drawing-room' or 'the studio mantelpiece' of No. 7; no young lady author had ever commented on 'the unaffected simplicity' with which Mr Pitman received her in the midst of his 'treasures'. It is an omission I would gladly supply, but our business is only with the backward parts and

'abject rear' of this aesthetic dwelling.

Here was a garden, boasting a dwarf fountain (that never played) in the centre, a few grimy-looking flowers in pots, two or three newly planted trees which the spring of Chelsea visited without noticeable consequence, and two or three statues after the antique, representing satyrs and nymphs in the worst possible style of sculptured art. On one side the garden was overshadowed by a pair of crazy studios, usually hired out to the more obscure and youthful practitioners of British art. Opposite these another lofty out-building, somewhat more carefully finished, and boasting of a communication with the house and a private door on the back lane, enshrined the multifarious industry of Mr Pitman. All day, it is true, he was engaged in the work of education at a seminary for young ladies; but the evenings at least were his own, and these he would prolong far into the night, now dashing off 'A landscape with waterfall' in oil, now a volunteer bust ('in marble', as he would gently but proudly observe) of some public character, now stooping his chisel to a mere 'nymph' for a gasbracket on a stair, sir', or a life-size 'Infant Samuel' for a religious nursery. Mr Pitman had studied in Paris, and he had studied in Rome, supplied with funds by a fond parent who went subsequently bankrupt in consequence of a fall in corsets; and though he was never thought to have the smallest modicum of talent, it was at one time supposed that he had learned his business. Eighteen years of what is called 'tuition' had relieved him of the dangerous knowledge. His artist lodgers would sometimes reason with him; they would point out to him how impossible it was to paint by gaslight,

or to sculpture life-sized nymphs without a model.

'I know that,' he would reply. 'No one in Norfolk Street knows it better; and if I were rich I should certainly employ the best models in London; but, being poor, I have taught myself to do without them. An occasional model would only disturb my ideal conception of the figure, and be a positive impediment in my career. As for painting by an artificial light,' he would continue, 'that is simply a knack I have found it necessary to acquire, my days being engrossed in the work of tuition.'

At the moment when we must present him to our readers, Pitman was in his studio alone, by the dying light of the October day. He sat (sure enough with 'unaffected simplicity') in a Windsor chair, his low-crowned black felt hat by his side; a dark, weak, harmless, pathetic little man, clad in the hue of mourning, his coat longer than is usual with the laity, his neck enclosed in a collar without a parting, his neckcloth pale in hue and simply tied; the whole outward man, except for a pointed beard, tentatively clerical. There was a thinning on the top of Pitman's head, there were silver hairs at Pitman's temple. Poor gentleman, he was no longer young; and years, and poverty, and humble ambition thwarted, make a cheerless lot.

In front of him, in the corner by the door, there stood a portly barrel; and let him turn them where he might, it was always to the barrel that his eyes and his thoughts returned.

'Should I open it? Should I return it? Should I communicate with Mr Sernitopolis at once?' he wondered. 'No,' he concluded finally, 'nothing without Mr Finsbury's advice.' And he arose and produced a shabby leathern desk. It opened without the formality of unlocking, and displayed the thick cream-coloured notepaper on which Mr Pitman was in the habit of communicating with the proprietors of schools and the parents of his pupils. He placed the desk on the table by the window, and taking a saucer of Indian ink from the chimney-piece, laboriously composed the following letter:

'My dear Mr Finsbury,' it ran, 'would it be presuming on your kindness if I asked you to pay me a visit here this evening? It is in no trifling matter that I invoke your valuable assistance, for need I say more than it concerns the welfare of Mr Semitopolis's statue of Hercules? I write you in great agitation of mind; for I have made all enquiries, and greatly fear that this work of ancient art has been mislaid. I labour besides under another perplexity, not unconnected with the first. Pray excuse the inelegance of this scrawl, and believe me yours in haste,
William D. Pitman.'

Armed with this he set forth and rang the bell of No. 233 King's Road, the private residence of Michael Finsbury. He had met the lawyer at a time of great public excitement in Chelsea; Michael, who had a sense of humour and a great deal of careless kindness in his nature, followed the acquaintance up, and, having come to laugh, remained to drop into

a contemptuous kind of friendship. By this time, which was four years after the first meeting, Pitman was the lawyer's dog.

'No,' said the elderly housekeeper, who opened the door in person, 'Mr Michael's not in yet. But ye're looking terribly poorly, Mr Pitman. Take a glass of sherry, sir, to cheer ye up.'

'No, I thank you, ma'am,' replied the artist. 'It is very good in you, but I scarcely feel in sufficient spirits for sherry. Just give Mr Finsbury this note, and ask him to look round--to the door in the lane, you will please tell him; I shall be in the studio all evening.'

And he turned again into the street and walked slowly homeward. A hairdresser's window caught his attention, and he stared long and earnestly at the proud, high--born, waxen lady in evening dress, who circulated in the centre of the show. The artist woke in him, in spite of his troubles.

'It is all very well to run down the men who make these things,' he cried, 'but there's a something--there's a haughty, indefinable something about that figure. It's what I tried for in my "Empress Eugenie",' he added, with a sigh.

And he went home reflecting on the quality. 'They don't teach you that direct appeal in Paris,' he thought. 'It's British. Come, I am going to sleep, I must wake up, I must aim higher--aim higher,' cried the little

artist to himself. All through his tea and afterward, as he was giving his eldest boy a lesson on the fiddle, his mind dwelt no longer on his troubles, but he was rapt into the better land; and no sooner was he at liberty than he hastened with positive exhilaration to his studio.

Not even the sight of the barrel could entirely cast him down. He flung himself with rising zest into his work--a bust of Mr Gladstone from a photograph; turned (with extraordinary success) the difficulty of the back of the head, for which he had no documents beyond a hazy recollection of a public meeting; delighted himself by his treatment of the collar; and was only recalled to the cares of life by Michael Finsbury's rattle at the door.

'Well, what's wrong?' said Michael, advancing to the grate, where, knowing his friend's delight in a bright fire, Mr Pitman had not spared the fuel. 'I suppose you have come to grief somehow.'

'There is no expression strong enough,' said the artist. 'Mr Semitopolis's statue has not turned up, and I am afraid I shall be answerable for the money; but I think nothing of that--what I fear, my dear Mr Finsbury, what I fear--alas that I should have to say it! is exposure. The Hercules was to be smuggled out of Italy; a thing positively wrong, a thing of which a man of my principles and in my responsible position should have taken (as I now see too late) no part whatever.'

'This sounds like very serious work,' said the lawyer. 'It will require a great deal of drink, Pitman.'

'I took the liberty of--in short, of being prepared for you,' replied the artist, pointing to a kettle, a bottle of gin, a lemon, and glasses. Michael mixed himself a grog, and offered the artist a cigar.

'No, thank you,' said Pitman. 'I used occasionally to be rather partial to it, but the smell is so disagreeable about the clothes.'

'All right,' said the lawyer. 'I am comfortable now. Unfold your tale.'

At some length Pitman set forth his sorrows. He had gone today to Waterloo, expecting to receive the colossal Hercules, and he had received instead a barrel not big enough to hold Discobolus; yet the barrel was addressed in the hand (with which he was perfectly acquainted) of his Roman correspondent. What was stranger still, a case had arrived by the same train, large enough and heavy enough to contain the Hercules; and this case had been taken to an address now undiscoverable. 'The vanman (I regret to say it) had been drinking, and his language was such as I could never bring myself to repeat.

He was at once discharged by the superintendent of the line, who behaved most properly throughout, and is to make enquiries at Southampton.

In the meanwhile, what was I to do? I left my address and brought the barrel home; but, remembering an old adage, I determined not to open it

except in the presence of my lawyer.'

'Is that all?' asked Michael. 'I don't see any cause to worry. The Hercules has stuck upon the road. It will drop in tomorrow or the day after; and as for the barrel, depend upon it, it's a testimonial from one of your young ladies, and probably contains oysters.'

'O, don't speak so loud!' cried the little artist. 'It would cost me my place if I were heard to speak lightly of the young ladies; and besides, why oysters from Italy? and why should they come to me addressed in Signor Ricardi's hand?'

'Well, let's have a look at it,' said Michael. 'Let's roll it forward to the light.'

The two men rolled the barrel from the corner, and stood it on end before the fire.

'It's heavy enough to be oysters,' remarked Michael judiciously.

'Shall we open it at once?' enquired the artist, who had grown decidedly cheerful under the combined effects of company and gin; and without waiting for a reply, he began to strip as if for a prize-fight, tossed his clerical collar in the wastepaper basket, hung his clerical coat upon a nail, and with a chisel in one hand and a hammer in the other, struck the first blow of the evening.

'That's the style, William Dent' cried Michael. 'There's fire for--your money! It may be a romantic visit from one of the young ladies--a sort of Cleopatra business. Have a care and don't stave in Cleopatra's head.'

But the sight of Pitman's alacrity was infectious. The lawyer could sit still no longer. Tossing his cigar into the fire, he snatched the instrument from the unwilling hands of the artist, and fell to himself. Soon the sweat stood in beads upon his large, fair brow; his stylish trousers were defaced with iron rust, and the state of his chisel testified to misdirected energies.

A cask is not an easy thing to open, even when you set about it in the right way; when you set about it wrongly, the whole structure must be resolved into its elements. Such was the course pursued alike by the artist and the lawyer. Presently the last hoop had been removed--a couple of smart blows tumbled the staves upon the ground--and what had once been a barrel was no more than a confused heap of broken and distorted boards.

In the midst of these, a certain dismal something, swathed in blankets, remained for an instant upright, and then toppled to one side and heavily collapsed before the fire. Even as the thing subsided, an eye-glass tingled to the floor and rolled toward the screaming Pitman.

'Hold your tongue!' said Michael. He dashed to the house door and locked

it; then, with a pale face and bitten lip, he drew near, pulled aside a corner of the swathing blanket, and recoiled, shuddering. There was a long silence in the studio.

'Now tell me,' said Michael, in a low voice: 'Had you any hand in it?' and he pointed to the body.

The little artist could only utter broken and disjointed sounds.

Michael poured some gin into a glass. 'Drink that,' he said. 'Don't be afraid of me. I'm your friend through thick and thin.'

Pitman put the liquor down untasted.

'I swear before God,' he said, 'this is another mystery to me. In my worst fears I never dreamed of such a thing. I would not lay a finger on a sucking infant.'

'That's all square,' said Michael, with a sigh of huge relief. 'I believe you, old boy.' And he shook the artist warmly by the hand. 'I thought for a moment,' he added with rather a ghastly smile, 'I thought for a moment you might have made away with Mr Semitopolis.'

'It would make no difference if I had,' groaned Pitman. 'All is at an end for me. There's the writing on the wall.'

'To begin with,' said Michael, 'let's get him out of sight; for to be quite plain with you, Pitman, I don't like your friend's appearance.' And with that the lawyer shuddered. 'Where can we put it?'

'You might put it in the closet there--if you could bear to touch it,' answered the artist.

'Somebody has to do it, Pitman,' returned the lawyer; 'and it seems as if it had to be me. You go over to the table, turn your back, and mix me a grog; that's a fair division of labour.'

About ninety seconds later the closet-door was heard to shut.

'There,' observed Michael, 'that's more homelike. You can turn now, my pallid Pitman. Is this the grog?' he ran on. 'Heaven forgive you, it's a lemonade.'

'But, O, Finsbury, what are we to do with it?' wailed the artist, laying a clutching hand upon the lawyer's arm.

'Do with it?' repeated Michael. 'Bury it in one of your flowerbeds, and erect one of your own statues for a monument. I tell you we should look devilish romantic shovelling out the sod by the moon's pale ray. Here, put some gin in this.'

'I beg of you, Mr Finsbury, do not trifle with my misery,' cried Pitman.

'You see before you a man who has been all his life--I do not hesitate to say it--imminently respectable. Even in this solemn hour I can lay my hand upon my heart without a blush. Except on the really trifling point of the smuggling of the Hercules (and even of that I now humbly repent), my life has been entirely fit for publication. I never feared the light,' cried the little man; 'and now--now--!'

'Cheer up, old boy,' said Michael. 'I assure you we should count this little contretemps a trifle at the office; it's the sort of thing that may occur to any one; and if you're perfectly sure you had no hand in it--'

'What language am I to find--' began Pitman.

'O, I'll do that part of it,' interrupted Michael, 'you have no experience.' But the point is this: If--or rather since--you know nothing of the crime, since the--the party in the closet--is neither your father, nor your brother, nor your creditor, nor your mother-in-law, nor what they call an injured husband--'

'O, my dear sir!' interjected Pitman, horrified.

'Since, in short,' continued the lawyer, 'you had no possible interest in the crime, we have a perfectly free field before us and a safe game to play. Indeed, the problem is really entertaining; it is one I have long contemplated in the light of an A. B. case; here it is at last

under my hand in specie; and I mean to pull you through. Do you hear that?--I mean to pull you through. Let me see: it's a long time since I have had what I call a genuine holiday; I'll send an excuse tomorrow to the office. We had best be lively,' he added significantly; 'for we must not spoil the market for the other man.'

'What do you mean?' enquired Pitman. 'What other man? The inspector of police?'

'Damn the inspector of police!' remarked his companion. 'If you won't take the short cut and bury this in your back garden, we must find some one who will bury it in his. We must place the affair, in short, in the hands of some one with fewer scruples and more resources.'

'A private detective, perhaps?' suggested Pitman.

'There are times when you fill me with pity,' observed the lawyer. 'By the way, Pitman,' he added in another key, 'I have always regretted that you have no piano in this den of yours. Even if you don't play yourself, your friends might like to entertain themselves with a little music while you were mudding.'

'I shall get one at once if you like,' said Pitman nervously, anxious to please. 'I play the fiddle a little as it is.'

'I know you do,' said Michael; 'but what's the fiddle--above all as you

play it? What you want is polyphonic music. And I'll tell you what it is--since it's too late for you to buy a piano I'll give you mine.'

'Thank you,' said the artist blankly. 'You will give me yours? I am sure it's very good in you.'

'Yes, I'll give you mine,' continued Michael, 'for the inspector of police to play on while his men are digging up your back garden.' Pitman stared at him in pained amazement.

'No, I'm not insane,' Michael went on. 'I'm playful, but quite coherent. See here, Pitman: follow me one half minute. I mean to profit by the refreshing fact that we are really and truly innocent; nothing but the presence of the--you know what--connects us with the crime; once let us get rid of it, no matter how, and there is no possible clue to trace us by. Well, I give you my piano; we'll bring it round this very night. Tomorrow we rip the fittings out, deposit the--our friend--inside, plump the whole on a cart, and carry it to the chambers of a young gentleman whom I know by sight.'

'Whom do you know by sight?' repeated Pitman.

'And what is more to the purpose,' continued Michael, 'whose chambers I know better than he does himself. A friend of mine--I call him my friend for brevity; he is now, I understand, in Demerara and (most likely) in gaol--was the previous occupant. I defended him, and I got him off

too--all saved but honour; his assets were nil, but he gave me what he had, poor gentleman, and along with the rest--the key of his chambers. It's there that I propose to leave the piano and, shall we say, Cleopatra?'

'It seems very wild,' said Pitman. 'And what will become of the poor young gentleman whom you know by sight?'

'It will do him good,'--said Michael cheerily. 'Just what he wants to steady him.'

'But, my dear sit, he might be involved in a charge of--a charge of murder,' gulped the artist.

'Well, he'll be just where we are,' returned the lawyer. 'He's innocent, you see. What hangs people, my dear Pitman, is the unfortunate circumstance of guilt.'

'But indeed, indeed,' pleaded Pitman, 'the whole scheme appears to me so wild. Would it not be safer, after all, just to send for the police?'

'And make a scandal?' enquired Michael. "'The Chelsea Mystery; alleged innocence of Pitman"? How would that do at the Seminary?'

'It would imply my discharge,' admitted the drawing--master. 'I cannot deny that.'

'And besides,' said Michael, 'I am not going to embark in such a business and have no fun for my money.'

'O my dear sir, is that a proper spirit?' cried Pitman.

'O, I only said that to cheer you up,' said the unabashed Michael.

'Nothing like a little judicious levity. But it's quite needless to discuss. If you mean to follow my advice, come on, and let us get the piano at once. If you don't, just drop me the word, and I'll leave you to deal with the whole thing according to your better judgement.'

'You know perfectly well that I depend on you entirely,' returned Pitman. 'But O, what a night is before me with that--horror in my studio! How am I to think of it on my pillow?'

'Well, you know, my piano will be there too,' said Michael. 'That'll raise the average.'

An hour later a cart came up the lane, and the lawyer's piano--a momentous Broadwood grand--was deposited in Mr Pitman's studio.