CHAPTER IX. Glorious Conclusion of Michael Finsbury's Holiday

I know Michael Finsbury personally; my business--I know the awkwardness of having such a man for a lawyer--still it's an old story now, and there is such a thing as gratitude, and, in short, my legal business, although now (I am thankful to say) of quite a placid character, remains entirely in Michael's hands. But the trouble is I have no natural talent for addresses; I learn one for every man--that is friendship's offering; and the friend who subsequently changes his residence is dead to me, memory refusing to pursue him. Thus it comes about that, as I always write to Michael at his office, I cannot swear to his number in the King's Road. Of course (like my neighbours), I have been to dinner there. Of late years, since his accession to wealth, neglect of business, and election to the club, these little festivals have become common. He picks up a few fellows in the smoking-room--all men of Attic wit--myself, for instance, if he has the luck to find me disengaged; a string of hansoms may be observed (by Her Majesty) bowling gaily through St James's Park; and in a quarter of an hour the party surrounds one of the best appointed boards in London.

But at the time of which we write the house in the King's Road (let us still continue to call it No. 233) was kept very quiet; when Michael entertained guests it was at the halls of Nichol or Verrey that he would convene them, and the door of his private residence remained closed against his friends. The upper storey, which was sunny, was set apart for his father; the drawing-room was never opened; the dining-room was

the scene of Michael's life. It is in this pleasant apartment, sheltered from the curiosity of King's Road by wire blinds, and entirely surrounded by the lawyer's unrivalled library of poetry and criminal trials, that we find him sitting down to his dinner after his holiday with Pitman. A spare old lady, with very bright eyes and a mouth humorously compressed, waited upon the lawyer's needs; in every line of her countenance she betrayed the fact that she was an old retainer; in every word that fell from her lips she flaunted the glorious circumstance of a Scottish origin; and the fear with which this powerful combination fills the boldest was obviously no stranger to the bosom of our friend. The hot Scotch having somewhat warmed up the embers of the Heidsieck, It was touching to observe the master's eagerness to pull himself together under the servant's eye; and when he remarked, 'I think, Teena, I'll take a brandy and soda,' he spoke like a man doubtful of his elocution, and not half certain of obedience.

'No such a thing, Mr Michael,' was the prompt return. 'Clar't and water.'

'Well, well, Teena, I daresay you know best,' said the master. 'Very fatiguing day at the office, though.'

'What?' said the retainer, 'ye never were near the office!'

'O yes, I was though; I was repeatedly along Fleet Street,' returned Michael.

'Pretty pliskies ye've been at this day!' cried the old lady, with humorous alacrity; and then, 'Take care--don't break my crystal!' she cried, as the lawyer came within an ace of knocking the glasses off the table.

'And how is he keeping?' asked Michael.

'O, just the same, Mr Michael, just the way he'll be till the end, worthy man!' was the reply. 'But ye'll not be the first that's asked me that the day.'

'No?' said the lawyer. 'Who else?'

'Ay, that's a joke, too,' said Teena grimly. 'A friend of yours: Mr Morris.'

'Morris! What was the little beggar wanting here?' enquired Michael.

'Wantin'? To see him,' replied the housekeeper, completing her meaning by a movement of the thumb toward the upper storey. 'That's by his way of it; but I've an idee of my own. He tried to bribe me, Mr Michael. Bribe--me!' she repeated, with inimitable scorn. 'That's no' kind of a young gentleman.'

'Did he so?' said Michael. 'I bet he didn't offer much.'

'No more he did,' replied Teena; nor could any subsequent questioning elicit from her the sum with which the thrifty leather merchant had attempted to corrupt her. 'But I sent him about his business,' she said gallantly. 'He'll not come here again in a hurry.'

'He mustn't see my father, you know; mind that!' said Michael. 'I'm not going to have any public exhibition to a little beast like him.'

'No fear of me lettin' him,' replied the trusty one. 'But the joke is this, Mr Michael--see, ye're upsettin' the sauce, that's a clean tablecloth--the best of the joke is that he thinks your father's dead and you're keepin' it dark.'

Michael whistled. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' said he.

'Exac'ly what I told him!' cried the delighted dame.

'I'll make him dance for that,' said Michael.

'Couldn't ye get the law of him some way?' suggested Teena truculently.

'No, I don't think I could, and I'm quite sure I don't want to,' replied Michael. 'But I say, Teena, I really don't believe this claret's wholesome; it's not a sound, reliable wine. Give us a brandy and soda, there's a good soul.' Teena's face became like adamant. 'Well, then,'

said the lawyer fretfully, 'I won't eat any more dinner.'

'Ye can please yourself about that, Mr Michael,' said Teena, and began composedly to take away.

'I do wish Teena wasn't a faithful servant!' sighed the lawyer, as he issued into Kings's Road.

The rain had ceased; the wind still blew, but only with a pleasant freshness; the town, in the clear darkness of the night, glittered with street-lamps and shone with glancing rain-pools. 'Come, this is better,' thought the lawyer to himself, and he walked on eastward, lending a pleased ear to the wheels and the million footfalls of the city.

Near the end of the King's Road he remembered his brandy and soda, and entered a flaunting public-house. A good many persons were present, a waterman from a cab-stand, half a dozen of the chronically unemployed, a gentleman (in one corner) trying to sell aesthetic photographs out of a leather case to another and very youthful gentleman with a yellow goatee, and a pair of lovers debating some fine shade (in the other). But the centre-piece and great attraction was a little old man, in a black, ready-made surtout, which was obviously a recent purchase. On the marble table in front of him, beside a sandwich and a glass of beer, there lay a battered forage cap. His hand fluttered abroad with oratorical gestures; his voice, naturally shrill, was plainly tuned to the pitch of the lecture room; and by arts, comparable to those of

the Ancient Mariner, he was now holding spellbound the barmaid, the waterman, and four of the unemployed.

'I have examined all the theatres in London,' he was saying; 'and pacing the principal entrances, I have ascertained them to be ridiculously disproportionate to the requirements of their audiences. The doors opened the wrong way--I forget at this moment which it is, but have a note of it at home; they were frequently locked during the performance, and when the auditorium was literally thronged with English people. You have probably not had my opportunities of comparing distant lands; but I can assure you this has been long ago recognized as a mark of aristocratic government. Do you suppose, in a country really self-governed, such abuses could exist? Your own intelligence, however uncultivated, tells you they could not. Take Austria, a country even possibly more enslaved than England. I have myself conversed with one of the survivors of the Ring Theatre, and though his colloquial German was not very good, I succeeded in gathering a pretty clear idea of his opinion of the case. But, what will perhaps interest you still more, here is a cutting on the subject from a Vienna newspaper, which I will now read to you, translating as I go. You can see for yourselves; it is printed in the German character.' And he held the cutting out for verification, much as a conjuror passes a trick orange along the front bench.

'Hullo, old gentleman! Is this you?' said Michael, laying his hand upon the orator's shoulder.

The figure turned with a convulsion of alarm, and showed the countenance of Mr Joseph Finsbury. 'You, Michael!' he cried. 'There's no one with you, is there?'

'No,' replied Michael, ordering a brandy and soda, 'there's nobody with me; whom do you expect?'

'I thought of Morris or John,' said the old gentleman, evidently greatly relieved.

'What the devil would I be doing with Morris or John?' cried the nephew.

'There is something in that,' returned Joseph. 'And I believe I can trust you. I believe you will stand by me.'

'I hardly know what you mean,' said the lawyer, 'but if you are in need of money I am flush.'

'It's not that, my dear boy,' said the uncle, shaking him by the hand. 'I'll tell you all about it afterwards.'

'All right,' responded the nephew. 'I stand treat, Uncle Joseph; what will you have?'

'In that case,' replied the old gentleman, 'I'll take another

sandwich. I daresay I surprise you,' he went on, 'with my presence in a public-house; but the fact is, I act on a sound but little-known principle of my own--'

'O, it's better known than you suppose,' said Michael sipping his brandy and soda. 'I always act on it myself when I want a drink.'

The old gentleman, who was anxious to propitiate Michael, laughed a cheerless laugh. 'You have such a flow of spirits,' said he, 'I am sure I often find it quite amusing. But regarding this principle of which I was about to speak. It is that of accommodating one's-self to the manners of any land (however humble) in which our lot may be cast. Now, in France, for instance, every one goes to a cafe for his meals; in America, to what is called a "two-bit house"; in England the people resort to such an institution as the present for refreshment. With sandwiches, tea, and an occasional glass of bitter beer, a man can live luxuriously in London for fourteen pounds twelve shillings per annum.'

'Yes, I know,' returned Michael, 'but that's not including clothes, washing, or boots. The whole thing, with cigars and occasional sprees, costs me over seven hundred a year.'

But this was Michael's last interruption. He listened in good-humoured silence to the remainder of his uncle's lecture, which speedily branched to political reform, thence to the theory of the weather-glass, with an illustrative account of a bora in the Adriatic; thence again to the best

manner of teaching arithmetic to the deaf-and-dumb; and with that, the sandwich being then no more, explicuit valde feliciter. A moment later the pair issued forth on the King's Road.

'Michael, I said his uncle, 'the reason that I am here is because I cannot endure those nephews of mine. I find them intolerable.'

'I daresay you do,' assented Michael, 'I never could stand them for a moment.'

'They wouldn't let me speak,' continued the old gentleman bitterly; 'I never was allowed to get a word in edgewise; I was shut up at once with some impertinent remark. They kept me on short allowance of pencils, when I wished to make notes of the most absorbing interest; the daily newspaper was guarded from me like a young baby from a gorilla. Now, you know me, Michael. I live for my calculations; I live for my manifold and ever-changing views of life; pens and paper and the productions of the popular press are to me as important as food and drink; and my life was growing quite intolerable when, in the confusion of that fortunate railway accident at Browndean, I made my escape. They must think me dead, and are trying to deceive the world for the chance of the tontine.'

'By the way, how do you stand for money?' asked Michael kindly.

'Pecuniarily speaking, I am rich,' returned the old man with

cheerfulness. 'I am living at present at the rate of one hundred a year, with unlimited pens and paper; the British Museum at which to get books; and all the newspapers I choose to read. But it's extraordinary how little a man of intellectual interest requires to bother with books in a progressive age. The newspapers supply all the conclusions.'

'I'll tell you what,' said Michael, 'come and stay with me.'

'Michael,' said the old gentleman, 'it's very kind of you, but you scarcely understand what a peculiar position I occupy. There are some little financial complications; as a guardian, my efforts were not altogether blessed; and not to put too fine a point upon the matter, I am absolutely in the power of that vile fellow, Morris.'

'You should be disguised,' cried Michael eagerly; 'I will lend you a pair of window-glass spectacles and some red side-whiskers.'

'I had already canvassed that idea,' replied the old gentleman, 'but feared to awaken remark in my unpretentious lodgings. The aristocracy, I am well aware--'

'But see here,' interrupted Michael, 'how do you come to have any money at all? Don't make a stranger of me, Uncle Joseph; I know all about the trust, and the hash you made of it, and the assignment you were forced to make to Morris.'

Joseph narrated his dealings with the bank.

'O, but I say, this won't do,' cried the lawyer. 'You've put your foot in it. You had no right to do what you did.'

'The whole thing is mine, Michael,' protested the old gentleman. 'I founded and nursed that business on principles entirely of my own.'

'That's all very fine,' said the lawyer; 'but you made an assignment, you were forced to make it, too; even then your position was extremely shaky; but now, my dear sir, it means the dock.'

'It isn't possible,' cried Joseph; 'the law cannot be so unjust as that?'

'And the cream of the thing,' interrupted Michael, with a sudden shout of laughter, 'the cream of the thing is this, that of course you've downed the leather business! I must say, Uncle Joseph, you have strange ideas of law, but I like your taste in humour.'

'I see nothing to laugh at,' observed Mr Finsbury tartly.

'And talking of that, has Morris any power to sign for the firm?' asked Michael.

'No one but myself,' replied Joseph.

'Poor devil of a Morris! O, poor devil of a Morris!' cried the lawyer in delight. 'And his keeping up the farce that you're at home! O, Morris, the Lord has delivered you into my hands! Let me see, Uncle Joseph, what do you suppose the leather business worth?'

'It was worth a hundred thousand,' said Joseph bitterly, 'when it was in my hands. But then there came a Scotsman--it is supposed he had a certain talent--it was entirely directed to bookkeeping--no accountant in London could understand a word of any of his books; and then there was Morris, who is perfectly incompetent. And now it is worth very little. Morris tried to sell it last year; and Pogram and Jarris offered only four thousand.'

'I shall turn my attention to leather,' said Michael with decision.

'You?' asked Joseph. 'I advise you not. There is nothing in the whole field of commerce more surprising than the fluctuations of the leather market. Its sensitiveness may be described as morbid.'

'And now, Uncle Joseph, what have you done with all that money?' asked the lawyer.

'Paid it into a bank and drew twenty pounds,' answered Mr Finsbury promptly. 'Why?'

'Very well,' said Michael. 'Tomorrow I shall send down a clerk with a cheque for a hundred, and he'll draw out the original sum and return it to the Anglo-Patagonian, with some sort of explanation which I will try to invent for you. That will clear your feet, and as Morris can't touch a penny of it without forgery, it will do no harm to my little scheme.'

'But what am I to do?' asked Joseph; 'I cannot live upon nothing.'

'Don't you hear?' returned Michael. 'I send you a cheque for a hundred; which leaves you eighty to go along upon; and when that's done, apply to me again.'

'I would rather not be beholden to your bounty all the same,' said Joseph, biting at his white moustache. 'I would rather live on my own money, since I have it.'

Michael grasped his arm. 'Will nothing make you believe,' he cried, 'that I am trying to save you from Dartmoor?'

His earnestness staggered the old man. 'I must turn my attention to law,' he said; 'it will be a new field; for though, of course, I understand its general principles, I have never really applied my mind to the details, and this view of yours, for example, comes on me entirely by surprise. But you may be right, and of course at my time of life--for I am no longer young--any really long term of imprisonment would be highly prejudicial. But, my dear nephew, I have no claim on

you; you have no call to support me.'

'That's all right,' said Michael; 'I'll probably get it out of the leather business.'

And having taken down the old gentleman's address, Michael left him at the corner of a street.

'What a wonderful old muddler!' he reflected, 'and what a singular thing is life! I seem to be condemned to be the instrument of Providence. Let me see; what have I done today? Disposed of a dead body, saved Pitman, saved my Uncle Joseph, brightened up Forsyth, and drunk a devil of a lot of most indifferent liquor. Let's top off with a visit to my cousins, and be the instrument of Providence in earnest. Tomorrow I can turn my attention to leather; tonight I'll just make it lively for 'em in a friendly spirit.'

About a quarter of an hour later, as the clocks were striking eleven, the instrument of Providence descended from a hansom, and, bidding the driver wait, rapped at the door of No. 16 John Street.

It was promptly opened by Morris.

'O, it's you, Michael,' he said, carefully blocking up the narrow opening: 'it's very late.'

Michael without a word reached forth, grasped Morris warmly by the hand, and gave it so extreme a squeeze that the sullen householder fell back. Profiting by this movement, the lawyer obtained a footing in the lobby and marched into the dining-room, with Morris at his heels.

'Where's my Uncle Joseph?' demanded Michael, sitting down in the most comfortable chair.

'He's not been very well lately,' replied Morris; 'he's staying at Browndean; John is nursing him; and I am alone, as you see.'

Michael smiled to himself. 'I want to see him on particular business,' he said.

'You can't expect to see my uncle when you won't let me see your father,' returned Morris.

'Fiddlestick,' said Michael. 'My father is my father; but Joseph is just as much my uncle as he's yours; and you have no right to sequestrate his person.'

'I do no such thing,' said Morris doggedly. 'He is not well, he is dangerously ill and nobody can see him.'

'I'll tell you what, then,' said Michael. 'I'll make a clean breast of it. I have come down like the opossum, Morris; I have come to

compromise.'

Poor Morris turned as pale as death, and then a flush of wrath against the injustice of man's destiny dyed his very temples. 'What do you mean?' he cried, 'I don't believe a word of it.' And when Michael had assured him of his seriousness, 'Well, then,' he cried, with another deep flush, 'I won't; so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it.'

'Oho!' said Michael queerly. 'You say your uncle is dangerously ill, and you won't compromise? There's something very fishy about that.'

'What do you mean?' cried Morris hoarsely.

'I only say it's fishy,' returned Michael, 'that is, pertaining to the finny tribe.'

'Do you mean to insinuate anything?' cried Morris stormily, trying the high hand.

'Insinuate?' repeated Michael. 'O, don't let's begin to use awkward expressions! Let us drown our differences in a bottle, like two affable kinsmen. The Two Affable Kinsmen, sometimes attributed to Shakespeare,' he added.

Morris's mind was labouring like a mill. 'Does he suspect? or is this chance and stuff? Should I soap, or should I bully? Soap,' he concluded.

'It gains time.' 'Well,' said he aloud, and with rather a painful affectation of heartiness, 'it's long since we have had an evening together, Michael; and though my habits (as you know) are very temperate, I may as well make an exception. Excuse me one moment till I fetch a bottle of whisky from the cellar.'

'No whisky for me,' said Michael; 'a little of the old still champagne or nothing.'

For a moment Morris stood irresolute, for the wine was very valuable: the next he had quitted the room without a word. His quick mind had perceived his advantage; in thus dunning him for the cream of the cellar, Michael was playing into his hand. 'One bottle?' he thought. 'By George, I'll give him two! this is no moment for economy; and once the beast is drunk, it's strange if I don't wring his secret out of him.'

With two bottles, accordingly, he returned. Glasses were produced, and Morris filled them with hospitable grace.

'I drink to you, cousin!' he cried gaily. 'Don't spare the wine-cup in my house.'

Michael drank his glass deliberately, standing at the table; filled it again, and returned to his chair, carrying the bottle along with him.

'The spoils of war!' he said apologetically. 'The weakest goes to the

wall. Science, Morris, science.' Morris could think of no reply, and for an appreciable interval silence reigned. But two glasses of the still champagne produced a rapid change in Michael.

'There's a want of vivacity about you, Morris,' he observed. 'You may be deep; but I'll be hanged if you're vivacious!'

'What makes you think me deep?' asked Morris with an air of pleased simplicity.

'Because you won't compromise,' said the lawyer. 'You're deep dog, Morris, very deep dog, not t' compromise--remarkable deep dog. And a very good glass of wine; it's the only respectable feature in the Finsbury family, this wine; rarer thing than a title--much rarer. Now a man with glass wine like this in cellar, I wonder why won't compromise?'

'Well, YOU wouldn't compromise before, you know,' said the smiling Morris. 'Turn about is fair play.'

'I wonder why _I_ wouldn' compromise? I wonder why YOU wouldn'?' enquired Michael. 'I wonder why we each think the other wouldn'? 'S quite a remarrable--remarkable problem,' he added, triumphing over oral obstacles, not without obvious pride. 'Wonder what we each think--don't you?'

'What do you suppose to have been my reason?' asked Morris adroitly.

Michael looked at him and winked. 'That's cool,' said he. 'Next thing, you'll ask me to help you out of the muddle. I know I'm emissary of Providence, but not that kind! You get out of it yourself, like Aesop and the other fellow. Must be dreadful muddle for young orphan o' forty; leather business and all!'

'I am sure I don't know what you mean,' said Morris.

'Not sure I know myself,' said Michael. 'This is exc'lent vintage, sir--exc'lent vintage. Nothing against the tipple. Only thing: here's a valuable uncle disappeared. Now, what I want to know: where's valuable uncle?'

'I have told you: he is at Browndean,' answered Morris, furtively wiping his brow, for these repeated hints began to tell upon him cruelly.

'Very easy say Brown--Browndee--no' so easy after all!' cried Michael. 'Easy say; anything's easy say, when you can say it. What I don' like's total disappearance of an uncle. Not businesslike.' And he wagged his head.

'It is all perfectly simple,' returned Morris, with laborious calm. 'There is no mystery. He stays at Browndean, where he got a shake in the accident.'

'Ah!' said Michael, 'got devil of a shake!'

'Why do you say that?' cried Morris sharply.

'Best possible authority. Told me so yourself,' said the lawyer. 'But if you tell me contrary now, of course I'm bound to believe either the one story or the other. Point is I've upset this bottle, still champagne's exc'lent thing carpet--point is, is valuable uncle dead--an'--bury?'

Morris sprang from his seat. 'What's that you say?' he gasped.

'I say it's exc'lent thing carpet,' replied Michael, rising. 'Exc'lent thing promote healthy action of the skin. Well, it's all one, anyway. Give my love to Uncle Champagne.'

'You're not going away?' said Morris.

'Awf'ly sorry, ole man. Got to sit up sick friend,' said the wavering Michael.

'You shall not go till you have explained your hints,' returned Morris fiercely. 'What do you mean? What brought you here?'

'No offence, I trust,' said the lawyer, turning round as he opened the door; 'only doing my duty as shemishery of Providence.'

Groping his way to the front-door, he opened it with some difficulty, and descended the steps to the hansom. The tired driver looked up as he approached, and asked where he was to go next.

Michael observed that Morris had followed him to the steps; a brilliant inspiration came to him. 'Anything t' give pain,' he reflected. . . . 'Drive Shcotlan' Yard,' he added aloud, holding to the wheel to steady himself; 'there's something devilish fishy, cabby, about those cousins. Mush' be cleared up! Drive Shcotlan' Yard.'

'You don't mean that, sir,' said the man, with the ready sympathy of the lower orders for an intoxicated gentleman. 'I had better take you home, sir; you can go to Scotland Yard tomorrow.'

'Is it as friend or as perfessional man you advise me not to go Shcotlan' Yard t'night?' enquired Michael. 'All righ', never min' Shcotlan' Yard, drive Gaiety bar.'

'The Gaiety bar is closed,' said the man.

'Then home,' said Michael, with the same cheerfulness.

'Where to, sir?'

'I don't remember, I'm sure,' said Michael, entering the vehicle, 'drive Shcotlan' Yard and ask.'

'But you'll have a card,' said the man, through the little aperture in the top, 'give me your card-case.'

'What imagi--imagination in a cabby!' cried the lawyer, producing his card-case, and handing it to the driver.

The man read it by the light of the lamp. 'Mr Michael Finsbury, 233 King's Road, Chelsea. Is that it, sir?'

'Right you are,' cried Michael, 'drive there if you can see way.'