

CHAPTER XIII. The Tribulations of Morris: Part the Second

In a really polite age of literature I would have scorned to cast my eye again on the contortions of Morris. But the study is in the spirit of the day; it presents, besides, features of a high, almost a repulsive, morality; and if it should prove the means of preventing any respectable and inexperienced gentleman from plunging light-heartedly into crime, even political crime, this work will not have been penned in vain.

He rose on the morrow of his night with Michael, rose from the leaden slumber of distress, to find his hand tremulous, his eyes closed with rheum, his throat parched, and his digestion obviously paralysed.

'Lord knows it's not from eating!' Morris thought; and as he dressed he reconsidered his position under several heads. Nothing will so well depict the troubled seas in which he was now voyaging as a review of these various anxieties. I have thrown them (for the reader's convenience) into a certain order; but in the mind of one poor human equal they whirled together like the dust of hurricanes. With the same obliging preoccupation, I have put a name to each of his distresses; and it will be observed with pity that every individual item would have graced and commended the cover of a railway novel.

Anxiety the First: Where is the Body? or, The Mystery of Bent Pitman. It was now manifestly plain that Bent Pitman (as was to be looked for from his ominous appellation) belonged to the darker order of the criminal class. An honest man would not have cashed the bill; a humane man would

not have accepted in silence the tragic contents of the water-butt; a man, who was not already up to the hilts in gore, would have lacked the means of secretly disposing them. This process of reasoning left a horrid image of the monster, Pitman. Doubtless he had long ago disposed of the body--dropping it through a trapdoor in his back kitchen, Morris supposed, with some hazy recollection of a picture in a penny dreadful; and doubtless the man now lived in wanton splendour on the proceeds of the bill. So far, all was peace. But with the profligate habits of a man like Bent Pitman (who was no doubt a hunchback in the bargain), eight hundred pounds could be easily melted in a week. When they were gone, what would he be likely to do next? A hell-like voice in Morris's own bosom gave the answer: 'Blackmail me.'

Anxiety the Second: The Fraud of the Tontine; or, Is my Uncle dead?

This, on which all Morris's hopes depended, was yet a question. He had tried to bully Teena; he had tried to bribe her; and nothing came of it. He had his moral conviction still; but you cannot blackmail a sharp lawyer on a moral conviction. And besides, since his interview with Michael, the idea wore a less attractive countenance. Was Michael the man to be blackmailed? and was Morris the man to do it? Grave considerations. 'It's not that I'm afraid of him,' Morris so far condescended to reassure himself; 'but I must be very certain of my ground, and the deuce of it is, I see no way. How unlike is life to novels! I wouldn't have even begun this business in a novel, but what I'd have met a dark, slouching fellow in the Oxford Road, who'd have become my accomplice, and known all about how to do it, and probably

broken into Michael's house at night and found nothing but a waxwork image; and then blackmailed or murdered me. But here, in real life, I might walk the streets till I dropped dead, and none of the criminal classes would look near me. Though, to be sure, there is always Pitman,' he added thoughtfully.

Anxiety the Third: The Cottage at Browndean; or, The Underpaid Accomplice. For he had an accomplice, and that accomplice was blooming unseen in a damp cottage in Hampshire with empty pockets. What could be done about that? He really ought to have sent him something; if it was only a post-office order for five bob, enough to prove that he was kept in mind, enough to keep him in hope, beer, and tobacco. 'But what would you have?' thought Morris; and ruefully poured into his hand a half-crown, a florin, and eightpence in small change. For a man in Morris's position, at war with all society, and conducting, with the hand of inexperience, a widely ramified intrigue, the sum was already a derision. John would have to be doing; no mistake of that. 'But then,' asked the hell-like voice, 'how long is John likely to stand it?'

Anxiety the Fourth: The Leather Business; or, The Shutters at Last: a Tale of the City. On this head Morris had no news. He had not yet dared to visit the family concern; yet he knew he must delay no longer, and if anything had been wanted to sharpen this conviction, Michael's references of the night before rang ambiguously in his ear. Well and good. To visit the city might be indispensable; but what was he to do when he was there? He had no right to sign in his own name; and, with

all the will in the world, he seemed to lack the art of signing with his uncle's. Under these circumstances, Morris could do nothing to procrastinate the crash; and, when it came, when prying eyes began to be applied to every joint of his behaviour, two questions could not fail to be addressed, sooner or later, to a speechless and perspiring insolvent. Where is Mr Joseph Finsbury? and how about your visit to the bank? Questions, how easy to put!--ye gods, how impossible to answer! The man to whom they should be addressed went certainly to gaol, and--eh! what was this?--possibly to the gallows. Morris was trying to shave when this idea struck him, and he laid the razor down. Here (in Michael's words) was the total disappearance of a valuable uncle; here was a time of inexplicable conduct on the part of a nephew who had been in bad blood with the old man any time these seven years; what a chance for a judicial blunder! 'But no,' thought Morris, 'they cannot, they dare not, make it murder. Not that. But honestly, and speaking as a man to a man, I don't see any other crime in the calendar (except arson) that I don't seem somehow to have committed. And yet I'm a perfectly respectable man, and wished nothing but my due. Law is a pretty business.'

With this conclusion firmly seated in his mind, Morris Finsbury descended to the hall of the house in John Street, still half-shaven. There was a letter in the box; he knew the handwriting: John at last!

'Well, I think I might have been spared this,' he said bitterly, and tore it open.

Dear Morris [it ran], what the dickens do you mean by it? I'm in an awful hole down here; I have to go on tick, and the parties on the spot don't cotton to the idea; they couldn't, because it is so plain I'm in a stait of Destitution. I've got no bedclothes, think of that, I must have coins, the hole thing's a Mockry, I wont stand it, nobody would. I would have come away before, only I have no money for the railway fare. Don't be a lunatic, Morris, you don't seem to understand my dredful situation. I have to get the stamp on tick. A fact.

--Ever your affte. Brother,

J. FINSBURY

'Can't even spell!' Morris reflected, as he crammed the letter in his pocket, and left the house. 'What can I do for him? I have to go to the expense of a barber, I'm so shattered! How can I send anybody coins? It's hard lines, I daresay; but does he think I'm living on hot muffins? One comfort,' was his grim reflection, 'he can't cut and run--he's got to stay; he's as helpless as the dead.' And then he broke forth again: 'Complains, does he? and he's never even heard of Bent Pitman! If he had what I have on my mind, he might complain with a good grace.'

But these were not honest arguments, or not wholly honest; there was a struggle in the mind of Morris; he could not disguise from himself that his brother John was miserably situated at Browndean, without news, without money, without bedclothes, without society or any entertainment;

and by the time he had been shaved and picked a hasty breakfast at a coffee tavern, Morris had arrived at a compromise.

'Poor Johnny,' he said to himself, 'he's in an awful box! I can't send him coins, but I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll send him the Pink Un--it'll cheer John up; and besides, it'll do his credit good getting anything by post.'

Accordingly, on his way to the leather business, whither he proceeded (according to his thrifty habit) on foot, Morris purchased and dispatched a single copy of that enlivening periodical, to which (in a sudden pang of remorse) he added at random the Athenaeum, the Revivalist, and the Penny Pictorial Weekly. So there was John set up with literature, and Morris had laid balm upon his conscience.

As if to reward him, he was received in his place of business with good news. Orders were pouring in; there was a run on some of the back stock, and the figure had gone up. Even the manager appeared elated. As for Morris, who had almost forgotten the meaning of good news, he longed to sob like a little child; he could have caught the manager (a pallid man with startled eyebrows) to his bosom; he could have found it in his generosity to give a cheque (for a small sum) to every clerk in the counting-house. As he sat and opened his letters a chorus of airy vocalists sang in his brain, to most exquisite music, 'This whole concern may be profitable yet, profitable yet, profitable yet.'

To him, in this sunny moment of relief, enter a Mr Rodgerson, a creditor, but not one who was expected to be pressing, for his connection with the firm was old and regular.

'O, Finsbury,' said he, not without embarrassment, 'it's of course only fair to let you know--the fact is, money is a trifle tight--I have some paper out--for that matter, every one's complaining--and in short--'

'It has never been our habit, Rodgerson,' said Morris, turning pale. 'But give me time to turn round, and I'll see what I can do; I daresay we can let you have something to account.'

'Well, that's just where is,' replied Rodgerson. 'I was tempted; I've let the credit out of MY hands.'

'Out of your hands?' repeated Morris. 'That's playing rather fast and loose with us, Mr Rodgerson.'

'Well, I got cent. for cent. for it,' said the other, 'on the nail, in a certified cheque.'

'Cent. for cent.!' cried Morris. 'Why, that's something like thirty per cent. bonus; a singular thing! Who's the party?'

'Don't know the man,' was the reply. 'Name of Moss.'

'A Jew,' Morris reflected, when his visitor was gone. And what could a Jew want with a claim of--he verified the amount in the books--a claim of three five eight, nineteen, ten, against the house of Finsbury? And why should he pay cent. for cent.? The figure proved the loyalty of Rodgerson--even Morris admitted that. But it proved unfortunately something else--the eagerness of Moss. The claim must have been wanted instantly, for that day, for that morning even. Why? The mystery of Moss promised to be a fit pendant to the mystery of Pitman. 'And just when all was looking well too!' cried Morris, smiting his hand upon the desk. And almost at the same moment Mr Moss was announced.

Mr Moss was a radiant Hebrew, brutally handsome, and offensively polite. He was acting, it appeared, for a third party; he understood nothing of the circumstances; his client desired to have his position regularized; but he would accept an antedated cheque--antedated by two months, if Mr Finsbury chose.

'But I don't understand this,' said Morris. 'What made you pay cent. per cent. for it today?'

Mr Moss had no idea; only his orders.

'The whole thing is thoroughly irregular,' said Morris. 'It is not the custom of the trade to settle at this time of the year. What are your instructions if I refuse?'

'I am to see Mr Joseph Finsbury, the head of the firm,' said Mr Moss.

'I was directed to insist on that; it was implied you had no status here--the expressions are not mine.'

'You cannot see Mr Joseph; he is unwell,' said Morris.

'In that case I was to place the matter in the hands of a lawyer. Let me see,' said Mr Moss, opening a pocket-book with, perhaps, suspicious care, at the right place--'Yes--of Mr Michael Finsbury. A relation, perhaps? In that case, I presume, the matter will be pleasantly arranged.'

To pass into the hands of Michael was too much for Morris. He struck his colours. A cheque at two months was nothing, after all. In two months he would probably be dead, or in a gaol at any rate. He bade the manager give Mr Moss a chair and the paper. 'I'm going over to get a cheque signed by Mr Finsbury,' said he, 'who is lying ill at John Street.'

A cab there and a cab back; here were inroads on his wretched capital! He counted the cost; when he was done with Mr Moss he would be left with twelvecence-halfpenny in the world. What was even worse, he had now been forced to bring his uncle up to Bloomsbury. 'No use for poor Johnny in Hampshire now,' he reflected. 'And how the farce is to be kept up completely passes me. At Browndean it was just possible; in Bloomsbury it seems beyond human ingenuity--though I suppose it's what Michael does. But then he has accomplices--that Scotsman and the whole gang. Ah,

if I had accomplices!

Necessity is the mother of the arts. Under a spur so immediate, Morris surprised himself by the neatness and dispatch of his new forgery, and within three-fourths of an hour had handed it to Mr Moss.

'That is very satisfactory,' observed that gentleman, rising. 'I was to tell you it will not be presented, but you had better take care.'

The room swam round Morris. 'What--what's that?' he cried, grasping the table. He was miserably conscious the next moment of his shrill tongue and ashen face. 'What do you mean--it will not be presented? Why am I to take care? What is all this mummery?'

'I have no idea, Mr Finsbury,' replied the smiling Hebrew. 'It was a message I was to deliver. The expressions were put into my mouth.'

'What is your client's name?' asked Morris.

'That is a secret for the moment,' answered Mr Moss. Morris bent toward him. 'It's not the bank?' he asked hoarsely.

'I have no authority to say more, Mr Finsbury,' returned Mr Moss. 'I will wish you a good morning, if you please.'

'Wish me a good morning!' thought Morris; and the next moment, seizing

his hat, he fled from his place of business like a madman. Three streets away he stopped and groaned. 'Lord! I should have borrowed from the manager!' he cried. 'But it's too late now; it would look dicky to go back; I'm penniless--simply penniless--like the unemployed.'

He went home and sat in the dismantled dining-room with his head in his hands. Newton never thought harder than this victim of circumstances, and yet no clearness came. 'It may be a defect in my intelligence,' he cried, rising to his feet, 'but I cannot see that I am fairly used. The bad luck I've had is a thing to write to The Times about; it's enough to breed a revolution. And the plain English of the whole thing is that I must have money at once. I'm done with all morality now; I'm long past that stage; money I must have, and the only chance I see is Bent Pitman. Bent Pitman is a criminal, and therefore his position's weak. He must have some of that eight hundred left; if he has I'll force him to go shares; and even if he hasn't, I'll tell him the tontine affair, and with a desperate man like Pitman at my back, it'll be strange if I don't succeed.'

Well and good. But how to lay hands upon Bent Pitman, except by advertisement, was not so clear. And even so, in what terms to ask a meeting? on what grounds? and where? Not at John Street, for it would never do to let a man like Bent Pitman know your real address; nor yet at Pitman's house, some dreadful place in Holloway, with a trapdoor in the back kitchen; a house which you might enter in a light summer overcoat and varnished boots, to come forth again piecemeal in a

market-basket. That was the drawback of a really efficient accomplice, Morris felt, not without a shudder. 'I never dreamed I should come to actually covet such society,' he thought. And then a brilliant idea struck him. Waterloo Station, a public place, yet at certain hours of the day a solitary; a place, besides, the very name of which must knock upon the heart of Pitman, and at once suggest a knowledge of the latest of his guilty secrets. Morris took a piece of paper and sketched his advertisement.

WILLIAM BENT PITMAN, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE on the far end of the main line departure platform, Waterloo Station, 2 to 4 P.M., Sunday next.

Morris reperused this literary trifle with approbation. 'Terse,' he reflected. 'Something to his advantage is not strictly true; but it's taking and original, and a man is not on oath in an advertisement. All that I require now is the ready cash for my own meals and for the advertisement, and--no, I can't lavish money upon John, but I'll give him some more papers. How to raise the wind?'

He approached his cabinet of signets, and the collector suddenly revolted in his blood. 'I will not!' he cried; 'nothing shall induce me to massacre my collection--rather theft!' And dashing upstairs to the drawing-room, he helped himself to a few of his uncle's curiosities: a pair of Turkish babooshes, a Smyrna fan, a water-cooler, a musket

guaranteed to have been seized from an Ephesian bandit, and a pocketful of curious but incomplete seashells.