

#### CHAPTER XIV. William Bent Pitman Hears of Something to his Advantage

On the morning of Sunday, William Dent Pitman rose at his usual hour, although with something more than the usual reluctance. The day before (it should be explained) an addition had been made to his family in the person of a lodger. Michael Finsbury had acted sponsor in the business, and guaranteed the weekly bill; on the other hand, no doubt with a spice of his prevailing jocularly, he had drawn a depressing portrait of the lodger's character. Mr Pitman had been led to understand his guest was not good company; he had approached the gentleman with fear, and had rejoiced to find himself the entertainer of an angel. At tea he had been vastly pleased; till hard on one in the morning he had sat entranced by eloquence and progressively fortified with information in the studio; and now, as he reviewed over his toilet the harmless pleasures of the evening, the future smiled upon him with revived attractions. 'Mr Finsbury is indeed an acquisition,' he remarked to himself; and as he entered the little parlour, where the table was already laid for breakfast, the cordiality of his greeting would have befitted an acquaintanceship already old.

'I am delighted to see you, sir'--these were his expressions--'and I trust you have slept well.'

'Accustomed as I have been for so long to a life of almost perpetual change,' replied the guest, 'the disturbance so often complained of by the more sedentary, as attending their first night in (what is called) a

new bed, is a complaint from which I am entirely free.'

'I am delighted to hear it,' said the drawing-master warmly. 'But I see I have interrupted you over the paper.'

'The Sunday paper is one of the features of the age,' said Mr Finsbury. 'In America, I am told, it supersedes all other literature, the bone and sinew of the nation finding their requirements catered for; hundreds of columns will be occupied with interesting details of the world's doings, such as water-spouts, elopements, conflagrations, and public entertainments; there is a corner for politics, ladies' work, chess, religion, and even literature; and a few spicy editorials serve to direct the course of public thought. It is difficult to estimate the part played by such enormous and miscellaneous repositories in the education of the people. But this (though interesting in itself) partakes of the nature of a digression; and what I was about to ask you was this: Are you yourself a student of the daily press?'

'There is not much in the papers to interest an artist,' returned Pitman.

'In that case,' resumed Joseph, 'an advertisement which has appeared the last two days in various journals, and reappears this morning, may possibly have failed to catch your eye. The name, with a trifling variation, bears a strong resemblance to your own. Ah, here it is. If you please, I will read it to you:

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

'Is that in print?' cried Pitman. 'Let me see it! Bent? It must be Dent! SOMETHING TO MY ADVANTAGE? Mr Finsbury, excuse me offering a word of caution; I am aware how strangely this must sound in your ears, but there are domestic reasons why this little circumstance might perhaps be better kept between ourselves. Mrs Pitman--my dear Sir, I assure you there is nothing dishonourable in my secrecy; the reasons are domestic, merely domestic; and I may set your conscience at rest when I assure you all the circumstances are known to our common friend, your excellent nephew, Mr Michael, who has not withdrawn from me his esteem.'

'A word is enough, Mr Pitman,' said Joseph, with one of his Oriental reverences.

Half an hour later, the drawing-master found Michael in bed and reading a book, the picture of good-humour and repose.

'Hillo, Pitman,' he said, laying down his book, 'what brings you here at this inclement hour? Ought to be in church, my boy!'

'I have little thought of church today, Mr Finsbury,' said the

drawing-master. 'I am on the brink of something new, Sir.' And he presented the advertisement.

'Why, what is this?' cried Michael, sitting suddenly up. He studied it for half a minute with a frown. 'Pitman, I don't care about this document a particle,' said he.

'It will have to be attended to, however,' said Pitman.

'I thought you'd had enough of Waterloo,' returned the lawyer. 'Have you started a morbid craving? You've never been yourself anyway since you lost that beard. I believe now it was where you kept your senses.'

'Mr Finsbury,' said the drawing-master, 'I have tried to reason this matter out, and, with your permission, I should like to lay before you the results.'

'Fire away,' said Michael; 'but please, Pitman, remember it's Sunday, and let's have no bad language.'

'There are three views open to us,' began Pitman. 'First this may be connected with the barrel; second, it may be connected with Mr Semitopolis's statue; and third, it may be from my wife's brother, who went to Australia. In the first case, which is of course possible, I confess the matter would be best allowed to drop.'

'The court is with you there, Brother Pitman,' said Michael.

'In the second,' continued the other, 'it is plainly my duty to leave no stone unturned for the recovery of the lost antique.'

'My dear fellow, Semitopolis has come down like a trump; he has pocketed the loss and left you the profit. What more would you have?' enquired the lawyer.

'I conceive, sir, under correction, that Mr Semitopolis's generosity binds me to even greater exertion,' said the drawing-master. 'The whole business was unfortunate; it was--I need not disguise it from you--it was illegal from the first: the more reason that I should try to behave like a gentleman,' concluded Pitman, flushing.

'I have nothing to say to that,' returned the lawyer. 'I have sometimes thought I should like to try to behave like a gentleman myself; only it's such a one-sided business, with the world and the legal profession as they are.'

'Then, in the third,' resumed the drawing-master, 'if it's Uncle Tim, of course, our fortune's made.'

'It's not Uncle Tim, though,' said the lawyer.

'Have you observed that very remarkable expression: SOMETHING TO HIS

ADVANTAGE?' enquired Pitman shrewdly.

'You innocent mutton,' said Michael, 'it's the seediest commonplace in the English language, and only proves the advertiser is an ass. Let me demolish your house of cards for you at once. Would Uncle Tim make that blunder in your name?--in itself, the blunder is delicious, a huge improvement on the gross reality, and I mean to adopt it in the future; but is it like Uncle Tim?'

'No, it's not like him,' Pitman admitted. 'But his mind may have become unhinged at Ballarat.'

'If you come to that, Pitman,' said Michael, 'the advertiser may be Queen Victoria, fired with the desire to make a duke of you. I put it to yourself if that's probable; and yet it's not against the laws of nature. But we sit here to consider probabilities; and with your genteel permission, I eliminate her Majesty and Uncle Tim on the threshold. To proceed, we have your second idea, that this has some connection with the statue. Possible; but in that case who is the advertiser? Not Ricardi, for he knows your address; not the person who got the box, for he doesn't know your name. The vanman, I hear you suggest, in a lucid interval. He might have got your name, and got it incorrectly, at the station; and he might have failed to get your address. I grant the vanman. But a question: Do you really wish to meet the vanman?'

'Why should I not?' asked Pitman.

'If he wants to meet you,' replied Michael, 'observe this: it is because he has found his address-book, has been to the house that got the statue, and-mark my words!--is moving at the instigation of the murderer.'

'I should be very sorry to think so,' said Pitman; 'but I still consider it my duty to Mr Sernitopolis. . .'

'Pitman,' interrupted Michael, 'this will not do. Don't seek to impose on your legal adviser; don't try to pass yourself off for the Duke of Wellington, for that is not your line. Come, I wager a dinner I can read your thoughts. You still believe it's Uncle Tim.'

'Mr Finsbury,' said the drawing-master, colouring, 'you are not a man in narrow circumstances, and you have no family. Guendolen is growing up, a very promising girl--she was confirmed this year; and I think you will be able to enter into my feelings as a parent when I tell you she is quite ignorant of dancing. The boys are at the board school, which is all very well in its way; at least, I am the last man in the world to criticize the institutions of my native land. But I had fondly hoped that Harold might become a professional musician; and little Otho shows a quite remarkable vocation for the Church. I am not exactly an ambitious man...'

'Well, well,' interrupted Michael. 'Be explicit; you think it's Uncle

Tim?'

'It might be Uncle Tim,' insisted Pitman, 'and if it were, and I neglected the occasion, how could I ever took my children in the face? I do not refer to Mrs Pitman. . . '

'No, you never do,' said Michael.

'. . . but in the case of her own brother returning from Ballarat. . . '

continued Pitman.

'. . . with his mind unhinged,' put in the lawyer.

'. . . returning from Ballarat with a large fortune, her impatience may be more easily imagined than described,' concluded Pitman.

'All right,' said Michael, 'be it so. And what do you propose to do?'

'I am going to Waterloo,' said Pitman, 'in disguise.'

'All by your little self?' enquired the lawyer. 'Well, I hope you think it safe. Mind and send me word from the police cells.'

'O, Mr Finsbury, I had ventured to hope--perhaps you might be induced to--to make one of us,' faltered Pitman.



'Disguise myself on Sunday?' cried Michael. 'How little you understand my principles!'

'Mr Finsbury, I have no means of showing you my gratitude; but let me ask you one question,' said Pitman. 'If I were a very rich client, would you not take the risk?'

'Diamond, Diamond, you know not what you do!' cried Michael. 'Why, man, do you suppose I make a practice of cutting about London with my clients in disguise? Do you suppose money would induce me to touch this business with a stick? I give you my word of honour, it would not. But I own I have a real curiosity to see how you conduct this interview--that tempts me; it tempts me, Pitman, more than gold--it should be exquisitely rich.' And suddenly Michael laughed. 'Well, Pitman,' said he, 'have all the truck ready in the studio. I'll go.'

About twenty minutes after two, on this eventful day, the vast and gloomy shed of Waterloo lay, like the temple of a dead religion, silent and deserted. Here and there at one of the platforms, a train lay becalmed; here and there a wandering footfall echoed; the cab-horses outside stamped with startling reverberations on the stones; or from the neighbouring wilderness of railway an engine snorted forth a whistle. The main-line departure platform slumbered like the rest; the booking-hutches closed; the backs of Mr Haggard's novels, with which upon a weekday the bookstall shines emblazoned, discreetly hidden behind dingy shutters; the rare officials, undisguisedly somnambulant; and the

customary loiterers, even to the middle-aged woman with the ulster and the handbag, fled to more congenial scenes. As in the inmost dells of some small tropic island the throbbing of the ocean lingers, so here a faint pervading hum and trepidation told in every corner of surrounding London.

At the hour already named, persons acquainted with John Dickson, of Ballarat, and Ezra Thomas, of the United States of America, would have been cheered to behold them enter through the booking-office.

'What names are we to take?' enquired the latter, anxiously adjusting the window-glass spectacles which he had been suffered on this occasion to assume.

'There's no choice for you, my boy,' returned Michael. 'Bent Pitman or nothing. As for me, I think I look as if I might be called Appleby; something agreeably old-world about Appleby--breathes of Devonshire cider. Talking of which, suppose you wet your whistle? the interview is likely to be trying.'

'I think I'll wait till afterwards,' returned Pitman; 'on the whole, I think I'll wait till the thing's over. I don't know if it strikes you as it does me; but the place seems deserted and silent, Mr Finsbury, and filled with very singular echoes.'

'Kind of Jack-in-the-box feeling?' enquired Michael, 'as if all these

empty trains might be filled with policemen waiting for a signal? and Sir Charles Warren perched among the girders with a silver whistle to his lips? It's guilt, Pitman.'

In this uneasy frame of mind they walked nearly the whole length of the departure platform, and at the western extremity became aware of a slender figure standing back against a pillar. The figure was plainly sunk into a deep abstraction; he was not aware of their approach, but gazed far abroad over the sunlit station. Michael stopped.

'Holloa!' said he, 'can that be your advertiser? If so, I'm done with it.' And then, on second thoughts: 'Not so, either,' he resumed more cheerfully. 'Here, turn your back a moment. So. Give me the specs.'

'But you agreed I was to have them,' protested Pitman.

'Ah, but that man knows me,' said Michael.

'Does he? what's his name?' cried Pitman.

'O, he took me into his confidence,' returned the lawyer. 'But I may say one thing: if he's your advertiser (and he may be, for he seems to have been seized with criminal lunacy) you can go ahead with a clear conscience, for I hold him in the hollow of my hand.'

The change effected, and Pitman comforted with this good news, the pair

drew near to Morris.

'Are you looking for Mr William Bent Pitman?' enquired the drawing-master. 'I am he.'

Morris raised his head. He saw before him, in the speaker, a person of almost indescribable insignificance, in white spats and a shirt cut indecently low. A little behind, a second and more burly figure offered little to criticism, except ulster, whiskers, spectacles, and deerstalker hat. Since he had decided to call up devils from the underworld of London, Morris had pondered deeply on the probabilities of their appearance. His first emotion, like that of Charoba when she beheld the sea, was one of disappointment; his second did more justice to the case. Never before had he seen a couple dressed like these; he had struck a new stratum.

'I must speak with you alone,' said he.

'You need not mind Mr Appleby,' returned Pitman. 'He knows all.'

'All? Do you know what I am here to speak of?' enquired Morris--. 'The barrel.'

Pitman turned pale, but it was with manly indignation. 'You are the man!' he cried. 'You very wicked person.'

'Am I to speak before him?' asked Morris, disregarding these severe expressions.

'He has been present throughout,' said Pitman. 'He opened the barrel; your guilty secret is already known to him, as well as to your Maker and myself.'

'Well, then,' said Morris, 'what have you done with the money?'

'I know nothing about any money,' said Pitman.

'You needn't try that on,' said Morris. 'I have tracked you down; you came to the station sacrilegiously disguised as a clergyman, procured my barrel, opened it, rifled the body, and cashed the bill. I have been to the bank, I tell you! I have followed you step by step, and your denials are childish and absurd.'

'Come, come, Morris, keep your temper,' said Mr Appleby.

'Michael!' cried Morris, 'Michael here too!'

'Here too,' echoed the lawyer; 'here and everywhere, my good fellow; every step you take is counted; trained detectives follow you like your shadow; they report to me every three-quarters of an hour; no expense is spared.'

Morris's face took on a hue of dirty grey. 'Well, I don't care; I have the less reserve to keep,' he cried. 'That man cashed my bill; it's a theft, and I want the money back.'

'Do you think I would lie to you, Morris?' asked Michael.

'I don't know,' said his cousin. 'I want my money.'

'It was I alone who touched the body,' began Michael.

'You? Michael!' cried Morris, starting back. 'Then why haven't you declared the death?' 'What the devil do you mean?' asked Michael.

'Am I mad? or are you?' cried Morris.

'I think it must be Pitman,' said Michael.

The three men stared at each other, wild-eyed.

'This is dreadful,' said Morris, 'dreadful. I do not understand one word that is addressed to me.'

'I give you my word of honour, no more do I,' said Michael.

'And in God's name, why whiskers?' cried Morris, pointing in a ghastly manner at his cousin. 'Does my brain reel? How whiskers?'

'O, that's a matter of detail,' said Michael.

There was another silence, during which Morris appeared to himself to be shot in a trapeze as high as St Paul's, and as low as Baker Street Station.

'Let us recapitulate,' said Michael, 'unless it's really a dream, in which case I wish Teena would call me for breakfast. My friend Pitman, here, received a barrel which, it now appears, was meant for you. The barrel contained the body of a man. How or why you killed him...'

'I never laid a hand on him,' protested Morris. 'This is what I have dreaded all along. But think, Michael! I'm not that kind of man; with all my faults, I wouldn't touch a hair of anybody's head, and it was all dead loss to me. He got killed in that vile accident.'

Suddenly Michael was seized by mirth so prolonged and excessive that his companions supposed beyond a doubt his reason had deserted him. Again and again he struggled to compose himself, and again and again laughter overwhelmed him like a tide. In all this maddening interview there had been no more spectral feature than this of Michael's merriment; and Pitman and Morris, drawn together by the common fear, exchanged glances of anxiety.

'Morris,' gasped the lawyer, when he was at last able to articulate,

'hold on, I see it all now. I can make it clear in one word. Here's the key: I NEVER GUESSED IT WAS UNCLE JOSEPH TILL THIS MOMENT.'

This remark produced an instant lightening of the tension for Morris. For Pitman it quenched the last ray of hope and daylight. Uncle Joseph, whom he had left an hour ago in Norfolk Street, pasting newspaper cuttings?--it?--the dead body?--then who was he, Pitman? and was this Waterloo Station or Colney Hatch?

'To be sure!' cried Morris; 'it was badly smashed, I know. How stupid not to think of that! Why, then, all's clear; and, my dear Michael, I'll tell you what--we're saved, both saved. You get the tontine--I don't grudge it you the least--and I get the leather business, which is really beginning to look up. Declare the death at once, don't mind me in the smallest, don't consider me; declare the death, and we're all right.'

'Ah, but I can't declare it,' said Michael.

'Why not?' cried Morris.

'I can't produce the corpus, Morris. I've lost it,' said the lawyer.

'Stop a bit,' ejaculated the leather merchant. 'How is this? It's not possible. I lost it.'

'Well, I've lost it too, my son,' said Michael, with extreme serenity.



'Not recognizing it, you see, and suspecting something irregular in its origin, I got rid of--what shall we say?--got rid of the proceeds at once.'

'You got rid of the body? What made you do that?' walled Morris. 'But you can get it again? You know where it is?'

'I wish I did, Morris, and you may believe me there, for it would be a small sum in my pocket; but the fact is, I don't,' said Michael.

'Good Lord,' said Morris, addressing heaven and earth, 'good Lord, I've lost the leather business!'

Michael was once more shaken with laughter.

'Why do you laugh, you fool?' cried his cousin, 'you lose more than I. You've bungled it worse than even I did. If you had a spark of feeling, you would be shaking in your boots with vexation. But I'll tell you one thing--I'll have that eight hundred pound--I'll have that and go to Swan River--that's mine, anyway, and your friend must have forged to cash it. Give me the eight hundred, here, upon this platform, or I go straight to Scotland Yard and turn the whole disreputable story inside out.'

'Morris,' said Michael, laying his hand upon his shoulder, 'hear reason. It wasn't us, it was the other man. We never even searched the body.'

'The other man?' repeated Morris.

'Yes, the other man. We palmed Uncle Joseph off upon another man,' said Michael.

'You what? You palmed him off? That's surely a singular expression,' said Morris.

'Yes, palmed him off for a piano,' said Michael with perfect simplicity. 'Remarkably full, rich tone,' he added.

Morris carried his hand to his brow and looked at it; it was wet with sweat. 'Fever,' said he.

'No, it was a Broadwood grand,' said Michael. 'Pitman here will tell you if it was genuine or not.'

'Eh? O! O yes, I believe it was a genuine Broadwood; I have played upon it several times myself,' said Pitman. 'The three-letter E was broken.'

'Don't say anything more about pianos,' said Morris, with a strong shudder; 'I'm not the man I used to be! This--this other man--let's come to him, if I can only manage to follow. Who is he? Where can I get hold of him?'

'Ah, that's the rub,' said Michael. 'He's been in possession of the

desired article, let me see--since Wednesday, about four o'clock, and is now, I should imagine, on his way to the isles of Javan and Gadire.'

'Michael,' said Morris pleadingly, 'I am in a very weak state, and I beg your consideration for a kinsman. Say it slowly again, and be sure you are correct. When did he get it?'

Michael repeated his statement.

'Yes, that's the worst thing yet,' said Morris, drawing in his breath.

'What is?' asked the lawyer.

'Even the dates are sheer nonsense,' said the leather merchant.

'The bill was cashed on Tuesday. There's not a gleam of reason in the whole transaction.'

A young gentleman, who had passed the trio and suddenly started and turned back, at this moment laid a heavy hand on Michael's shoulder.

'Aha! so this is Mr Dickson?' said he.

The trump of judgement could scarce have rung with a more dreadful note in the ears of Pitman and the lawyer. To Morris this erroneous name seemed a legitimate enough continuation of the nightmare in which he

had so long been wandering. And when Michael, with his brand-new bushy whiskers, broke from the grasp of the stranger and turned to run, and the weird little shaven creature in the low-necked shirt followed his example with a bird-like screech, and the stranger (finding the rest of his prey escape him) pounced with a rude grasp on Morris himself, that gentleman's frame of mind might be very nearly expressed in the colloquial phrase: 'I told you so!'

'I have one of the gang,' said Gideon Forsyth.

'I do not understand,' said Morris dully.

'O, I will make you understand,' returned Gideon grimly.

'You will be a good friend to me if you can make me understand anything,' cried Morris, with a sudden energy of conviction.

'I don't know you personally, do I?' continued Gideon, examining his unresisting prisoner. 'Never mind, I know your friends. They are your friends, are they not?'

'I do not understand you,' said Morris.

'You had possibly something to do with a piano?' suggested Gideon.

'A piano!' cried Morris, convulsively clasping Gideon by the arm. 'Then

you're the other man! Where is it? Where is the body? And did you cash the draft?

'Where is the body? This is very strange,' mused Gideon. 'Do you want the body?'

'Want it?' cried Morris. 'My whole fortune depends upon it! I lost it. Where is it? Take me to it?'

'O, you want it, do you? And the other man, Dickson--does he want it?' enquired Gideon.

'Who do you mean by Dickson? O, Michael Finsbury! Why, of course he does! He lost it too. If he had it, he'd have won the tontine tomorrow.'

'Michael Finsbury! Not the solicitor?' cried Gideon. 'Yes, the solicitor,' said Morris. 'But where is the body?'

'Then that is why he sent the brief! What is Mr Finsbury's private address?' asked Gideon.

'233 King's Road. What brief? Where are you going? Where is the body?' cried Morris, clinging to Gideon's arm.

'I have lost it myself,' returned Gideon, and ran out of the station.

