

CHAPTER XV. The Return of the Great Vance

Morris returned from Waterloo in a frame of mind that baffles description. He was a modest man; he had never conceived an overweening notion of his own powers; he knew himself unfit to write a book, turn a table napkin-ring, entertain a Christmas party with legerdemain--grapple (in short) any of those conspicuous accomplishments that are usually classed under the head of genius. He knew--he admitted--his parts to be pedestrian, but he had considered them (until quite lately) fully equal to the demands of life. And today he owned himself defeated: life had the upper hand; if there had been any means of flight or place to flee to, if the world had been so ordered that a man could leave it like a place of entertainment, Morris would have instantly resigned all further claim on its rewards and pleasures, and, with inexpressible contentment, ceased to be. As it was, one aim shone before him: he could get home. Even as the sick dog crawls under the sofa, Morris could shut the door of John Street and be alone.

The dusk was falling when he drew near this place of refuge; and the first thing that met his eyes was the figure of a man upon the step, alternately plucking at the bell-handle and pounding on the panels. The man had no hat, his clothes were hideous with filth, he had the air of a hop-picker. Yet Morris knew him; it was John.

The first impulse of flight was succeeded, in the elder brother's bosom, by the empty quiescence of despair. 'What does it matter now?' he

thought, and drawing forth his latchkey ascended the steps.

John turned about; his face was ghastly with weariness and dirt and fury; and as he recognized the head of his family, he drew in a long rasping breath, and his eyes glittered.

'Open that door,' he said, standing back.

'I am going to,' said Morris, and added mentally, 'He looks like murder!'

The brothers passed into the hall, the door closed behind them; and suddenly John seized Morris by the shoulders and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. 'You mangy little cad,' he said, 'I'd serve you right to smash your skull!' And shook him again, so that his teeth rattled and his head smote upon the wall.

'Don't be violent, Johnny,' said Morris. 'It can't do any good now.'

'Shut your mouth,' said John, 'your time's come to listen.'

He strode into the dining-room, fell into the easy-chair, and taking off one of his burst walking-shoes, nursed for a while his foot like one in agony. 'I'm lame for life,' he said. 'What is there for dinner?'

'Nothing, Johnny,' said Morris.

'Nothing? What do you mean by that?' enquired the Great Vance. 'Don't set up your chat to me!'

'I mean simply nothing,' said his brother. 'I have nothing to eat, and nothing to buy it with. I've only had a cup of tea and a sandwich all this day myself.'

'Only a sandwich?' sneered Vance. 'I suppose YOU'RE going to complain next. But you had better take care: I've had all I mean to take; and I can tell you what it is, I mean to dine and to dine well. Take your signets and sell them.'

'I can't today,' objected Morris; 'it's Sunday.'

'I tell you I'm going to dine!' cried the younger brother.

'But if it's not possible, Johnny?' pleaded the other.

'You nincompoop!' cried Vance. 'Ain't we householders? Don't they know us at that hotel where Uncle Parker used to come. Be off with you; and if you ain't back in half an hour, and if the dinner ain't good, first I'll lick you till you don't want to breathe, and then I'll go straight to the police and blow the gaff. Do you understand that, Morris Finsbury? Because if you do, you had better jump.'

The idea smiled even upon the wretched Morris, who was sick with famine. He sped upon his errand, and returned to find John still nursing his foot in the armchair.

'What would you like to drink, Johnny?' he enquired soothingly.

'Fizz,' said John. 'Some of the poppy stuff from the end bin; a bottle of the old port that Michael liked, to follow; and see and don't shake the port. And look here, light the fire--and the gas, and draw down the blinds; it's cold and it's getting dark. And then you can lay the cloth. And, I say--here, you! bring me down some clothes.'

The room looked comparatively habitable by the time the dinner came; and the dinner itself was good: strong gravy soup, fillets of sole, mutton chops and tomato sauce, roast beef done rare with roast potatoes, cabinet pudding, a piece of Chester cheese, and some early celery: a meal uncompromisingly British, but supporting.

'Thank God!' said John, his nostrils sniffing wide, surprised by joy into the unwonted formality of grace. 'Now I'm going to take this chair with my back to the fire--there's been a strong frost these two last nights, and I can't get it out of my bones; the celery will be just the ticket--I'm going to sit here, and you are going to stand there, Morris Finsbury, and play butler.'

'But, Johnny, I'm so hungry myself,' pleaded Morris.

'You can have what I leave,' said Vance. 'You're just beginning to pay your score, my daisy; I owe you one-pound-ten; don't you rouse the British lion!' There was something indescribably menacing in the face and voice of the Great Vance as he uttered these words, at which the soul of Morris withered. 'There!' resumed the feaster, 'give us a glass of the fizz to start with. Gravy soup! And I thought I didn't like gravy soup! Do you know how I got here?' he asked, with another explosion of wrath.

'No, Johnny; how could I?' said the obsequious Morris.

'I walked on my ten toes!' cried John; 'tramped the whole way from Browndean; and begged! I would like to see you beg. It's not so easy as you might suppose. I played it on being a shipwrecked mariner from Blyth; I don't know where Blyth is, do you? but I thought it sounded natural. I begged from a little beast of a schoolboy, and he forked out a bit of twine, and asked me to make a clove hitch; I did, too, I know I did, but he said it wasn't, he said it was a granny's knot, and I was a what-d'ye-call-'em, and he would give me in charge. Then I begged from a naval officer--he never bothered me with knots, but he only gave me a tract; there's a nice account of the British navy!--and then from a widow woman that sold lollipops, and I got a hunch of bread from her. Another party I fell in with said you could generally always get bread; and the thing to do was to break a plateglass window and get into gaol; seemed rather a brilliant scheme. Pass the beef.'

'Why didn't you stay at Browndean?' Morris ventured to enquire.

'Skittles!' said John. 'On what? The Pink Un and a measly religious paper? I had to leave Browndean; I had to, I tell you. I got tick at a public, and set up to be the Great Vance; so would you, if you were leading such a beastly existence! And a card stood me a lot of ale and stuff, and we got swipecy, talking about music-halls and the piles of tin I got for singing; and then they got me on to sing "Around her splendid form I weaved the magic circle," and then he said I couldn't be Vance, and I stuck to it like grim death I was. It was rot of me to sing, of course, but I thought I could brazen it out with a set of yokels. It settled my hash at the public,' said John, with a sigh. 'And then the last thing was the carpenter--'

'Our landlord?' enquired Morris.

'That's the party,' said John. 'He came nosing about the place, and then wanted to know where the water-butt was, and the bedclothes. I told him to go to the devil; so would you too, when there was no possible thing to say! And then he said I had pawned them, and did I know it was felony? Then I made a pretty neat stroke. I remembered he was deaf, and talked a whole lot of rot, very politely, just so low he couldn't hear a word. "I don't hear you," says he. "I know you don't, my buck, and I don't mean you to," says I, smiling away like a haberdasher. "I'm hard of hearing," he roars. "I'd be in a pretty hot corner if you weren't,"

says I, making signs as if I was explaining everything. It was tip-top as long as it lasted. "Well," he said, "I'm deaf, worse luck, but I bet the constable can hear you." And off he started one way, and I the other. They got a spirit-lamp and the Pink Un, and that old religious paper, and another periodical you sent me. I think you must have been drunk--it had a name like one of those spots that Uncle Joseph used to hold forth at, and it was all full of the most awful swipes about poetry and the use of the globes. It was the kind of thing that nobody could read out of a lunatic asylum. The Athaeneum, that was the name! Golly, what a paper!

'Athenaeum, you mean,' said Morris.

'I don't care what you call it,' said John, 'so as I don't require to take it in! There, I feel better. Now I'm going to sit by the fire in the easy-chair; pass me the cheese, and the celery, and the bottle of port--no, a champagne glass, it holds more. And now you can pitch in; there's some of the fish left and a chop, and some fizz. Ah,' sighed the refreshed pedestrian, 'Michael was right about that port; there's old and vatted for you! Michael's a man I like; he's clever and reads books, and the Athaeneum, and all that; but he's not dreary to meet, he don't talk Athaeneum like the other parties; why, the most of them would throw a blight over a skittle alley! Talking of Michael, I ain't bored myself to put the question, because of course I knew it from the first. You've made a hash of it, eh?'

'Michael made a hash of it,' said Morris, flushing dark.

'What have we got to do with that?' enquired John.

'He has lost the body, that's what we have to do with it,' cried Morris.

'He has lost the body, and the death can't be established.'

'Hold on,' said John. 'I thought you didn't want to?'

'O, we're far past that,' said his brother. 'It's not the tontine now, it's the leather business, Johnny; it's the clothes upon our back.'

'Stow the slow music,' said John, 'and tell your story from beginning to end.' Morris did as he was bid.

'Well, now, what did I tell you?' cried the Great Vance, when the other had done. 'But I know one thing: I'm not going to be humbugged out of my property.'

'I should like to know what you mean to do,' said Morris.

'I'll tell you that,' responded John with extreme decision. 'I'm going to put my interests in the hands of the smartest lawyer in London; and whether you go to quod or not is a matter of indifference to me.'

'Why, Johnny, we're in the same boat!' expostulated Morris.

'Are we?' cried his brother. 'I bet we're not! Have I committed forgery? have I lied about Uncle Joseph? have I put idiotic advertisements in the comic papers? have I smashed other people's statues? I like your cheek, Morris Finsbury. No, I've let you run my affairs too long; now they shall go to Michael. I like Michael, anyway; and it's time I understood my situation.'

At this moment the brethren were interrupted by a ring at the bell, and Morris, going timorously to the door, received from the hands of a commissionaire a letter addressed in the hand of Michael. Its contents ran as follows:

MORRIS FINSBURY, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of
SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE at my office, in Chancery Lane, at 10
A.M.

tomorrow.

MICHAEL FINSBURY

So utter was Morris's subjection that he did not wait to be asked, but handed the note to John as soon as he had glanced at it himself.

'That's the way to write a letter,' cried John. 'Nobody but Michael could have written that.'

And Morris did not even claim the credit of priority.