

CHAPTER XVI. Final Adjustment of the Leather Business

Finsbury brothers were ushered, at ten the next morning, into a large apartment in Michael's office; the Great Vance, somewhat restored from yesterday's exhaustion, but with one foot in a slipper; Morris, not positively damaged, but a man ten years older than he who had left Bournemouth eight days before, his face ploughed full of anxious wrinkles, his dark hair liberally grizzled at the temples.

Three persons were seated at a table to receive them: Michael in the midst, Gideon Forsyth on his right hand, on his left an ancient gentleman with spectacles and silver hair. 'By Jingo, it's Uncle Joe!' cried John.

But Morris approached his uncle with a pale countenance and glittering eyes.

'I'll tell you what you did!' he cried. 'You absconded!'

'Good morning, Morris Finsbury,' returned Joseph, with no less asperity; 'you are looking seriously ill.'

'No use making trouble now,' remarked Michael. 'Look the facts in the face. Your uncle, as you see, was not so much as shaken in the accident; a man of your humane disposition ought to be delighted.'

'Then, if that's so,' Morris broke forth, 'how about the body? You don't mean to insinuate that thing I schemed and sweated for, and colported with my own hands, was the body of a total stranger?'

'O no, we can't go as far as that,' said Michael soothingly; 'you may have met him at the club.'

Morris fell into a chair. 'I would have found it out if it had come to the house,' he complained. 'And why didn't it? why did it go to Pitman? what right had Pitman to open it?'

'If you come to that, Morris, what have you done with the colossal Hercules?' asked Michael.

'He went through it with the meat-axe,' said John. 'It's all in spillikins in the back garden.'

'Well, there's one thing,' snapped Morris; 'there's my uncle again, my fraudulent trustee. He's mine, anyway. And the tontine too. I claim the tontine; I claim it now. I believe Uncle Masterman's dead.'

'I must put a stop to this nonsense,' said Michael, 'and that for ever. You say too near the truth. In one sense your uncle is dead, and has been so long; but not in the sense of the tontine, which it is even on the cards he may yet live to win. Uncle Joseph saw him this morning; he will tell you he still lives, but his mind is in abeyance.'

'He did not know me,' said Joseph; to do him justice, not without emotion.

'So you're out again there, Morris,' said John. 'My eye! what a fool you've made of yourself!'

'And that was why you wouldn't compromise,' said Morris.

'As for the absurd position in which you and Uncle Joseph have been making yourselves an exhibition,' resumed Michael, 'it is more than time it came to an end. I have prepared a proper discharge in full, which you shall sign as a preliminary.'

'What?' cried Morris, 'and lose my seven thousand eight hundred pounds, and the leather business, and the contingent interest, and get nothing? Thank you.'

'It's like you to feel gratitude, Morris,' began Michael.

'O, I know it's no good appealing to you, you sneering devil!' cried Morris. 'But there's a stranger present, I can't think why, and I appeal to him. I was robbed of that money when I was an orphan, a mere child, at a commercial academy. Since then, I've never had a wish but to get back my own. You may hear a lot of stuff about me; and there's no doubt at times I have been ill-advised. But it's the pathos of my situation;

that's what I want to show you.'

'Morris,' interrupted Michael, 'I do wish you would let me add one point, for I think it will affect your judgement. It's pathetic too since that's your taste in literature.'

'Well, what is it?' said Morris.

'It's only the name of one of the persons who's to witness your signature, Morris,' replied Michael. 'His name's Moss, my dear.'

There was a long silence. 'I might have been sure it was you!' cried Morris.

'You'll sign, won't you?' said Michael.

'Do you know what you're doing?' cried Morris. 'You're compounding a felony.'

'Very well, then, we won't compound it, Morris,' returned Michael. 'See how little I understood the sterling integrity of your character! I thought you would prefer it so.'

'Look here, Michael,' said John, 'this is all very fine and large; but how about me? Morris is gone up, I see that; but I'm not. And I was robbed, too, mind you; and just as much an orphan, and at the blessed

same academy as himself.'

'Johnny,' said Michael, 'don't you think you'd better leave it to me?'

'I'm your man,' said John. 'You wouldn't deceive a poor orphan, I'll take my oath. Morris, you sign that document, or I'll start in and astonish your weak mind.'

With a sudden alacrity, Morris proffered his willingness. Clerks were brought in, the discharge was executed, and there was Joseph a free man once more.

'And now,' said Michael, 'hear what I propose to do. Here, John and Morris, is the leather business made over to the pair of you in partnership. I have valued it at the lowest possible figure, Pogram and Jarris's. And here is a cheque for the balance of your fortune. Now, you see, Morris, you start fresh from the commercial academy; and, as you said yourself the leather business was looking up, I suppose you'll probably marry before long. Here's your marriage present--from a Mr Moss.'

Morris bounded on his cheque with a crimsoned countenance.

'I don't understand the performance,' remarked John. 'It seems too good to be true.'

'It's simply a readjustment,' Michael explained. 'I take up Uncle Joseph's liabilities; and if he gets the tontine, it's to be mine; if my father gets it, it's mine anyway, you see. So that I'm rather advantageously placed.'

'Morris, my unconverted friend, you've got left,' was John's comment.

'And now, Mr Forsyth,' resumed Michael, turning to his silent guest, 'here are all the criminals before you, except Pitman. I really didn't like to interrupt his scholastic career; but you can have him arrested at the seminary--I know his hours. Here we are then; we're not pretty to look at: what do you propose to do with us?'

'Nothing in the world, Mr Finsbury,' returned Gideon. 'I seem to understand that this gentleman'---indicating Morris--'is the fons et origo of the trouble; and, from what I gather, he has already paid through the nose. And really, to be quite frank, I do not see who is to gain by any scandal; not me, at least. And besides, I have to thank you for that brief.'

Michael blushed. 'It was the least I could do to let you have some business,' he said. 'But there's one thing more. I don't want you to misjudge poor Pitman, who is the most harmless being upon earth. I wish you would dine with me tonight, and see the creature on his native heath--say at Verrey's?'

'I have no engagement, Mr Finsbury,' replied Gideon. 'I shall be delighted. But subject to your judgement, can we do nothing for the man in the cart? I have qualms of conscience.'

'Nothing but sympathize,' said Michael.