



THE OUTRAGEOUS
FORTUNE
OF ABEL MORGAN

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Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2018.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2324-9

Typeset in 11/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CHRISTOPHER MORGAN

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It was deep night when the coach reached Dario. Time was lost to him but, somehow, he must have packed his belongings and put himself on it, for he had been carried along for many hours. The coachman roused him with a growl and he realised he was the only remaining passenger. The unmatched pair of horses fidgeted as the coachman untied Christopher's box and let it drop onto the road. Christopher clambered out. Steam from the sweating horses rose up into the cold night air like mist from a sullen lake in the moonlight. Christopher reached back into the coach for his leather travelling bag. Almost before he had taken it and closed the door, the coachman whipped up the horses. Startled by their lightened load, they set off at a canter, kicking up the road grit. Christopher bent his head against the cloud of dust that engulfed him, holding the edge of his cloak over his mouth. By the time he lifted his head, the coach had gone and the only living thing was a fox, sniffing at a midden before leaping onto a low wall and disappearing under some gorse.

The Rumpfustian Inn seemed smaller and older than when he had bought it. The great grey stones of its walls seemed to grow out of the ground, and the low roof undulated under its thatch. In the centre of the building was a broad, heavy door, with a small window to either side. Smoke came from a chimney, and the windows were dimly lit. There was sound, too: the rumble of voices and occasional laughter. Christopher shrank from the idea of company, but he must have a bed to rest his aching bones. And he could be relieved that someone was awake at this hour to give him entry. He closed his eyes for a moment but, open or closed, the same terrible memory was still being played in his head.

Time must have passed. He was chilled now, shivering in his long cloak and dust-grimed hat. He stooped to pick up his bag and left the box in the road.

It was a few short steps to the great oak door. It felt fissured under his hand, like the face of an old man, but the latch lifted cleanly and the door swung wide with hardly a sound. As he stepped in, the lintel knocked his hat askew so that he saw only a portion of the room. It was warm, even hot, with a great fire burning high in the hearth. Christopher had not been so close to such a generous fire since before his exile. Even the King had been forced to be parsimonious with fuel, relying as they all did on the generosity of others. To have a hot fire so late in the night must mean a great store of wood, or perhaps a festival of some sort.

The room was crowded. Surely, almost every man in the village must be here. All were making merry and, at first, the silently opened door attracted no attention. But, as the draught touched the nearest drinkers, they twitched with the sudden chill, turned and saw Christopher hesitating in the doorway.

Soon, all were staring at him with eyes that looked alarmed, even hostile, and every voice became silenced.

Christopher knew that strangers were often viewed with suspicion in the countryside, especially so late into the night when few honest travellers were abroad. He might be the new owner of the inn, but he was certainly not expected. Mr Gazely, who had sold him the Rumfustian, had agreed to stay and look after it until such time as Christopher could safely bring his young wife across the country to take up residence. But Christopher looked for him without success. He put his bag carefully down and righted his hat before closing the door behind him. As he turned back to face the room, his eyes met those of a middle-aged man staring at him. The man looked pale and frightened, as if Christopher might be a ghost. This was the servant, William, who, along with his wife, Christopher had bought with the inn to brew and serve beer, cook and generally do his bidding. As Christopher attempted to form his mouth into a smile of greeting, William looked ever more like a dog expecting a whipping. Christopher attempted to speak, but the obstruction in his throat, which had been there as long as his latest sorrow, strangled most of his words. He had wanted to form a reassuring question, but it sounded more like a demand.

‘Mr Gazely?’

The name prompted a murmur from the assembled company, and the switching of attention away from Christopher towards the hapless William. However, it wasn't William who replied, but a man Christopher had not so far noticed. He sat at a table near the fire, along with an elderly man and several lads who looked so alike they must be of the same family. While most of the other drinkers held tankards, he had a glass of some spirit. A small gold hoop in his ear sparked in the firelight.

‘Gone, sir,’ was his remark to Christopher. ‘This forenoon.’

One of the lads at his table laughed, but the man silenced him with a look.

Before the man could add more, William found his tongue, pushing his way between several drinkers to come close to where Christopher stood.

‘Mr Morgan, sir!’

Everyone redirected their attention to the servant. He blushed deeply but ploughed doggedly on.

‘I’m sorry, sir, not to have recognised you at once, but . . . we weren’t expecting you so soon . . .’ He glanced at the man at the table and then quickly away. ‘I do apologise, sir, but I’m sure all of Dario would want to welcome the new owner of the Rumfustian Inn.’

The silence was so solid it could have been sliced.

‘I want no ceremony, William,’ said Christopher, finding his voice, ‘just a bed prepared, for I am very weary. I am sorry to arrive so late and without notice. Did Mr Gazely give word as to when he will return?’

William shook his head and the man at the table cut neatly in. ‘He will not return, sir. In this inn, we are as you see us, rudderless and in need of a captain – but no doubt a bed can be found.’ He raised his glass to Christopher and took a nip of the liquor. ‘SALLY!’

His sudden shout made Christopher jump. He couldn’t recall the man, but he seemed to have no difficulty in acting the host. Perhaps he had been a friend of Mr Gazely.

A young girl, no more than a child, presented herself to the man at the table, but he pointed her towards Christopher and busied himself with enjoying his drink.

‘I will show you to your room, sir,’ she said to Christopher.

‘Thank you.’ Christopher retrieved his bag and followed. The drinkers moved aside to let him past, but none met his eyes or spoke. Christopher wondered if there was some form of greeting he should give them. ‘Perhaps you could ensure everyone gets a drink as a welcome from me?’ He looked at William. Although the man nodded, Christopher had the uncomfortable feeling that it had not been the right thing to say. A quickly stifled guffaw came from the other side of the room. Christopher looked to see who had laughed, but it was impossible to tell. As he turned back to William, the movement slightly opened the front of his cloak. William, being so close, was the only person who could have seen what lay beneath. With terror on his face, he stepped back into a table. A bottle upon it juddered and almost fell. Neither man spoke, but Christopher pulled his cloak across his body once more.

‘My box,’ he said quietly. ‘It is in the road. Please bring it to my room.’

He followed Sally’s flickering figure. At the stairs, she held her candle up to light his way. It was a generous, well-made staircase, but over the years the green oak had settled eccentrically into its foundation, and Christopher had to tread carefully on the sloping timbers. Along a groaning passage and around a corner . . . Sally seemed to have forgotten him, but the shadows on the wall showed him that she had stopped, and he reached her without mishap. She was entering a room. He hesitated but, seeing her light another candle and then kneel to a laid fire, he surmised that the room must be his.

The infant fire soon caught from her candle. She piled some fragments of peat onto the twigs and then sat back on her heels to await the fire’s progress. She hesitated after adding some sticks, but Christopher was impatient.

‘I can tend the fire. Go . . . Stay!’

She had stood up and now looked curiously at him, seeming unafraid of her new master.

‘Bring me some beer.’

She reached the door.

‘And perhaps some bread?’

He wasn’t sure if she had heard the last muttered order, but he couldn’t bring himself to call her back again. He took off his cloak and hung it from a nail on the door. Then, after depositing a bundle on the bed, he removed his hat, scattering grit all around. It crunched underfoot as he tossed the hat onto a small table and seated himself in a chair at the hearth. He busied himself with the fire, adding more wood and nudging it with his boot until it fell together in a burning heap. Staring at the fire, he fell into an exhausted stupor while figures danced in the flames, unendingly replaying the tragedy in his head.

The woman might have knocked, but he didn’t hear her. The first he noticed was her sturdy figure standing near his elbow, staring with fearful concentration at the region of his stomach. In her hands she held a pewter mug and plate, both dented. When he moved his head to look at her, she jumped as if a devil had landed on her back. Beer slopped from the mug and she almost lost the contents of the plate, some bread and a piece of yellow cheese. He hadn’t met her before. She was of middle age and with a face, if it had not been so alarmed, that would have been warm and friendly. It was the face of a servant who looked comfortable with her place and used to knowing more than was required of her.

Christopher found himself flattening the fabric of his shirt to his chest in response to her staring. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘No, sir.’ She sounded more puzzled than convinced as she

moved to the table, where she laid down her burden. 'You asked Sally for beer, sir, and I thought to bring you something to eat, in case you were hungry.' They stared at each other for a moment, each elsewhere in their thoughts. Being a servant, she recovered herself first. 'I'm Jane, sir, William's wife . . .' She was trying to keep her eyes on him, but he could see that they kept darting away, examining the room and especially his belongings.

'Is William attending to my box?'

She looked away from his cloak, hanging as it was like a dark, empty shroud. 'Yes, indeed . . .'

'Then please tell him to bring it up.' It sounded as if the revellers were ending their evening. Through the cracks in the boards there came from below much noisy scraping of stools, tramping of feet and unmistakable farewells. 'I don't want it carried off and lost to me.'

'It's secure, sir. Harold Pierce, the roadman, and William brought it in. It sits in the passage, safe enough for now.'

Two steps took her towards the door and past the bed. She glanced at the bundle and gave a gasp. 'Oh, God save us!' A pause. And then, 'Is it dead?'

'Yes.' He didn't look at it or her.

After a few moments, she was once more at his side. He ignored her and concentrated on the flames, although he was aware of her agitated presence.

'Sir. Sir!' Her voice was unsteady. As he continued to ignore her, she ventured to touch his sleeve. 'It lives, sir! Its heart is beating. But it is very weak. It needs nourishment and . . .'

'I gave it beer . . . but it will die.' His voice, too, was dying.

She was impatient with him. 'But while it breathes, surely . . . You cannot mean to let it die with no attempt to save it?'

It was those last five words that forced him to turn to her.

He didn't realise his tears were visible. He thought they were inside his head, as his grief was. Only, through his blurred eyes, he saw her expression alter from urgency to pity. And he could not speak. She said some words.

'Do I have your permission . . . ?'

The nod was hardly perceptible, but she saw it. First, she bundled out of the room like a whirlwind, leaving all behind. It was quiet now, below. Then came her voice and her husband's. She sounding like a scold, he floating up angry and then conciliatory. Eventually, the great door banged and her footsteps were audible, tramping up the stairs and along to his room. She was breathing heavily as she entered, sounding as if she had just run a race.

She brought life and energy and urgency with her, but stopped it up as she reached his side, as if this was hallowed ground. He was twisted away from her in his chair, staring again at the fire, as if all he wished for were there.

'May I . . . pick it up?'

He turned to her, then, and his voice came as a rising sob.

'What use is there in that? It will still die . . . ' And without warning he collapsed against her, as a tree might fall against another in the wood, leaning his head against her ribs, clutching her skirts with fingers like twigs.

For a few seconds she was struck dumb, then she began to talk quietly in a soft, soothing voice.

'It's all right. It'll come right, it will. So, calm yourself. And William is sorry but he caught just a glimpse when your cloak opened, and he thought it was a devil creature, God save us . . . hush now . . . an imp, like the paintings in the old church down the way, foolish man that he is . . . There's one with a devil coming from a man's belly, Lord bless us, and it frightened him so as a

child, when he'd gone there for a dare . . . nightmares he's had for many years, but he's sorry . . .' She kept her voice low and calm, paying no more attention to his sobs. Her words wove a little repair into his tattered mind, meaning being less important to him than her gentle tone. 'If he'd known, he wouldn't for the world . . . it was just . . . he wasn't expecting . . . you a gentleman and all . . . he'd never imagined a gentleman with such a thing . . . and no woman to care for it. We knew you were bringing your wife once she had birthed . . . so did she die, then? I know it feels like the world has ended but all will come right in the end. Be still now. William's gone . . . to ask the blacksmith's wife if she'll come down and see to it, so, you know all will be well. Her babe isn't more than three months and she has plenty of milk . . . so don't you fret . . . it's all well now . . .'

She tried to move away then, but he only held on more tightly, his body shaking as he wept. She began hesitantly to touch his tangled hair and his back, stroking both gently and constantly, while all the time continuing her quiet talk. Slowly, his grip loosened as he became calmer. Now there were voices again in the room below, William and a woman, querulous, complaining, being hushed. Jane spoke again in the same calm, gentle voice. 'That's her now,' she said. 'She will do her best for it, put it to the breast, and she can stay here tonight if you wish it, stay close, keep it warm and safe, warm and safe . . .'

With that, she gave his hair a last caress and dared to put her arm around him, holding him reassuringly close. When she released him this time, he let her go. She went to the bed and picked up the motionless form of the infant, still talking to Christopher in the same way. 'Now it's wrapped in two shirts, I see . . . we'll leave the one here. I told William to be sure Margaret brought an extra shawl, and I can make clouts. I have

old linen here. I can use that for swaddling, and it'll sleep with her in the bed and be warm that way.'

Christopher watched her through his hair and she showed she was aware of his gaze, bringing the bundle for him to see. When he showed signs of wanting to take it from her, she resisted, softly but firmly. 'Now, they'll be in the next room and not far at all. What you must do is pray for it, as we all shall, and then sleep, for it's up to God now and Margaret to do her best . . . but its heart beats still, for all it's so quiet. I'll be back in a moment to make the fire safe and put you to bed, so don't you fret.'

He was still in the chair when she returned without the infant. He made no protest when she knelt and removed his shoes and stockings. He stood like a child for her to remove his jacket and britches. She led him to the bed in his shirt, not asking if he had a nightshirt with him. Pulling back the covers, she helped him in and tucked him up. He turned away from her and lay on his side in the cold bed, while she attended to the fire and blew out the candle. Once she had left, he sat up and felt for the shirt he had used to swaddle the baby. Dragging it under the cover with him, he wrapped his arms around it and huddled with its scent to his face, waiting for sleep.