

MEET MR MORTIBOY

by James Fox



COLIN JONES

I don't really know what you're trying to get at, old son - I mean, I've got no skeletons in my cupboard. There's a lot of chaps in Paddington have made a lot more money than me. I believe in living and let living, you know. I don't believe in being diabolical. I probably know more strokes than a monkey, but I don't perform them. Not a performing monkey. I don't need to, you see. I've never been fined for the price of a dustbin. Mind you, more by good luck than good management." Mortiboy gives a little puffy whimper of a laugh. It's a fair assessment, a little on the modest side.

Mortiboy's Christian name Herbert is a plain embarrassment to him and its usage has lapsed. The surname comes from Mort-le-Bois. "I think it means dead in the head," he says. At 61 he is Paddington's elder statesman operator, who has always worked hard for respect from honest dealers and villains alike. It has proved a good working formula. Decency and villainy are at opposite poles of the Paddington property man's behaviour chart and if you're not one you are thought to be the other in every way. He's made a little under a million pounds including tie-ups and invisibles out of the 'dust hole,' the Paddington and Notting Hill property markets, and if he had been a tyrant and money grabber, he says, he would have doubled it. His influence around Paddington and markets beyond, to use his euphemism, is octopal. He has moved into clubland, he is on the higher gossip network. His anecdotes drop the names of judges and peers. His greatest gift is his astonishing ability to talk more words to the minute than anyone else. He's London Street's Max Miller, the

cheeky chappie, the man with the golden mouth. The flow of words in broad cockney is decorated with punch line after salty punch line, euphemism and suggestion, so sharp, so condensed by speed, that there is no recognised funny-man act to compare with his in the pubs of W.11.

He was born well off: "My father was the very famous firm of music publishers, Augener Limited in Great Marlborough Street." He will die richer. His life is embellished with an 'interest' in a yacht in Monte Carlo, boxes at Epsom and Ascot, a large country house in plutocratic West Sussex, near Fontwell Park racecourse - he entertains in all of them - and a jerky kind of generosity to his friends.

And if you wondered what happened to Rachman's slum estate, Mortiboy bought a good deal of it and his reputation took a fierce battering as a result. It made him cautious with the Press. His name, he realised, was a natural bait for the headline writers.

"I've got nothing to hide. I'm sort of on the outside looking in. If I was mad about money I could operate like some of these other monkeys. If I got a couple of blokes to pay you a late night call, walk about a bit, put a couple of discs on the radiogram, and so forth you'd soon wonder what it's all about. But I'm never likely to. I deal with tenants on a comparatively friendly basis." There's a tightness, sombreness and tension about Mortiboy from which his wealth hasn't released him. His voice is metallic and piercing. He wears dark, heavy suits and walks slightly hunched, eyes lowered as if he's about to fall forward. Outwardly he looks like an undertaker.

At our first meeting he took me to a Christmas party in the Rembrandt Rooms in Knightsbridge, organised by Wilmotts, a property firm. We sat in the back of a friend's car. He was formerly manager of a bank in the Harrow Road. Once he was offered the job of cashier at the Claremont, London's most fashionable gambling club. "I had some funds from that bank," says Mortiboy, "not substantial, £30,000 or something. When he retired I said I'd look after him. It's no skin off my nose, is it? He was a bit handy at the time. Very handy. I don't forget people who are handy." Mortiboy was nervous about the party, repeating: "I thought you knew where I was going. I thought you knew where I was going," to the questioning bank manager as we motored over the Serpentine.

At our second meeting, in his

gloomy flat in Paddington between a Golden Egg and a Tennessee Pancake House, the door was opened by Jack, Mortiboy's factotum, a ghostly man from Dublin with a cloth cap, waistcoat and nicotine-stained moustache, his face crumpling in over the bones. "He's a comic, that Jack," says Mortiboy. "Jack," he shouts, into space, "Jack? Gi'us two teas will you? He wants to know how many sugars you take. He judges your character by the amount of sugar, I think. I generally send him to the funerals around about that I'm always asked to go to. I can't go myself. I might burst out laughing.

"But you'd really like to know, in the first place," says Mortiboy, pulling his chin into his neck, "how I started in the property business. What happened. Well, in the very first place I was educated, and became an optician in my very young days, but the money that I was offered in the optical world was so small that I decided to leave it almost the day I started it and sought another job, much to the aggravation of me father, in R. B. Sunnucks' office in New Oxford Street. He's just died as a matter of fact. Ronald Banbury Sunnucks. He's well known in the property world. His final days, he owned some hotels back of Selfridges, Ronald House and Banbury House. And from there I associated, those earlier days, with a chap named Arthur Benabo - subsequently died. He was a great chap for the auction marts in Queen Victoria Street, which is the home of property for sale as you know. The experience I got from those two has stood me in good stead the rest of me life."

Like most of the property millionaires, Mortiboy came in after the war when the market was wide open and prices were at the bottom. "I was fiddling about before the war, to use a colloquial expression. I was learning the business, put it that way, I was learning the art.

"I bought two houses in Porlock Road for a pound. I bought many houses in Southam Street for £50 and any number for two or three hundred pounds. Then later of course you could buy a house for £250 to £300 and you could find a Pole, not necessarily a Pole but there was a large number of Poles, ex-servicemen, and I think they had plenty of grants with a view to buying houses in the twilight areas of London. And I specialised mostly, as you know, in Notting Hill. There's more money to be made in the

dust hole than there is in Piccadilly, you know. Find a Pole who has three or four hundred pounds to put down on a house. You could multiply the price by probably about three by decorating it, not spending more than about £150 on it, so you probably get the money back you spent on the house, leave him to repay the mortgage. It was a bargain for him, and which to you was a substantial profit.

"Then the coloured people came along. That made a different story entirely when the coloured people came along, and I mean they turned these houses into multiple occupation and Rachman showed them the way to go home, didn't he, by throwing out controlled tenants and filling them up like rabbit warrens. That's what it amounted to, isn't it? And increasing the price 20 times. I think Rachman was an evil fellow myself. Matter of fact I had plenty of opportunity to deal with him. Met him on several occasions. But I never did a transaction with him. Didn't like his style of operation, *modus operandi*. He wasn't in the business very long. He died, more like dropped dead. Only in the business about six years, caused all that row in six years.

"He spent money like water. He didn't have the sense of conserving. It's very easy to make money, it's very difficult to hold money. He used to give doormen £5 tips and things like that. Oh, he was very ostentatious. He'd give a waiter £5 to get a window table in the Hyde Park Hotel.

"All that sort of thing. Riding about in his Rolls-Royce, have a couple of dogs waiting for him. But it didn't appeal to me. I think he lived and played too fast. I sometimes wonder why I'm alive," Mortiboy gives a breathy chuckle, "I don't think that kills you, though."

"It killed Rachman," I said.

"I think it did, yes. Bit of a warning that was, wasn't it? Shepherd's warning. He was deposed as King of Notting Hill more or less at the time these coloured chaps came in. I mean these coloured fellows are more or less the kings of Notting Hill at the moment, aren't they? I would think so, I mean there are certain people buying and selling property over there, principally coloureds you know."

Mortiboy had clubs in Dean Street, and Gerrard Street in Soho, and properties in Mayfair. "Mayfair? Oh Christ, that's one of the most dangerous places in the world. Places like Hertford Street, Trebeck

Street and Curzon Street, and those particular parts of the market, mostly inhabited by some of the monkeys of this world. Lot of prostitutes and a lot of minders. It's very, very dangerous down there. During the war I had a place in Market Mews, so I know how dangerous it is. The Messina crowd were down there. They've still got places in Curzon Street. They're all dead 'cept one. Big funeral the other day in Sicily.

"I suppose that's about the worst thing that ever happened to me," says Mortiboy, "buying some of Rachman's gear and finding out what it's all about. I had to confront the tenants, who were very irate. They thought I was another kind of Rachman, till I stroked 'em down a bit. Come, come, you know, none of that nonsense. I think they got to understand I wasn't quite the villain they might have imagined."

We take off in Mortiboy's four-year-old Austin Princess for a tour of Paddington. Around Golborne Road is a wall slogan: "Children beat your mother while she's young", and another: "Smash boredom and isolation".

"Lot of nut cases around here," he says, "they call me Naughty Boy. Soon get known if you've made a few bob. It used to be a real little kingdom. There was a punch-up every other

night. Most of the worst villains have been decimated by the police. Go round the pubs now and they're full of cons, but they're nice old cons if you know what I mean."

Down at Westfields, his country place, there are pine trees for seclusion and a raucous collection of rooks that hover over the front door. The bar is tended by the retired bank manager or one of Mortiboy's punter friends. It's Tuesday and race day. Some property men have come from Birmingham, much dealing is done on racecourses. The decor in the house is like an expensive furnished flat in Paddington, with reds and blacks and a dash of Spanish fandango. There is one book in the bookcase, a biography of his ancestors printed in 1877 called *Ready Money Mortiboy*.

In the members' enclosure at Fontwell Park Mortiboy has his own bench inscribed with his initials, H.A.M., beside others of military rank. "There's a lot of side down this part of the world. You shouldn't really wear mink coats on the racecourse, of course. Come down here in the summer and you'll see them all done up like dogs' dinners. Chap I knew said, 'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?' I was standing at the champagne bar at Epsom. I said, 'Brixton, wasn't it?' He

said 'I hardly think so'. I said 'Isn't your brother up for two years at the moment?'

"And there's a brigadier who lives next door here. He's got a bit of side to him. Told me the other day if I was in his regiment, he'd make me stand up. I said I'm not likely to be in his regiment, so it doesn't matter does it?"

"I go to the races principally to enjoy myself. It's something to do, isn't it? Relaxation. In fact one of the wisest judges in the Old Bailey said he'd only heard of two calendars, the nude calendar and the racing calendar. They go to the races those judges do, too. Well I know one did - I was on the jury on one occasion and he said he had a very important engagement tomorrow and the jury weren't required. Never dawned on me it was Gold Cup day at Ascot. You couldn't ask him the next morning. You couldn't say the next morning, 'Where have you been, gov'nor?' Mortiboy is in convulsions of laughter.

"I said to the other members of the jury, even moneys he was at Ascot yesterday. I got a certificate of life exemption for that trial as it happens. It was a fraud case, and I was foreman of the jury. After it was all over the judge said thank you very much and all that nonsense and anything I can do for you. I said I'd like exemption

if it's all the same to you."

Once Mortiboy was well and truly conned - for the first and the last time, he says - and it was on a racecourse.

"I went racing at Kuala Lumpur. I had a day to spare so I got a taxi down there, put a bet on the first race and I was standing on the rails looking for the horses. Not a bloody horse in sight. It was a ghost racecourse, it was happening hundreds of miles away. Talk about being done, that was it."

We are having tea in the bar above the members' stands looking out on to the green racecourse, surrounded by the gentry of West Sussex in their gabardines and tweeds. When Mortiboy orders a drink he says: "Combien?" pronouncing the 'n'; when he orders another he says: "Encore, my brother," and slaps the coins on to the bar. He is discoursing on the art of the property business.

"Well, it's something that comes to you. It's judgment, isn't it?" he says, munching a piece of angel cake. "It's like an artist painting a picture. It's like journalism. I mean, I couldn't write an article to save my life. Same with taking pictures. There's a friend of mine runs a camera shop I got an interest in round the corner from London Street. He's got all sorts of cameras from Alpha to Omega. I don't know what it's all about. Who supplies your cameras, by the way?"

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