

Chapter LXI - The Chief Butler Resigns The Seals Of Office

The dinner-party was at the great Physician's. Bar was there, and in full force. Ferdinand Barnacle was there, and in his most engaging state. Few ways of life were hidden from Physician, and he was oftener in its darkest places than even Bishop. There were brilliant ladies about London who perfectly doted on him, my dear, as the most charming creature and the most delightful person, who would have been shocked to find themselves so close to him if they could have known on what sights those thoughtful eyes of his had rested within an hour or two, and near to whose beds, and under what roofs, his composed figure had stood. But Physician was a composed man, who performed neither on his own trumpet, nor on the trumpets of other people. Many wonderful things did he see and hear, and much irreconcilable moral contradiction did he pass his life among; yet his equality of compassion was no more disturbed than the Divine Master's of all healing was. He went, like the rain, among the just and unjust, doing all the good he could, and neither proclaiming it in the synagogues nor at the corner of streets.

As no man of large experience of humanity, however quietly carried it may be, can fail to be invested with an interest peculiar to the possession of such knowledge, Physician was an attractive man. Even the daintier gentlemen and ladies who had no idea of his secret, and who would have been startled out of more wits than they had, by the monstrous impropriety of his proposing to them 'Come and see what I see!' confessed his attraction. Where he was, something real was. And half a grain of reality, like the smallest portion of some other scarce natural productions, will flavour an enormous quantity of diluent.

It came to pass, therefore, that Physician's little dinners always presented people in their least conventional lights. The guests said to themselves, whether they were conscious of it or no, 'Here is a man who really has an acquaintance with us as we are, who is admitted to some of us every day with our wigs and paint off, who hears the wanderings of our minds, and sees the undisguised expression of our faces, when both are past our control; we may as well make an approach to reality with him, for the man has got the better of us and is too strong for us.' Therefore, Physician's guests came out so surprisingly at his round table that they were almost natural.

Bar's knowledge of that agglomeration of jurymen which is called humanity was as sharp as a razor; yet a razor is not a generally convenient instrument, and Physician's plain bright scalpel, though far less keen, was adaptable to far wider purposes. Bar knew all about the gullibility and knavery of people; but Physician could have given him a better insight into their tendernesses and affections, in one week of his rounds, than Westminster Hall and all the circuits put

together, in threescore years and ten. Bar always had a suspicion of this, and perhaps was glad to encourage it (for, if the world were really a great Law Court, one would think that the last day of Term could not too soon arrive); and so he liked and respected Physician quite as much as any other kind of man did.

Mr Merdle's default left a Banquo's chair at the table; but, if he had been there, he would have merely made the difference of Banquo in it, and consequently he was no loss. Bar, who picked up all sorts of odds and ends about Westminster Hall, much as a raven would have done if he had passed as much of his time there, had been picking up a great many straws lately and tossing them about, to try which way the Merdle wind blew. He now had a little talk on the subject with Mrs Merdle herself; sidling up to that lady, of course, with his double eye-glass and his jury droop.

'A certain bird,' said Bar; and he looked as if it could have been no other bird than a magpie; 'has been whispering among us lawyers lately, that there is to be an addition to the titled personages of this realm.'

'Really?' said Mrs Merdle.

'Yes,' said Bar. 'Has not the bird been whispering in very different ears from ours - in lovely ears?' He looked expressively at Mrs Merdle's nearest ear-ring.

'Do you mean mine?' asked Mrs Merdle.

'When I say lovely,' said Bar, 'I always mean you.'

'You never mean anything, I think,' returned Mrs Merdle (not displeased).

'Oh, cruelly unjust!' said Bar. 'But, the bird.'

'I am the last person in the world to hear news,' observed Mrs Merdle, carelessly arranging her stronghold. 'Who is it?'

'What an admirable witness you would make!' said Bar. 'No jury (unless we could empanel one of blind men) could resist you, if you were ever so bad a one; but you would be such a good one!'

'Why, you ridiculous man?' asked Mrs Merdle, laughing.

Bar waved his double eye-glass three or four times between himself and the Bosom, as a rallying answer, and inquired in his most insinuating accents:

'What am I to call the most elegant, accomplished and charming of women, a few weeks, or it may be a few days, hence?'

'Didn't your bird tell you what to call her?' answered Mrs Merdle. 'Do ask it to-morrow, and tell me the next time you see me what it says.'

This led to further passages of similar pleasantries between the two; but Bar, with all his sharpness, got nothing out of them. Physician, on the other hand, taking Mrs Merdle down to her carriage and attending on her as she put on her cloak, inquired into the symptoms with his usual calm directness.

'May I ask,' he said, 'is this true about Merdle?'

'My dear doctor,' she returned, 'you ask me the very question that I was half disposed to ask you.' 'To ask me! Why me?'

'Upon my honour, I think Mr Merdle reposes greater confidence in you than in any one.'

'On the contrary, he tells me absolutely nothing, even professionally. You have heard the talk, of course?'

'Of course I have. But you know what Mr Merdle is; you know how taciturn and reserved he is. I assure you I have no idea what foundation for it there may be. I should like it to be true; why should I deny that to you? You would know better, if I did!'

'Just so,' said Physician.

'But whether it is all true, or partly true, or entirely false, I am wholly unable to say. It is a most provoking situation, a most absurd situation; but you know Mr Merdle, and are not surprised.'

Physician was not surprised, handed her into her carriage, and bade her Good Night. He stood for a moment at his own hall door, looking sedately at the elegant equipage as it rattled away. On his return upstairs, the rest of the guests soon dispersed, and he was left alone. Being a great reader of all kinds of literature (and never at all apologetic for that weakness), he sat down comfortably to read.

The clock upon his study table pointed to a few minutes short of twelve, when his attention was called to it by a ringing at the door bell. A man of plain habits, he had sent his servants to bed and must needs go down to open the door. He went down, and there found a man without hat or coat, whose shirt sleeves were rolled up tight to his shoulders. For a moment, he thought the man had been fighting: the rather, as he was much agitated and out of breath. A second look,

however, showed him that the man was particularly clean, and not otherwise discomposed as to his dress than as it answered this description.

'I come from the warm-baths, sir, round in the neighbouring street.'

'And what is the matter at the warm-baths?'

'Would you please to come directly, sir. We found that, lying on the table.'

He put into the physician's hand a scrap of paper. Physician looked at it, and read his own name and address written in pencil; nothing more. He looked closer at the writing, looked at the man, took his hat from its peg, put the key of his door in his pocket, and they hurried away together.

When they came to the warm-baths, all the other people belonging to that establishment were looking out for them at the door, and running up and down the passages. 'Request everybody else to keep back, if you please,' said the physician aloud to the master; 'and do you take me straight to the place, my friend,' to the messenger.

The messenger hurried before him, along a grove of little rooms, and turning into one at the end of the grove, looked round the door. Physician was close upon him, and looked round the door too.

There was a bath in that corner, from which the water had been hastily drained off. Lying in it, as in a grave or sarcophagus, with a hurried drapery of sheet and blanket thrown across it, was the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features. A sky-light had been opened to release the steam with which the room had been filled; but it hung, condensed into water-drops, heavily upon the walls, and heavily upon the face and figure in the bath. The room was still hot, and the marble of the bath still warm; but the face and figure were clammy to the touch. The white marble at the bottom of the bath was veined with a dreadful red. On the ledge at the side, were an empty laudanum- bottle and a tortoise-shell handled penknife - soiled, but not with ink.

'Separation of jugular vein - death rapid - been dead at least half an hour.' This echo of the physician's words ran through the passages and little rooms, and through the house while he was yet straightening himself from having bent down to reach to the bottom of the bath, and while he was yet dabbling his hands in water; redly veining it as the marble was veined, before it mingled into one tint.

He turned his eyes to the dress upon the sofa, and to the watch, money, and pocket-book on the table. A folded note half buckled up in the pocket-book, and half protruding from it, caught his observant glance. He looked at it, touched it, pulled it a little further out from among the leaves, said quietly, 'This is addressed to me,' and opened and read it.

There were no directions for him to give. The people of the house knew what to do; the proper authorities were soon brought; and they took an equable business-like possession of the deceased, and of what had been his property, with no greater disturbance of manner or countenance than usually attends the winding-up of a clock. Physician was glad to walk out into the night air - was even glad, in spite of his great experience, to sit down upon a door-step for a little while: feeling sick and faint.

Bar was a near neighbour of his, and, when he came to the house, he saw a light in the room where he knew his friend often sat late getting up his work. As the light was never there when Bar was not, it gave him assurance that Bar was not yet in bed. In fact, this busy bee had a verdict to get to-morrow, against evidence, and was improving the shining hours in setting snares for the gentlemen of the jury.

Physician's knock astonished Bar; but, as he immediately suspected that somebody had come to tell him that somebody else was robbing him, or otherwise trying to get the better of him, he came down promptly and softly. He had been clearing his head with a lotion of cold water, as a good preparative to providing hot water for the heads of the jury, and had been reading with the neck of his shirt thrown wide open that he might the more freely choke the opposite witnesses. In consequence, he came down, looking rather wild. Seeing Physician, the least expected of men, he looked wilder and said, 'What's the matter?'

'You asked me once what Merdle's complaint was.'

'Extraordinary answer! I know I did.'

'I told you I had not found out.'

'Yes. I know you did.'

'I have found it out.'

'My God!' said Bar, starting back, and clapping his hand upon the other's breast. 'And so have I! I see it in your face.'

They went into the nearest room, where Physician gave him the letter to read. He read it through half-a-dozen times. There was not much in it as to quantity; but it made a great demand on his close and continuous attention. He could not sufficiently give utterance to his regret that he had not himself found a clue to this. The smallest clue, he said, would have made him master of the case, and what a case it would have been to have got to the bottom of!

Physician had engaged to break the intelligence in Harley Street. Bar could not at once return to his inveiglements of the most enlightened and remarkable jury he had ever seen in that box, with whom, he could tell his learned friend, no shallow sophistry would go down, and no unhappily abused professional tact and skill prevail (this was the way he meant to begin with them); so he said he would go too, and would loiter to and fro near the house while his friend was inside. They walked there, the better to recover self-possession in the air; and the wings of day were fluttering the night when Physician knocked at the door.

A footman of rainbow hues, in the public eye, was sitting up for his master - that is to say, was fast asleep in the kitchen over a couple of candles and a newspaper, demonstrating the great accumulation of mathematical odds against the probabilities of a house being set on fire by accident. When this serving man was roused, Physician had still to await the rousing of the Chief Butler. At last that noble creature came into the dining-room in a flannel gown and list shoes; but with his cravat on, and a Chief Butler all over. It was morning now. Physician had opened the shutters of one window while waiting, that he might see the light. 'Mrs Merdle's maid must be called, and told to get Mrs Merdle up, and prepare her as gently as she can to see me. I have dreadful news to break to her.'

Thus Physician told the Chief Butler. The latter, who had a candle in his hand, called his man to take it away. Then he approached the window with dignity; looking on at Physician's news exactly as he had looked on at the dinners in that very room.

'Mr Merdle is dead.'

'I should wish,' said the Chief Butler, 'to give a month's notice.'

'Mr Merdle has destroyed himself.'

'Sir,' said the Chief Butler, 'that is very unpleasant to the feelings of one in my position, as calculated to awaken prejudice; and I should wish to leave immediately.'

'If you are not shocked, are you not surprised, man?' demanded the Physician, warmly.

The Chief Butler, erect and calm, replied in these memorable words.

'Sir, Mr Merdle never was the gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on Mr Merdle's part would surprise me. Is there anybody else I can send to you, or any other directions I can give before I leave, respecting what you would wish to be done?'

When Physician, after discharging himself of his trust up-stairs, rejoined Bar in the street, he said no more of his interview with Mrs Merdle than that he had not yet told her all, but that what he had told her she had borne pretty well. Bar had devoted his leisure in the street to the construction of a most ingenious man-trap for catching the whole of his jury at a blow; having got that matter settled in his mind, it was lucid on the late catastrophe, and they walked home slowly, discussing it in every bearing. Before parting at the Physician's door, they both looked up at the sunny morning sky, into which the smoke of a few early fires and the breath and voices of a few early stirrers were peacefully rising, and then looked round upon the immense city, and said, if all those hundreds and thousands of beggared people who were yet asleep could only know, as they two spoke, the ruin that impended over them, what a fearful cry against one miserable soul would go up to Heaven!

The report that the great man was dead, got about with astonishing rapidity. At first, he was dead of all the diseases that ever were known, and of several bran-new maladies invented with the speed of Light to meet the demand of the occasion. He had concealed a dropsy from infancy, he had inherited a large estate of water on the chest from his grandfather, he had had an operation performed upon him every morning of his life for eighteen years, he had been subject to the explosion of important veins in his body after the manner of fireworks, he had had something the matter with his lungs, he had had something the matter with his heart, he had had something the matter with his brain. Five hundred people who sat down to breakfast entirely uninformed on the whole subject, believed before they had done breakfast, that they privately and personally knew Physician to have said to Mr Merdle, 'You must expect to go out, some day, like the snuff of a candle;' and that they knew Mr Merdle to have said to Physician, 'A man can die but once.' By about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, something the matter with the brain, became the favourite theory against the field; and by twelve the something had been distinctly ascertained to be 'Pressure.'

Pressure was so entirely satisfactory to the public mind, and seemed to make everybody so comfortable, that it might have lasted all day

but for Bar's having taken the real state of the case into Court at half-past nine. This led to its beginning to be currently whispered all over London by about one, that Mr Merdle had killed himself. Pressure, however, so far from being overthrown by the discovery, became a greater favourite than ever. There was a general moralising upon Pressure, in every street. All the people who had tried to make money and had not been able to do it, said, There you were! You no sooner began to devote yourself to the pursuit of wealth than you got Pressure. The idle people improved the occasion in a similar manner. See, said they, what you brought yourself to by work, work, work! You persisted in working, you overdid it. Pressure came on, and you were done for! This consideration was very potent in many quarters, but nowhere more so than among the young clerks and partners who had never been in the slightest danger of overdoing it. These, one and all, declared, quite piously, that they hoped they would never forget the warning as long as they lived, and that their conduct might be so regulated as to keep off Pressure, and preserve them, a comfort to their friends, for many years.

But, at about the time of High 'Change, Pressure began to wane, and appalling whispers to circulate, east, west, north, and south. At first they were faint, and went no further than a doubt whether Mr Merdle's wealth would be found to be as vast as had been supposed; whether there might not be a temporary difficulty in 'realising' it; whether there might not even be a temporary suspension (say a month or so), on the part of the wonderful Bank. As the whispers became louder, which they did from that time every minute, they became more threatening. He had sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that any one could account for; he had been, after all, a low, ignorant fellow; he had been a down-looking man, and no one had ever been able to catch his eye; he had been taken up by all sorts of people in quite an unaccountable manner; he had never had any money of his own, his ventures had been utterly reckless, and his expenditure had been most enormous. In steady progression, as the day declined, the talk rose in sound and purpose. He had left a letter at the Baths addressed to his physician, and his physician had got the letter, and the letter would be produced at the Inquest on the morrow, and it would fall like a thunderbolt upon the multitude he had deluded. Numbers of men in every profession and trade would be blighted by his insolvency; old people who had been in easy circumstances all their lives would have no place of repentance for their trust in him but the workhouse; legions of women and children would have their whole future desolated by the hand of this mighty scoundrel. Every partaker of his magnificent feasts would be seen to have been a sharer in the plunder of innumerable homes; every servile worshipper of riches who had helped to set him on his pedestal, would have done better to worship the Devil point-blank. So, the talk, lashed louder and higher by confirmation on confirmation, and by edition

after edition of the evening papers, swelled into such a roar when night came, as might have brought one to believe that a solitary watcher on the gallery above the Dome of St Paul's would have perceived the night air to be laden with a heavy muttering of the name of Merdle, coupled with every form of execration.

For by that time it was known that the late Mr Merdle's complaint had been simply Forgery and Robbery. He, the uncouth object of such wide-spread adulation, the sinner at great men's feasts, the roc's egg of great ladies' assemblies, the subduer of exclusiveness, the leveller of pride, the patron of patrons, the bargain-driver with a Minister for Lordships of the Circumlocution Office, the recipient of more acknowledgment within some ten or fifteen years, at most, than had been bestowed in England upon all peaceful public benefactors, and upon all the leaders of all the Arts and Sciences, with all their works to testify for them, during two centuries at least - he, the shining wonder, the new constellation to be followed by the wise men bringing gifts, until it stopped over a certain carrion at the bottom of a bath and disappeared - was simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows.