

Chapter 22

The Phrenologist

The following morning--Saturday--the men went about their work in gloomy silence; there were but few attempts at conversation and no jests or singing. The tenor of the impending slaughter pervaded the house. Even those who were confident of being spared and kept on till the job was finished shared the general depression, not only out of sympathy for the doomed, but because they knew that a similar fate awaited themselves a little later on.

They all waited anxiously for Nimrod to come, but hour after hour dragged slowly by and he did not arrive. At half past eleven some of those who had made up their minds that they were to be 'stood still' began to hope that the slaughter was to be deferred for a few days: after all, there was plenty of work still to be done: even if all hands were kept on, the job could scarcely be finished in another week. Anyhow, it would not be very long now before they would know one way or the other. If he did not come before twelve, it was all right: all the hands were paid by the hour and were therefore entitled to an hour's notice.

Easton and Harlow were working together on the staircase, finishing the doors and other woodwork with white enamel. The men had not been allowed to spend the time necessary to prepare this work in a proper

manner, it had not been rubbed down smooth or properly filled up, and it had not had a sufficient number of coats of paint to make it solid white. Now that the glossy enamel was put on, the work looked rather rough and shady.

'It ain't 'arf all right, ain't it?' remarked Harlow, sarcastically, indicating the door he had just finished.

Easton laughed: 'I can't understand how people pass such work,' he said.

'Old Sweater did make some remark about it the other day,' replied Harlow, 'and I heard Misery tell 'im it was impossible to make a perfect job of such old doors.'

'I believe that man's the biggest liar Gord ever made,' said Easton, an opinion in which Harlow entirely concurred.

'I wonder what the time is?' said the latter after a pause.

'I don't know exactly,' replied Easton, 'but it can't be far off twelve.'

'E don't seem to be comin', does 'e?' Harlow continued.

'No: and I shouldn't be surprised if 'e didn't turn up at all, now. P'raps 'e don't mean to stop nobody today after all.'

They spoke in hushed tones and glanced cautiously about them fearful of being heard or observed.

'This is a bloody life, ain't it?' Harlow said, bitterly. 'Workin' our guts out like a lot of slaves for the benefit of other people, and then as soon as they've done with you, you're chucked aside like a dirty rag.'

'Yes: and I begin to think that a great deal of what Owen says is true. But for my part I can't see 'Ow it's ever goin' to be altered, can you?'

Blowed if I know, mate. But whether it can be altered or not, there's one thing very certain; it won't be done in our time.'

Neither of them seemed to think that if the 'alteration' they spoke of were to be accomplished at all they themselves would have to help to bring it about.

'I wonder what they're doin' about the venetian blinds?' said Easton. 'Is there anyone doin' em yet?'

'I don't know; ain't 'eard nothing about 'em since the boy took 'em to the shop.'

There was quite a mystery about these blinds. About a month ago they were taken to the paint-shop down at the yard to be repainted and re-harnessed, and since then nothing had been heard of them by the men

working at the 'Cave'.

'P'hap's a couple of us will be sent there to do 'em next week,'
remarked Harlow.

'P'hap's so. Most likely they'll 'ave to be done in a bloody 'urry at
the last minute.'

Presently Harlow--who was very anxious to know what time it was--went
downstairs to ask Slyme. It was twenty minutes to twelve.

From the window of the room where Slyme was papering, one could see
into the front garden. Harlow paused a moment to watch Bundy and the
labourers, who were still working in the trenches at the drains, and as
he looked out he saw Hunter approaching the house. Harlow drew back
hastily and returned to his work, and as he went he passed the word to
the other men, warning them of the approach of Misery.

Hunter entered in his usual manner and, after crawling quietly about
the house for about ten minutes, he went into the drawing room.

'I see you're putting the finishing touches on at last,' he said.

'Yes,' replied Owen. 'I've only got this bit of outlining to do now.'

'Ah, well, it looks very nice, of course,' said Misery in a voice of
mourning, 'but we've lost money over it. It's taken you a week longer

to do than we allowed for; you said three weeks and it's taken you a month; and we only allowed for fifteen books of gold, but you've been and used twenty-three.'

'You can hardly blame me for that, you know,' answered Owen. 'I could have got it done in the three weeks, but Mr Rushton told me not to hurry for the sake of a day or two, because he wanted a good job. He said he would rather lose a little over it than spoil it; and as for the extra gold, that was also his order.'

'Well, I suppose it can't be helped,' whined Misery. 'Anyhow, I'm very glad it's done, because this kind of work don't pay. We'll 'ave you back on the brush on Monday morning; we want to get outside done next week if it keeps fine.'

The 'brush' alluded to by Nimrod was the large 'pound' brush used in ordinary painting.

Misery now began wandering about the house, in and out of the rooms, sometimes standing for several minutes silently watching the hands as they worked. As he watched them the men became nervous and awkward, each one dreading that he might be one of those who were to be paid off at one o'clock.

At about five minutes to twelve Hunter went down to the paint-shop--the scullery--where Crass was mixing some colour, and getting ready some 'empties' to be taken to the yard.

'I suppose the b--r's gone to ask Crass which of us is the least use,' whispered Harlow to Easton.

'I wouldn't be surprised if it was you and me, for two,' replied the latter in the same tone. 'You can't trust Crass you know, for all 'e seems so friendly to our faces. You never know what 'e ses behind our backs.'

'You may be sure it won't be Sawkins or any of the other light-weights, because Nimrod won't want to pay us sixpence ha'penny for painting guttering and rainpipes when THEY can do it near enough for fourpence ha'penny and fivepence. They won't be able to do the sashes, though, will they?'

'I don't know so much about that,' replied Easton. 'Anything seems to be good enough for Hunter.'

'Look out! Ere 'e comes!' said Harlow, and they both relapsed into silence and busied themselves with their work. Misery stood watching them for some time without speaking, and then went out of the house. They crept cautiously to the window of a room that overlooked the garden and, peeping furtively out, they saw him standing on the brink of one of the trenches, moodily watching Bundy and his mates as they toiled at the drains. Then, to their surprise and relief, he turned and went out of the gate! They just caught sight of one of the wheels of his bicycle as he rode away.

The slaughter was evidently to be put off until next week! It seemed too good to be true.

'P'hap's 'e's left a message for some of us with Crass?' suggested Easton. 'I don't think it's likely, but it's just possible.'

'Well, I'm goin' down to ask 'im,' said Harlow, desperately. 'We may as well know the worst at once.'

He returned in a few minutes with the information that Hunter had decided not to stop anyone that day because he wanted to get the outside finished during the next week, if possible.

The hands received this intelligence with mixed feelings, because although it left them safe for the present, it meant that nearly everybody would certainly be stopped next Saturday, if not before; whereas if a few had been sacked today it would have made it all the better for the rest. Still, this aspect of the business did not greatly interfere with the relief that they all felt at knowing that the immediate danger was over; and the fact that it was Saturday--pay-day--also served to revive their drooping spirits. They all felt pretty certain that Misery would return no more that day, and presently Harlow began to sing the old favourite. 'Work! for the night is coming!' the refrain of which was soon taken up by nearly everyone in the house:

'Work! for the night is coming,
Work in the morning hours.
Work! for the night is coming,
Work 'mid springing flowers.

'Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work in the noonday sun!
Work! for the night is coming
When man's work is done!'

When this hymn was finished, someone else, imitating the whine of a street-singer, started, 'Oh, where is my wandering boy tonight?' and then Harlow--who by some strange chance had a penny--took it out of his pocket and dropped it on the floor, the ringing of the coin being greeted with shouts of 'Thank you, kind lady,' from several of the singers. This little action of Harlow's was the means of bringing a most extraordinary circumstance to light. Although it was Saturday morning, several of the others had pennies or half-pence! and at the conclusion of each verse they all followed Harlow's example and the house resounded with the ringing of falling coins, cries of 'Thank you, kind lady,' 'Thank you, sir,' and 'Gord bless you,' mingled with shouts of laughter.

'My wandering boy' was followed by a choice selection of choruses of well-known music-hall songs, including 'Goodbye, my Bluebell', 'The Honeysuckle and the Bee', 'I've got 'em!' and 'The Church Parade', the whole being tastefully varied and interspersed with howls, shrieks,

curses, catcalls, and downward explosions of flatulence.

In the midst of the uproar Crass came upstairs.

'Ere!' he shouted. 'For Christ's sake make less row! Suppose Nimrod was to come back!'

'Oh, he ain't comin' any more today,' said Harlow, recklessly.

'Besides, what if 'e does come?' cried Easton. 'Oo cares for 'im?'

'Well, we never know; and for that matter Rushton or Sweater might come at any minit.'

With this, Crass went muttering back to the scullery, and the men relapsed into their usual silence.

At ten minutes to one they all ceased work, put away their colours and locked up the house. There were a number of 'empties' to be taken away and left at the yard on their way to the office; these Crass divided amongst the others--carrying nothing himself--and then they all set out for the office to get their money, cracking jokes as they went along. Harlow and Easton enlivened the journey by coughing significantly whenever they met a young woman, and audibly making some complimentary remark about her personal appearance. If the girl smiled, each of them eagerly claimed to have 'seen her first', but if she appeared offended or 'stuck up', they suggested that she was cross-cut or that she had

been eating vinegar with a fork. Now and then they kissed their hands affectionately to servant-girls whom they saw looking out of windows. Some of these girls laughed, others looked indignant, but whichever way they took it was equally amusing to Crass and the rest, who were like a crowd of boys just let out of school.

It will be remembered that there was a back door to Rushton's office; in this door was a small sliding panel or trap-door with a little shelf at the bottom. The men stood in the road on the pavement outside the closed door, their money being passed out to them through the sliding panel. As there was no shelter, when it rained they occasionally got wet through while waiting to be paid. With some firms it is customary to call out the names of the men and pay them in order of seniority or ability, but there was no such system here; the man who got to the aperture first was paid first, and so on. The result was that there was always a sort of miniature 'Battle of Life', the men pushing and struggling against each other as if their lives depended upon their being paid by a certain time.

On the ledge of the little window through which their money was passed there was always a Hospital collection-box. Every man put either a penny or twopence into this box. Of course, it was not compulsory to do so, but they all did, because they felt that any man who omitted to contribute might be 'marked'. They did not all agree with contributing to the Hospital, for several reasons. They knew that the doctors at the Hospital made a practice of using the free patients to make experiments upon, and they also knew that the so-called 'free' patients

who contribute so very largely directly to the maintenance of such institutions, get scant consideration when they apply for the 'free' treatment, and are plainly given to understand that they are receiving 'charity'. Some of the men thought that, considering the extent to which they contributed, they should be entitled to attention as a right.

After receiving their wages, Crass, Easton, Bundy, Philpot, Harlow and a few others adjourned to the Cricketers for a drink. Owen went away alone, and Slyme also went on by himself. There was no use waiting for Easton to come out of the public house, because there was no knowing how long he would be; he might stay half an hour or two hours.

On his way home, in accordance with his usual custom, Slyme called at the Post Office to put some of his wages in the bank. Like most other 'Christians', he believed in taking thought for the morrow, what he should eat and drink and wherewithal he was to be clothed. He thought it wise to lay up for himself as much treasure upon earth as possible. The fact that Jesus said that His disciples were not to do these things made no more difference to Slyme's conduct than it does to the conduct of any other 'Christian'. They are all agreed that when Jesus said this He meant something else: and all the other inconvenient things that Jesus said are disposed of in the same way. For instance, these 'disciples' assure us that when Jesus said, 'Resist not evil', 'If a man smite thee upon he right cheek turn unto him also the left', He really meant 'Turn on to him a Maxim gun; disembowel him with a bayonet or batter in his skull with the butt end of a rifle!' When He said, 'If one take thy coat, give him thy cloak also,' the 'Christians' say

that what He really meant was: 'If one take thy coat, give him six months' hard labour. A few of the followers of Jesus admit that He really did mean just what He said, but they say that the world would never be able to go on if they followed out His teachings! That is true. It is probably the effect that Jesus intended His teachings to produce. It is altogether improbable that He wished the world to continue along its present lines. But, if these pretended followers really think--as they say that they do--that the teachings of Jesus are ridiculous and impracticable, why continue the hypocritical farce of calling themselves 'Christians' when they don't really believe in or follow Him at all?

As Jesus himself pointed out, there's no sense in calling Him 'Lord, Lord' when they do not the things that He said.

This banking transaction finished, Slyme resumed his homeward way, stopping only to purchase some sweets at a confectioner's. He spent a whole sixpence at once in this shop on a glass jar of sweets for the baby.

Ruth was not surprised when she saw him come in alone; it was the usual thing since Easton had become so friendly with Crass.

She made no reference to his absence, but Slyme noticed with secret chagrin that she was annoyed and disappointed. She was just finishing scrubbing the kitchen floor and little Freddie was sitting up in a baby's high chair that had a little shelf or table fixed in front of

it. To keep him amused while she did her work, Ruth had given him a piece of bread and raspberry jam, which the child had rubbed all over his face and into his scalp, evidently being under the impression that it was something for the improvement of the complexion, or a cure for baldness. He now looked as if he had been in a fight or a railway accident. The child hailed the arrival of Slyme with enthusiasm, being so overcome with emotion that he began to shed tears, and was only pacified when the man gave him the jar of sweets and took him out of the chair.

Slyme's presence in the house had not proved so irksome as Easton and Ruth had dreaded it would be. Indeed, at first, he made a point of retiring to his own room after tea every evening, until they invited him to stay downstairs in the kitchen. Nearly every Wednesday and Saturday he went to a meeting, or an open-air preaching, when the weather permitted, for he was one of a little zealous band of people connected with the Shining Light Chapel who carried on the 'open-air' work all the year round. After a while, the Eastons not only became reconciled to his presence in the house, but were even glad of it. Ruth especially would often have been very lonely if he had not been there, for it had lately become Easton's custom to spend a few evenings every week with Crass at the Cricketers.

When at home Slyme passed his time playing a mandolin or making fretwork photo frames. Ruth had the baby's photograph taken a few weeks after Slyme came, and the frame he made for it was now one of the ornaments of the sitting-room. The instinctive, unreasoning aversion

she had at first felt for him had passed away. In a quiet, unobtrusive manner he did her so many little services that she found it impossible to dislike him. At first, she used to address him as 'Mr' but after a time she fell naturally into Easton's practice of calling him by his first name.

As for the baby, he made no secret of his affection for the lodger, who nursed and played with him for hours at a stretch.

'I'll serve your dinner now, Alf,' said Ruth when she had finished scrubbing the floor, 'but I'll wait for mine for a little while. Will may come.'

'I'm in no hurry,' replied Slyme. 'I'll go and have a wash; he may be here then.'

As he spoke, Slyme--who had been sitting by the fire nursing the baby--who was trying to swallow the jar of sweets--put the child back into the high chair, giving him one of the sticks of sweet out of the jar to keep him quiet; and went upstairs to his own room. He came down again in about a quarter of an hour, and Ruth proceeded to serve his dinner, for Easton was still absent.

'If I was you, I wouldn't wait for Will,' said Slyme, 'he may not come for another hour or two. It's after two o'clock now, and I'm sure you must be hungry.'

'I suppose I may as well,' replied Ruth, hesitatingly. 'He'll most likely get some bread and cheese at the "Cricketers", same as he did last Saturday.'

'Almost sure to,' responded Slyme.

The baby had had his face washed while Slyme was upstairs. Directly he saw his mother eating he threw away the sugar-stick and began to cry, holding out his arms to her. She had to take him on her lap whilst she ate her dinner, and feed him with pieces from her plate.

Slyme talked all the time, principally about the child. He was very fond of children, he said, and always got on well with them, but he had really never known such an intelligent child--for his age--as Freddie. His fellow-workmen would have been astonished had they been present to hear him talking about the shape of the baby's head. They would have been astonished at the amount of knowledge he appeared to possess of the science of Phrenology. Ruth, at any rate, thought he was very clever.

After a time the child began to grow fretful and refused to eat; when his mother gave him a fresh piece of sugar-stick out of the jar he threw it peevishly on the floor and began to whimper, rubbing his face against his mother's bosom and pulling at her dress with his hands. When Slyme first came Ruth had made a practice of withdrawing from the room if he happened to be present when she wanted to nurse the child, but lately she had been less sensitive. She was sitting with her back

to the window and she partly covered the baby's face with a light shawl that she wore. By the time they finished dinner the child had dozed off to sleep. Slyme got up from his chair and stood with his back to the fire, looking down at them; presently he spoke, referring, of course, to the baby:

'He's very like you, isn't he?'

'Yes,' replied Ruth. 'Everyone says he takes after me.'

Slyme moved a little closer, bending down to look at the slumbering infant.

'You know, at first I thought he was a girl,' he continued after a pause. 'He seems almost too pretty for a boy, doesn't he?'

Ruth smiled. 'People always take him for a girl at first,' she said.

'Yesterday I took him with me to the Monopole Stores to buy some things, and the manager would hardly believe it wasn't a girl.'

The man reached out his hand and stroked the baby's face.

Although Slyme's behaviour had hitherto always been very correct, yet there was occasionally an indefinable something in his manner when they were alone that made Ruth feel conscious and embarrassed. Now, as she glanced up at him and saw the expression on his face she crimsoned with confusion and hastily lowered her eyes without replying to his last

remark. He did not speak again either, and they remained for several minutes in silence, as if spellbound, Ruth oppressed with instinctive dread, and Slyme scarcely less agitated, his face flushed and his heart beating wildly. He trembled as he stood over her, hesitating and afraid.

And then the silence was suddenly broken by the creaking and clanging of the front gate, heralding the tardy coming of Easton. Slyme went out into the scullery and, taking down the blacking brushes from the shelf, began cleaning his boots.

It was plain from Easton's appearance and manner that he had been drinking, but Ruth did not reproach him in any way; on the contrary, she seemed almost feverishly anxious to attend to his comfort.

When Slyme finished cleaning his boots he went upstairs to his room, receiving a careless greeting from Easton as he passed through the kitchen. He felt nervous and apprehensive that Ruth might say something to Easton, and was not quite able to reassure himself with the reflection that, after all, there was nothing to tell. As for Ruth, she had to postpone the execution of her hastily formed resolution to tell her husband of Slyme's strange behaviour, for Easton fell asleep in his chair before he had finished his dinner, and she had some difficulty in waking him sufficiently to persuade him to go upstairs to bed, where he remained until tea-time. Probably he would not have come down even then if it had not been for the fact that he had made an appointment to meet Crass at the Cricketers.

Whilst Easton was asleep, Slyme had been downstairs in the kitchen, making a fretwork frame. He played with Freddie while Ruth prepared the tea, and he appeared to her to be so unconscious of having done anything unusual that she began to think that she must have been mistaken in imagining that he had intended anything wrong.

After tea, Slyme put on his best clothes to go to his usual 'open-air' meeting. As a rule Easton and Ruth went out marketing together every Saturday night, but this evening he could not wait for her because he had promised to meet Crass at seven o'clock; so he arranged to see her down town at eight.