

Chapter 38

The Brigands' Cave

One evening in the drawing-room at 'The Cave' there was a meeting of a number of the 'Shining Lights' to arrange the details of a Rummage Sale, that was to be held in aid of the unemployed. It was an informal affair, and while they were waiting for the other luminaries, the early arrivals, Messrs Rushton, Didlum and Grinder, Mr Oyley Sweater, the Borough Surveyor, Mr Wireman, the electrical engineer who had been engaged as an 'expert' to examine and report on the Electric Light Works, and two or three other gentlemen--all members of the Band--took advantage of the opportunity to discuss a number of things they were mutually interested in, which were to be dealt with at the meeting of the Town Council the next day. First, there was the affair of the untenanted Kiosk on the Grand Parade. This building belonged to the Corporation, and 'The Cosy Corner Refreshment Coy.' of which Mr Grinder was the managing director, was thinking of hiring it to open as a high-class refreshment lounge, provided the Corporation would make certain alterations and let the place at a reasonable rent. Another item which was to be discussed at the Council meeting was Mr Sweater's generous offer to the Corporation respecting the new drain connecting 'The Cave' with the Town Main.

The report of Mr Wireman, the electrical expert, was also to be dealt with, and afterwards a resolution in favour of the purchase of the

Mugsborough Electric light and Installation Co. Ltd by the town, was to be proposed.

In addition to these matters, several other items, including a proposal by Mr Didlum for an important reform in the matter of conducting the meetings of the Council, formed subjects for animated conversation between the brigands and their host.

During this discussion other luminaries arrived, including several ladies and the Rev. Mr Boshier, of the Church of the Whited Sepulchre.

The drawing-room of 'The Cave' was now elaborately furnished. A large mirror in a richly gilt frame reached from the carved marble mantelpiece to the cornice. A magnificent clock in an alabaster case stood in the centre of the mantelpiece and was flanked by two exquisitely painted and gilded vases of Dresden ware. The windows were draped with costly hangings, the floor was covered with a luxurious carpet and expensive rugs. Sumptuously upholstered couches and easy chairs added to the comfort of the apartment, which was warmed by the immense fire of coal and oak logs that blazed and crackled in the grate.

The conversation now became general and at times highly philosophical in character, although Mr Boshier did not take much part, being too busily engaged gobbling up the biscuits and tea, and only occasionally spluttering out a reply when a remark or question was directly addressed to him.

This was Mr Grinder's first visit at the house, and he expressed his admiration of the manner in which the ceiling and the walls were decorated, remarking that he had always liked this 'ere Japanese style.

Mr Boshier, with his mouth full of biscuit, mumbled that it was sweetly pretty--charming--beautifully done--must have cost a lot of money.

'Hardly wot you'd call Japanese, though, is it?' observed Didlum, looking round with the air of a connoisseur. 'I should be inclined to say it was rather more of the--er--Chinese or Egyptian.'

'Moorish,' explained Mr Sweater with a smile. 'I got the idear at the Paris Exhibition. It's simler to the decorations in the "Halambara", the palace of the Sultan of Morocco. That clock there is in the same style.'

The case of the clock referred to--which stood on a table in a corner of the room--was of fretwork, in the form of an Indian Mosque, with a pointed dome and pinnacles. This was the case that Mary Linden had sold to Didlum; the latter had had it stained a dark colour and polished and further improved it by substituting a clock of more suitable design than the one it originally held. Mr Sweater had noticed it in Didlum's window and, seeing that the design was similar in character to the painted decorations on the ceiling and walls of his drawing-room, had purchased it.

'I went to the Paris Exhibition meself,' said Grinder, when everyone

had admired the exquisite workmanship of the clock-case. 'I remember 'avin' a look at the moon through that big telescope. I was never so surprised in me life: you can see it quite plain, and it's round!'

'Round?' said Didlum with a puzzled look. 'Round? Of course it's round! You didn't used to think it was square, did yer?'

'No, of course not, but I always used to think it was flat--like a plate, but it's round like a football.'

'Certainly: the moon is a very simler body to the earth,' explained Didlum, describing an aerial circle with a wave of his hand. They moves through the air together, but the earth is always nearest to the sun and consequently once a fortnight the shadder of the earth falls on the moon and darkens it so that it's invisible to the naked eye. The new moon is caused by the moon movin' a little bit out of the earth's shadder, and it keeps on comin' more and more until we gets the full moon; and then it goes back again into the shadder; and so it keeps on.'

For about a minute everyone looked very solemn, and the profound silence was disturbed only the the crunching of the biscuits between the jaws of Mr Boshier, and by certain gurglings in the interior of that gentleman.

'Science is a wonderful thing,' said Mr Sweater at length, wagging his head gravely, 'wonderful!'

'Yes: but a lot of it is mere theory, you know,' observed Rushton.

'Take this idear that the world is round, for instance; I fail to see it! And then they say as Hawstralia is on the other side of the globe, underneath our feet. In my opinion it's ridiculous, because if it was true, wot's to prevent the people droppin' orf?'

'Yes: well, of course it's very strange,' admitted Sweater. 'I've often thought of that myself. If it was true, we ought to be able to walk on the ceiling of this room, for instance; but of course we know that's impossible, and I really don't see that the other is any more reasonable.'

'I've often noticed flies walkin' on the ceilin',' remarked Didlum, who felt called upon to defend the globular theory.

'Yes; but they're different,' replied Rushton. 'Flies is provided by nature with a gluey substance which oozes out of their feet for the purpose of enabling them to walk upside down.'

'There's one thing that seems to me to finish that idear once for all,' said Grinder, 'and that is--water always finds its own level. You can't get away from that; and if the world was round, as they want us to believe, all the water would run off except just a little at the top. To my mind, that settles the whole argymint.'

'Another thing that gets over me,' continued Rushton, 'is this: according to science, the earth turns round on its axle at the rate of

twenty miles a minute. Well, what about when a lark goes up in the sky and stays there about a quarter of an hour? Why, if it was true that the earth was turnin' round at that rate all the time, when the bird came down it would find itself 'undreds of miles away from the place where it went up from! But that doesn't 'appen at all; the bird always comes down in the same spot.'

'Yes, and the same thing applies to balloons and flyin' machines,' said Grinder. 'If it was true that the world is spinnin' round on its axle so quick as that, if a man started out from Calais to fly to Dover, by the time he got to England he'd find 'imself in North America, or p'r'aps farther off still.'

'And if it was true that the world goes round the sun at the rate they makes out, when a balloon went up, the earth would run away from it! They'd never be able to get back again!' remarked Rushton.

This was so obvious that nearly everyone said there was probably something in it, and Didlum could think of no reply. Mr Boshier upon being appealed to for his opinion, explained that science was alright in its way, but unreliable: the things scientists said yesterday they contradicted today, and what they said today they would probably repudiate tomorrow. It was necessary to be very cautious before accepting any of their assertions.

'Talking about science,' said Grinder, as the holy man relapsed into silence and started on another biscuit and a fresh cup of tea. 'Talking

about science reminds me of a conversation I 'ad with Dr Weakling the other day. You know, he believes we're all descended from monkeys.'

Everyone laughed; the thing was so absurd: the idea of placing intellectual beings on a level with animals!

'But just wait till you hear how nicely I flattened 'im out,' continued Grinder. 'After we'd been arguin' a long time about wot 'e called everlution or some sich name, and a lot more tommy-rot that I couldn't make no 'ead or tail of--and to tell you the truth I don't believe 'e understood 'arf of it 'imself--I ses to 'im, "Well," I ses, "if it's true that we're hall descended from monkeys," I ses, "I think your famly must 'ave left orf where mine begun."'

In the midst of the laughter that greeted the conclusion of Grinder's story it was seen that Mr Boshier had become black in the face. He was waving his arms and writhing about like one in a fit, his goggle eyes bursting from their sockets, whilst his huge stomach quivering spasmodically, alternately contracted and expanded as if it were about to explode.

In the exuberance of his mirth, the unfortunate disciple had swallowed two biscuits at once. Everybody rushed to his assistance, Grinder and Didlum seized an arm and a shoulder each and forced his head down. Rushton punched him in the back and the ladies shrieked with alarm. They gave him a big drink of tea to help to get the biscuits down, and when he at last succeeded in swallowing them he sat in the armchair

with his eyes red-rimmed and full of tears, which ran down over his white, flabby face.

The arrival of the other members of the committee put an end to the interesting discussion, and they shortly afterwards proceeded with the business for which the meeting had been called--the arrangements for the forthcoming Rummage Sale.