



PHEBE AND THE PHRENOLOGIST.



HE shop windows in Birchville were gay with posters. They were not in the least like those which announced the coming of a circus, and the oldest inhabitant could not remember to have seen anything of their sort before.

At the top was the picture of a human head with a mild but animated countenance. Here, however, its resemblance to the ordinary head ceased; for the crown, instead of being adorned with anything suggesting hair, was platted off into small sections, labelled 'Veneration,' 'Approbation,' 'Ac-

quisitiveness,' and the like.

Below this enigmatical wood-cut was the announcement, in very black letters, that 'J. Manville Herring, the greatest living phrenologist, had arrived in Birchville, and was prepared to disclose to each citizen, by cranial examination, his or her exact character.' The importance of the examination was set forth more fully in smaller handbills, headed 'Know Thyself,' which were sprinkled plentifully about in door-ways.

'Great was the sensation that followed. 'The new society,' as the posters called it, was discussed by the letterers at the post office, and by the ladies at the sewing society.

But it was among the pupils at the Birchville Academy that it gained most credence. It seemed to their youthful minds quite within reason that science, which has discovered so much, should have devised this time-saving method of reading human character, once for all.

There was not one who took the matter quite so much to heart as Phebe Graham. Her own eager, faulty little self had always been a most interesting subject to Phebe, and she longed inexpressibly to know what the phrenologist would say about her.

Moreover, Phebe had ambitions. In her secret heart she cherished a dream of doing something else than housework when she was a woman; but it was a dream in which no one encouraged her.

It seemed to Phebe not impossible that this acute phrenologist, if he had the opportunity, might make some suggestions as to the true bent of her talents which would open her Aunt Eunice's eyes, and make that good woman a little less irritable if she found her niece scribbling away in the corner of the garret when she might have been darning stockings.

Phebe thought the matter over, as she took the long walk home from school one night, and arranged a little plea by which she hoped to win her aunt's consent.

After supper, as she stood at the sink wiping dishes, she remained, in a casual manner, 'Do you know, Aunt Eunice, there are ever so many people going to that phrenologist, and they say it's perfectly wonderful the way he tells them all about themselves!'

'H'm!' said Aunt Eunice. "'A fool and his money are soon parted.'"

Phebe flushed a little. 'I don't see what there is foolish about it,' she said. 'Everything he tells them is true. It seems as if he could look right into people's minds. It's just as if he had known them all their lives.'

'I don't believe a word on't,' said Aunt Eunice, scraping fiercely at the dish she was washing. 'It don't stand to reason that a perfect stranger can come up to you, and just by feeling round the top of your head tell all about you. The Lord didn't make folks to be found out that way.'

'Well, but, Aunt Eunice,' said Phebe, a little vexed, 'I should think people who have been to him ought to know, and they say he tells perfectly. Bert Fry had an examination, and his mother owned up that she couldn't have told as much about him as the phrenologist did.'

'H'm!' said Aunt Eunice, again. 'Well, I never did think Mrs Fry had much sense about that boy.'

After a moment she demanded sharply, 'And what good would it do if he could tell folks all about themselves? They ought to know their own faults already, and the less said to 'em about their good points the better. I tell you, Phebe, I haint a mite of patience with it.'

'But, Aunt Eunice,' protested Phebe, 'he tells people more than just their faults and virtues. He shows them what kind of work they are best fitted to do. There are thousands who fail in life just because they try to do things they were never designed for.'

Aunt Eunice did not answer, and Phebe went on.

'Mr Herring says that it is why there are so many unsuccessful people in every kind of business, and that what folks need more than anything else is to have somebody put them on the right track while they are young.'

Phebe had revolved this little speech on her way home, and felt that she had made a strong point; but Aunt Eunice shook her head inexorably.

'If folks do their duty according to the light they've got, and mind the leadings of Providence, the Lord'll give 'em the kind of work He wants to have 'em do. Of course if a body haint got any heart for a thing, he hadn't ought to go into it; but if he has, and takes right hold the best he knows, there ain't any need of his making a failure.'

She paused for a moment, and then gave the subject a practical turn for which her niece was quite unprepared. 'I'll tell you one thing, Phebe Graham, if you don't learn to put your mind on your work and stop dreaming over it, you'll never amount to anything. Here you've been wipin' on that nappy for the last five minutes and you haint got it smooth an' shiny neither. Put it back in the pan and give it another rinsin'.'

Phebe obeyed with a dejected expression. It was clear that with Aunt Eunice's consent she would never enjoy a phrenological examination. For a moment the good woman, who had stood to her in the relation of a mother ever since she could remember, seemed to her a sort of dragon, keeping her back from the tree of knowledge. She wiped the rest of the dishes in silence, and then stole out to the barn to confer with Ted.

Ted was her brother, a year or two older than herself, and though Phebe sometimes considered him the greatest trial of her life on account of his propensity to tease, she could not help appealing to him for sympathy at a time like this.

He was giving the cattle their last feed for the night, whistling cheerfully as he went from stall to stall.

Phebe watched him for a few minutes in melancholy silence. Then she burst out, 'O Ted, I do wish Aunt Eunice wasn't so set against my having a phrenological examination!'

'What do you want of one anyway?' asked Ted, bluntly. 'I wouldn't give the fellow a wisp of hay for all he could tell about me.'

'Why, Ted,' said Phebe, 'can't you see that it might be worth something to you if a person should point out your strong qualities, and show you what you could make of yourself if you tried?'

'I know what I mean to make of myself,' said Ted, sturdily, 'and I wouldn't thank any stranger for putting in his advice.'

Phebe made a gesture of despair. 'Well, Ted,' she said, rather bitterly, 'everybody doesn't feel as certain as you do, and some people—have aspirations.'

The last clause was unlucky. Ted's eyes gleamed with sudden mischief.

'Yes,' he admitted with a reflective nod, 'some people aspire to write poetry and keep their diaries in rhyme for weeks at a time. I tell you, Phebe, it's a clear case what a body's cut out for when they can make up such verses as—'

'Ted!' shrieked Phebe, putting both hands over her ears.

But Ted was not to be headed off. He went on without mercy:

"To-day, alas, that cruel Ted
Killed a poor blue Jay,
Dead, dead, dead."

Even with her ears closed Phebe knew perfectly what he was saying.

'Ted Graham, you're mean!' she cried, her eyes flashing. 'You know you stole my diary and read it when you had no right to. Besides, that was the worst rhyme in it. That's why you always torment me with it.'

She fled from the barn back to the house, resolving not to say another word on the subject to her unfeeling relatives.

But the next day put a different phase upon the matter. There was news at school that J. Manville Herring was to give a free lecture at the town hall the following evening. The citizens of Birchville, one and all, were invited to attend.

Phebe's hopes revived. Perhaps Aunt Eunice could be induced to go, and the strong arguments which the phrenologist would surely put forth in behalf of his science might have a convincing effect.

But Aunt Eunice could not be induced to go. She declined to be enlightened on a subject for which she declared that she cared no more than for the man in the moon. However, she consented that Phebe should hear the lecture, and, as Ted showed no very lively desire to accompany her, suggested that the girl should spend the night in town with her friend May Allen.

Phebe wore her best dress to school the next morning, and through the day could scarcely study for thinking of the great event of the evening.

Long before it was time for the lecture to begin, she and May, with Lu Brown, another special friend, were in the hall, seated well to the front, where they could be sure to see and hear everything.

The small room filled rapidly, and when, at eight o'clock, the lecturer stepped upon the platform, it was a good audience which gave him greeting.

He was well provided with charts and diagrams, and the manner in which he demonstrated his theory seemed to Phebe, at least, in the highest degree convincing.

After an hour of fluent discourse the lecturer paused and said:

'Now, my friends, to test the truth of what I have been saying and my own power as a teacher of this great science, I propose that some of you come forward and take a phrenological examination. I shall be most happy to give it to you free of charge.'

There was a minute of silence. Then a foolish titter ran around the room, but no one started.

'Don't be backward,' said the orator, encouragingly. 'I assure you it is not a painful ordeal.'

Still no one started. The phrenologist sent a keen glance around the room, and his eyes fell upon the three girls seated in the front row.

'My young friends,' he said, bending towards them with a persuasive smile, 'will you do me the favour to step forward to the platform? I am sure there can be no better subjects in this room than yourselves.'

The girls looked at each other with startled faces, and Phebe's grew for an instant decidedly pale.

The lecturer saw the hesitation, and went on more coaxingly than before:

'Of course, I should not have time to read your characters in detail, but I could outline, in a general way, your special gifts. You are young and hopeful. It might be of lasting service to you.'

Phebe's heart began to flutter. She had not a doubt that he was right in the last suggestion. Still, it was not she who made the first move forward. Lu Brown put up her hand and began to whisper.

'Come on, girls,' she said, her black eyes dancing. 'Let's all go up together. He won't dare to say anything bad about us, and 't would be lots of fun.'

Lu had always been a leader among her mates. She liked to do striking things. When she rose and gave a determined little pull at May's sleeve, May started, and Phebe gasping a little, followed.

'I thank you, young ladies,' said the phrenologist, impressively.

He set three chairs for them on the platform, and invited them to take off their hats quite as if he were receiving them into his parlour. The girls did as requested, and sat blushing like three peonies.

Phebe, for her part, felt very foolish. She had a distinct impression that it was not a nice thing to do, this going forward to be talked about in the presence of others, and she was glad Ted and Aunt Eunice were not there.

The examination began with Lu, and whether the phrenologist read it in the conformation of her brain, or drew his conclusions from the very poise of her head and the expression of her bright fun-loving eyes, he quickly credited her with the energetic and venturesome qualities which her school-mates knew so well.

Pretty, gentle May came next, and certainly he did not miss the mark when he spoke of her generous disposition and good-natured fondness for pleasing everybody. He even dwelt a little on her excellence as a scholar, which made Phebe open her eyes and wonder what he would say about her. She had always had to help May with her grammar lessons and with the greater part of her essays.

Poor Phebe! she was destined not to hear anything from the phrenologist on that point. Perhaps, having bestowed so much praise on the others, he felt that it would be well to make a little variation in her case.

Perhaps, as she afterwards reflected, her style of wearing her hair gave him a better chance to discover her cranial defects. It was not crimped or coiled like the others, but drawn straight back from her forehead, and cut off just below the tips of her ears, in the manner which Aunt Eunice considered most appropriate for a girl of fifteen.

The phrenologist felt her brown head solemnly. Then he cleared his voice and began in an impressive manner:

'Order is Heaven's first law, but it is evidently not the first law of the young person on whose head my hand is now resting.'

Phebe felt herself flush to the very roots of her hair. It was true enough that order was not one of her strong points. To have a place for everything and keep everything in its place, was, in her opinion, the hardest commandment which had ever been added to the decalogue, and was the one in which she most constantly failed.

After dwelling at some length on the importance of order, the phrenologist proceeded to point out a graver fault.

'It is a common error among young people,' he said, 'to be somewhat too fond of their own sweet will. In the case of our young friend, that fondness would seem to be peculiarly strong; and I should be unworthy of my profession, he continued, with a firm but fatherly accent, 'if I did not warn her against the danger of following too obstinately her own inclinations, instead of accepting the judgment of those who are older and wiser.'

The fire in Phebe's cheeks burned ten times hotter than before. It seemed to her that the worst must be said of her now, but the examiner had still another point to make.

'A strong will and an impetuous temper do not always go together,' he continued, 'but in this subject we find both combined, each in a marked degree. I do not find here the evidence of a disposition which cherishes resentment, but our young friend is liable to hot and hasty outbursts of temper, in the course of which she is likely to say things which she has cause to repent of at her leisure.'

Phebe writhed in her chair. She bit her lip and clenched her small hands desperately.

From the time of stepping on the platform she had not been able to lift her eyes. Something at this instant seemed compelling her to do so. She looked across the audience, and there, at the back of the hall, leaning easily against the door, stood Ted Graham!

She remembered now that she had heard the door open just as the phrenologist began to talk about her. No doubt her brother had entered then, and had heard every word.

Phebe started up, and walked straight down the aisle, with a profound silence. Her grey eyes looked almost black, and a little red spot burning brightly on each cheek.

'Ted,' she whispered, as she came up to him, 'let's go home!'

Ted nodded, and they passed out of the door together.

'What in the world did you come for?' she demanded, when it had closed behind them.

'To hear the nice things that were being said about you, of course!' gurgled Ted, who seemed to be undergoing some kind of inward convulsion. Then, straightening himself, he managed to say more soberly, 'Why, you see Aunt Persis and the children came over from Goodrich this afternoon, and we thought you'd better come home.'

'Well, I'm glad of it,' said Phebe. 'I wouldn't stay with May now for anything.'

When they were seated in the waggon she asked piteously, 'Ted, are you going to tell every word of this as soon as you get home?'

'Not if you don't want me to,' said Ted, generously. 'But I say, Phebe, what made you go up? I could have told you all that, and so could Aunt Eunice.'

Phebe groaned.

'Oh, it was dreadful to go up there! I know it; but I had no idea he'd go into things the way he did. What he said about the others was nice,' she added, bitterly.