

THE *Ragged
Trousered*

PHILANTHROPISTS



MORE THAN A CLASSIC
P.S.
INSIGHTS
FEATURES
AND MORE
INSIDE

'This book changed
my life' Ricky Tomlinson

ROBERT TRESSELL

Robert Tressell

**The Ragged Trousered
Philanthropists**

«HarperCollins»

Tressell R.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists / R. Tressell —
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Originally published in 1914, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is a timeless story of socialism, political awakenings and class struggle, told with a volatile mix of heartfelt rage and sly humour. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* tells the story of a group of working men who are joined one day by Owen, a journeyman-prophet with a vision of a just society. Owen's spirited attacks on the greed and dishonesty of the capitalist system rouse his fellow men from their political quietism. A masterpiece of wit and political passion, this is one of the most authentic novels of English working class life ever written. This enduring favourite is now reinvigorated by a smart new jacket and exclusive extra material as part of Harper Perennial's Modern Classics line of reissues. Now its timeless message of justice, equality and reason will be introduced to a whole new generation of discerning readers.

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Harper Perennial Modern Classics

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists
Robert Tressell

H A R P E R P E R E N N I A L

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Robert Tressell's original MS was 'edited' and 're-edited' at various times. This complete edition presents the work in almost its original form (it has been necessary to retain some editorial paraphrases where the original text is lost beyond trace: such paraphrases are enclosed within square brackets). Tressell's idiosyncratic grammar, spelling and punctuation (his way of conveying the spoken idiom of his characters), as well as his somewhat inconsistent use of capital letters, has been restored.

Introduction

This novel is about a group of painters and decorators, and their families, in Hastings (Mugsborough), around 1906. It describes the workman's life of that time, the subjection, deception, and destitution of the people whose labour helped to create the luxury and glitter of the Edwardian age. It is the age which those who didn't have to live in still like to refer to as the good old days of pomp and circumstance, the apex of England's greatness, the time before 1914 when everyone knew his place and because of it was supposed to be contented.

I read an abridged edition of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* when I was nineteen and with the Air Force in Malaya. It was given to me by a wireless operator from Glasgow, who said: 'You ought to read this. Among other things it is the book that won the '45 election for Labour.' It had been cut to half the length of the present full version, made to end on a note of despair suggesting that cranks who believed in Socialism could do nothing better than think of suicide. The present edition ends the way the author intended.

It isn't easy to say precisely the effect this book had on me when I first read it. It certainly had a great one, because it has haunted me ever since. Those whose life has touched the misery recounted by Robert Tressell can get out of it many things: a bolstering of class feeling; pure rage; reinforcement for their own self-pity; a call to action; maybe a good and beneficial dose of all these things.

Owen, the main character, tries with marvellous patience and tenacity to enlighten his workmates, to tell them how Socialism could level out riches and give them not only a little more to live on, but also real hope of alleviating their inequalities for good. They won't listen, so he calls them philanthropists, benefactors in ragged trousers who willingly hand over the results of their labour to the employers and the rich. They think it the natural order of things that the rich should exploit them, that 'gentlemen' are the only people with a right to govern. This theme is the soul of the novel, yet a mass of personal detail keeps it a novel and not a tract.

Robert Tressell (born Robert Noonan) was himself one of the workmen he describes, wrote his book in his spare time, and knew exactly what he was talking about. He died of tuberculosis in 1911, when he was forty, and his book was not published until 1914. It has gone through many varied editions since then, and has sold tens of thousands of copies all over the world. But this is the first time that the *full* edition has been published in paperback form.

Strange to say, one of my first thoughts after finishing the abridged edition was: 'This book hasn't been written by a working man' – thereby displaying those symptoms of faithlessness that so outraged Owen. Fifteen years later, reading *Tressell of Mugsborough*, by F.C. Ball, I found the following sentence from a letter written by a relation of Tressell's: 'I have told you quite truthfully that Robert was *not* born into the working class. He would have had a very much happier life, no doubt, had he been.'

It is useless to argue about what 'class' a man was born into, but it is interesting to know that Tressell was a person grafted on to working-class life through family misfortune. Little is known about his early years, but one account says that his father was an Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary.

Of great talent and outstanding passion, Tressell grieved for the people around him, for their poverty as well as his own. Add to that his Irish descent and a justifiable detestation of the English middle and upper classes; and also the fact that he was a sick man most of his life, and you have the author of what has become an English classic.

This was the first good novel of English working-class life. A generation before it, appeared those of Arthur Morrison, who wrote *A Child of the Jago*, and *Tales of Mean Streets*. Morrison's writing, however, was as slick as the Sunday newspapers, and his pompous and passionless style either lulls you to sleep or makes you distrust it. He wrote from too far above his characters: they lived in a zoo, and were to be regarded with fear, hostility, and derision. His working man was the stereotype

(add a dose of dirt for realism) that still plagues English fiction. Robert Tressell, on the other hand, put his ordinary people into correct perspective by relating them to society as a whole.

Many working people familiar with Tressell's book talk about its characters as if they knew them, recount incidents from it as if they had happened to themselves only the other day. It is hard to forget such people as Crass the chargehand, Misery the foreman, Rushton the firm's director, and Owen the firebrand socialist workman, as well as the women, who suffer the most. What makes Tressell's work unique are the author's sense of humour and sense of honour. You can laugh at the way tragic things are told, while being led through the fire, only to weep when cold blasts greet you at the other end. He is utterly unsentimental.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists has as its theme the class war. This perhaps reduces it to a great simplicity, yet this also is what elevates it to a tragedy. I have heard it said that working people are not worth writing about because they have few refinements of perception, that lack of intelligence denies them expression, and people who can't express themselves are not good material for the novelist. This may be so if the novelist has neither sympathy nor imagination. Self-expression denied to participants in Greek drama gave rise to tragedy of mythic dimensions.

On its simplest level, a failure to get bread means death, and this conflict goes back even beyond the emergence of tragedy and myth. The attempt to get more than bread – that is, the self-respect and dignity of spiritual bread – is a theme that can emulate myth while still containing the seeds of tragedy or failure. There is more tragic material in the failure to get bread than in the temporary lapse of morality that shapes the climaxes of most modern novels. There is a greater meaning in the attempt to get a more equitable share of bread than there is in the attempt to get more out of a kind of life already at the end of its spiritual tether.

I feel that those class-conscious middle-class critics who coined the phrase 'the working-class novelist' must wish now that they hadn't, since the issue of class has become more of a reality than the fiction they first thought it. It only becomes a reality when there are signs and possibilities of it breaking up. Robert Tressell's workmen either had no class feeling, or they regarded themselves as totally inferior. Because they saw no way of getting out of their predicament, they could only say 'It's not for the likes of us'. If they thought of improving their lives it was only in ways laid down by their 'betters'. Owen realized that this would solve nothing. The 'not for the likes of us' attitude (still widespread though not nearly so universal) engendered the poisonous inaction of self-pity, sloth, and stupidity. He saw that they must find the solution from their own hearts – which he feared would not happen until their own hearts had been taken from them. By then it would be too late, because in exchange for more bread they would have relinquished the right to demand anything else. They lived in a jungle. The middle-class wouldn't, and perhaps couldn't, help them. Only what the workers take is helpful. What they are given is useless.

In some ways Owen's workmates did want to get out of this jungle, but they needed help, more help than they were willing to accept. A tragedy cannot be written about creatures of the jungle, only about those who try to get out of it – or those who succumb to it knowing that it is possible to transform it. Therefore Owen is the most tragic figure in the book.

What relevance has this novel today? Not a difficult question, in that its relevance is simply that of a good book that ought to be read. It is easy to read, like all journeys through hell. It has its own excitement, harmony, pathos. It is spiked, witty, humorous, and instructive. Above all it is deeply bitter, because it is a real hell inhabited by real people, a hell made by one's fellow men because they were human also and didn't want to know any better.

The soul of Robert Tressell, in its complete rejection of middle-class values, seems forged in the formative years of the English working-class, during the Industrial Revolution of 1790–1832. Tressell no doubt inherited this feeling from his early days as a more independent workman in South Africa. The working people in his time did not have the same clarity, violent outlook, nor intellectual guidance

of those earlier men of the Industrial Revolution. Never before or since were they so spiritless or depressed.

England was stagnating, eddying in a cultural and material back-water of self-satisfaction and callous indifference, in which those who 'had' hoped it would go on forever, and those who 'had not' were beginning to curse the day they were born. But by the time the first great English novel about the class war was published, the power of those who might act was being cut down on the Western Front. The Great War drained off the surplus blood of unemployment, and definite unrest. It proved once more the maxim that war is the father of a certain kind of progress – in certain societies. I imagine also that Robert Tressell's destitute workers welcomed it, for a while.

ALAN SILLITOE

December 1964

Introduction

Life

Although *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is well known, the same cannot be said of its author, Robert Tressell, who was said to be ‘extremely reticent.’¹ Fred Ball, Tressell’s biographer, admitted that even after extensive research, he still did not know whether Tressell’s real name was Noonan or Croker. I shall refer to him as Tressell, that being the pen name he chose in honour of the trestle table, part of the basic equipment of house painters and signwriters.

Fred Ball wrote two lives of Tressell, the first in 1951² and the second after it was discovered in 1967 that Tressell’s daughter, Kathleen, who had been presumed killed in a car crash in Canada, was alive and living in Winchcombe, Gloucestershire. The story was topical because BBC2 had recently screened a dramatisation of Tressell’s novel which Kathleen had been unable to see because she could not afford a television set. The second biography, however, does little more than correct some minor errors in the first, for example the claim that Tressell wrote his book in response to what he considered to be the shortcomings of fellow socialist George Meek’s book, *George Meek, Bathchairman*, when in fact Meek’s book was not published until 1910, the year that Tressell finished *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.

Tressell was probably born in Dublin in 1870, the illegitimate son of Samuel Croker, an Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary, and Mary Noonan who had three other children in addition to Tressell: Adelaide, Ellie and Mary Jane. One source says that Tressell’s father, to whom he was deeply attached, died when he was six. It is not clear whether this was Croker or another man whom Mary had married in the meantime. Either way she remarried and Tressell was later to leave home, partly because of financial difficulties and partly because he did not get on with his stepfather. The move prevented this promising scholar – he could speak several languages – from finishing his education with the result, as his biographer, Fred Ball, explains, that ‘[h]e was now a working man without having been nurtured as one.’³

Tressell next appeared in Cape Town, South Africa, where he worked as a signwriter and also wrote sketches for various newspapers, exploiting to the full his ‘eye for queer characters.’⁴ This was the most prosperous period of his life; he made enough money to buy a plot of land and had a servant called Sixpence. He also married, but the union was not a happy one and, after his wife’s death from typhoid fever in 1895, Tressell moved to Johannesburg with Kathleen.

His time in South Africa came to an end with the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899. One story claims that he was active in the formation of the Irish Brigade which fought with the Boers. He was then captured and transported to Cape Town in an open railway truck, a journey that may have triggered the tuberculosis that was to kill him at the age of forty. After the war, Tressell was released and returned to England. Another story, however, claims that he left South Africa before the war and that his ill health was due to his excessive whisky drinking and then getting chilled when riding across the veldt on cold nights.

Back in England, Tressell settled first in Hastings with his sister, Adelaide, and her son Arthur, before finding somewhere for himself and Kathleen. Being a skilled artisan, Tressell was able to find employment as a signwriter and housepainter despite the depressed state of the building trade in Hastings. To his fellow workmen he was known variously as Raphael, the Professor or, most affectionately, as ‘little Bob.’

However, although as a craftsman Tressell earned more than the ordinary labourer, it was not enough to banish the constant spectre of poverty. Consequently, he was always exploring other ways of making money, particularly as he was anxious that Kathleen be provided for should anything happen to him. He set up *The South Coast Amusement Company* taking lantern lectures around the Sussex

villages, but this quickly folded. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to hire the St Leonard's Pier Hall to show 'moving pictures'. He even taught himself aeronautics but could interest no-one in his designs. All his plans had come to nothing. He then decided to write a novel, referring to it as 'this work which must be done or I will die in the workhouse.'¹ He kept the book secret from his workmates because, Ball suggests, of working class prejudice against the arts.

Tressell began *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* sometime in 1906-7. Working a fifty-six and a half hour week meant that he could only write in the evenings and on Sundays, and the constant toil aggravated his already poor health. The novel was completed in 1910. Tressell sent it to publishers but, since the manuscript was only hand-written, it was rejected without being read. Disillusioned, Tressell decided to emigrate to Canada in the hope of making a better life there before sending for Kathleen. Sadly, he fell ill *en route* and died, in Liverpool, on 2 February, 1911. Kathleen had no money to pay for or even to attend her father's funeral and he was buried in a pauper's grave. His last letter to her ended: *Je vous aime toujours, Dad*.

What Kathleen did have, however, was the manuscript. Some time after her father's death she moved to London and obtained a post as a nurse governess with a Mr and Mrs Mackinlay. She told a friend of theirs, Jessie Pope, about her father's manuscript. Pope suggested she show it to the publisher Grant Richards who was sufficiently impressed to publish it buying the sole rights from Kathleen for £25. His only stipulation was that the manuscript, which he felt was repetitious, be cut from 250,000 to 100,000 words. Kathleen said that the repetitions were necessary because 'my father felt that he had to hammer home his message to get the workers to see it'² but she eventually agreed to Richards's terms and the book was published on 23 April, 1914. It has never been out of print since.

Jessie Pope was responsible for the editing of the novel. So as not to offend the moral and political sensibilities of middle class readers she omitted from the original manuscript Chapters 23, 38, 39, 47, 48 and 51 and concluded the novel not with Tressell's vision of a socialist future, but with Owen's contemplation of suicide in Chapter 34. This clearly interfered with Tressell's aims, one of which was to describe the effects of poverty and how it might be eliminated through socialism once it is properly understood.

Class, Revolution and Resistance

The socialism of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* has its roots in the Marxist analysis of society, the main tenet of which states that the economic base of society entirely determines what Marx calls the superstructure, that is its social, political and cultural forms. Owen – who incidentally takes his name and many of his ideas from Robert Owen, a nineteenth century socialist – describes the orthodox Marxist position in Chapter 21 when he observes that there are two main classes in capitalist society: first, those who own the means of production, that is, raw materials, machinery, modes of transport, communication and so on, and second, the workers, who own nothing except their labour power which they have to sell in order to survive. What the workers earn is always less than the value of what they produce. Hence the owners, by selling back to the workers what they produce, continue to increase their wealth while the condition of the workers progressively deteriorates. Eventually, a situation is reached where the owners have become so rich and the workers so poor that, as Owen puts it, ‘these miserable wretches [will] turn upon their oppressors and drown both them and their system in a sea of blood’(p.370).

This analysis was consistent with the principles of the Social Democratic Federation (1884), one of many organisations which sprung from the revival of socialist ideas in the late nineteenth century. Its members were sceptical of trade unions believing that society could only be changed through revolution. Tressell belonged to the Hastings branch of the party for which he wrote manifestos and designed posters. He also painted a banner, known as the Robert Tressell banner, which was borne aloft at the 1936 May Day demonstration in London. It was then sent for safe keeping in Birmingham, but no-one has seen it since.

If *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* reflects the revolutionary politics of the period it is also the case that it endorses the gradualist approach to social problems espoused by the Fabians. The Fabians, whose most prominent members were George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice and Sidney Webb, were socialists in the sense that they wanted to destroy the anarchy of the capitalist market and usher in a classless society. They believed that injustice and inequality could be removed by state intervention and a good example of this in the novel is the proposal to add a ‘halfpenny’ to the rates in order ‘to provide food for all the hungry schoolchildren’ whose fathers are out of work (p.346).

As well as reflecting both revolutionary and reformist socialist politics, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* also negotiates more general socialist concerns. For example, the value Owen places on craftsmanship in contrast to the ‘scamping’ demanded by his employer, Rushton, echoes the ideas of William Morris, cofounder of The Socialist League (1884), who believed that work should express the whole person, unlike the capitalists in the novel who propagate the idea that ‘[t]he men work with their hands and the masters work with their brains’ (p.138). The desire for profit, Morris argued, destroys traditional skills and denies people the right to produce ‘beautiful things’. This is illustrated in the novel by the different approaches Owen and Rushton take to the decoration of the drawing room at the ‘Cave’, the house which the philanthropists are renovating. The former ‘simply wanted to do the work; and he was so fully occupied with thinking and planning how it was to be done that the question of profit was crowded out’ (p.123). The latter only thinks about ‘how much money could be made out of it’ (ibid.). Hence, in keeping with his name, he wants Owen to ‘rush’ the job and do it as cheaply as possible so as to maximise his profits.

Another influence on Tressell was Robert Blatchford who, in 1891, founded the *Clarion*, a socialist newspaper, which sold up to 90,000 copies a week. He also wrote two highly popular Utopian socialist essays, *Merrie England* (1895) and *Britain for the British* (1902), both of which are alluded to in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Frankie, Owen’s son, when he tries to convert the local butcher by getting him to read ‘the two very best [socialist tracts] *Happy England* and *England for the English*’ (p.228). Whereas Morris was concerned with work, Blatchford was concerned with

leisure. He believed that greater use of machines would mean that people had more free time which could be spent in education, self-improvement and in acquiring knowledge of the cultural heritage of the nation, ideas which form an important part of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Owen, for example, argues that 'civilisation – the accumulation of knowledge which has come down to us from our forefathers...is by right the common heritage of all' (pp.29-30) The same point, together with other related issues, is expanded in detail in the chapter entitled 'The Great Oration', where Barrington describes the ideal socialist society.

The various socialist theories in the novel have drawn some criticism over the years, in particular in their negative portrayal of women, an attitude which reflects the decidedly anti-feminist drift within some areas of the late nineteenth century socialist movement. For example H. M. Hyndman, founder of the Social Democratic Federation, was utterly dismissive of feminist and sexual politics asserting in 1883 that he was 'quite content to bear the reproach of chauvinism'.³ Pamela Fox has argued that *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is biased towards maleness by its emphasis on traditional notions of work and production. She also notes how women are excluded not just from the workplace but also from the men's leisure activities.⁴ While there is some truth in this argument it overlooks the fact that Tressell shows Ruth as having a far better grasp of economics than her husband, as is shown when he tries to balance their household budget (Chapter 3). Her greater understanding of money and, by implication, the capitalist system, gives her an advantage over the philanthropists who, despite Owen's patient expositions, remain profoundly ignorant of its workings. Women, that is, have precisely the sort of insight that may precipitate change.

A more serious charge against the socialism of the novel is its denigration of working class culture which is judged wanting against a middle class one of 'books, theatres, pictures[and] music' (p.29). Without these accoutrements the philanthropists 'might just as well be savage[s]' (ibid.). The use of the word 'savages' bears traces of the imperialist period in which the book was written. Indeed, Owen's whole approach to his fellow workers is that of a missionary assiduously trying to convert the natives. The philanthropists are encouraged to abandon their 'primitive' culture of football, betting and sex (p.545) for the 'civilised' one of temperance cafes, mechanics institutes and public lectures.

This attitude towards working class pastimes was characteristic of British socialists like the Fabians who urged the value of 'rational recreation' as opposed to a view of leisure as amusement, diversion or the pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, it was because so many socialists held the belief that 'culture' could exert a 'civilising' influence that they could not fully understand the realities of working class life. And this explains, in part, their inability to win widespread support for their cause. Owen, in other words, is as much to blame as the philanthropists for the failure of socialism in the novel. His scornful attitude towards their enjoyments alienates the philanthropists, making them unsympathetic to both his analysis of capitalism and his advocacy of socialism.

Society has of course changed in the eighty-five years since Tressell's book was first published. The Marxist idea of class for instance, which prevails in the novel, has been criticised for being too simplistic. In particular it is now claimed that political, social and cultural phenomena are not merely the effects of the economic base but have their own autonomy and dynamic laws of development. The Marxist idea of class took no account of gender, or ethnicity or how people perceived their own class position. In addition, while someone could be categorised as working class because of their occupation, they could also be deemed middle class because of their cultural pursuits. Moreover, the term 'working class' presumes a uniformity of beliefs and practices which is not borne out by the diversity of 'working class' experience. Accordingly, modern commentators tend to study the history of 'the working class' less in terms of the growth of the trade union movement and the rise of the Labour party and more in terms of attitudes toward the home, the market place, the locality and the body.

But these ‘new’ ideas about class can also be found in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* alongside the more traditional view. The novel demonstrates that class is composed of a number of different levels; it is not exclusively economic but also political, ideological and cultural. Moreover, there is no necessary connection between these different levels; Owen, for example, a member of ‘the working class’ values ‘high culture’ (p.29) whereas ‘The Brigands’, members of ‘the ruling class’ have no sense or understanding of culture at all (chapter 38); ‘[d]evoid of every ennobling thought or aspiration, they grovelled on the filthy ground, tearing up the flowers to get at the worms’(p.459).

With the abandonment of the Marxist concept of class, the view that capitalism is not going to be violently overthrown has now been accepted. The emphasis is on resistance, not revolution. This resistance which is rooted in the practices of everyday life, involves one adapting, manipulating or tricking the system so as to create one’s own meanings in opposition to those the system would like to impose.⁵ This view of resistance can also be found in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Work, as Tressell shows, provides opportunities to make tactical raids on the system. Philpot, for example, ceases work to enjoy a ‘quiet smoke, remarking to himself: “This is where we get some of our own back.”’ (p.38), an idea that is repeated in chapters 8, 9, 21, and 42. The drawback is that such resistance, isolated and individual, never poses a real threat to the system and that is why Tressell ultimately emphasises the importance of class consciousness since that, he believes, is the basis for real change in society.

Tressell’s socialism is firmly rooted in its time, but this does not mean that it has no relevance to our society where there are still extremes of wealth and where one third of the working population is in low paid, insecure employment. Its relevance lies in its Utopian quality, and Utopia never goes out of fashion. What *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* proposes is a ‘co-operative commonwealth’ where ‘the benefits and pleasures conferred...by science and civilisation will be enjoyed equally by all’ (p.485). As such it provides a model by which to critique the present and plan for the future. The power of the novel lies in its ability to move us by the promise of a better life not in the tensions of its various socialisms. Indeed, the variety of socialisms in the novel make it eclectic rather than doctrinaire. Although this leads to certain inconsistencies, for example Tressell demanding the overthrow of capitalism while simultaneously supporting it by subscribing to its cultural heritage, it does not diminish the appeal of its vision. It is that vision which still has something to say to us today.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists as Literature

Despite, or perhaps because of its enormous popularity *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* has not received the critical attention it deserves. Its status as art has been compromised by its espousal of socialism. Such partisan writing goes against the tradition of the English novel which ‘first explore[s] to find “the true facts of this world” and then face[s] them to enable the reader to draw the necessary conclusions.’⁶ Angus Wilson, on the other hand, has argued that, since Jane Austen, ‘the English novel has shied away from essentials, reducing good and evil to mere right and wrong.’⁷ Seen in this light the passionate commitment of Tressell’s book represents a return to the fundamental duty of novel writing: to elaborate and advocate a notion of the good.

The literary credentials of Tressell’s novel are manifold, and are apparent in its imaginative force, its unity and its relation to tradition. Imaginative force refers to the quality of writing; the vividness of character, the sharply realised situations and the intensity of the vision. All these combine to produce a powerful effect on the reader. As a review in 1914 enthuses, ‘There is no one, no one at all, who will be, after reading it, quite the same as he was before.’⁸ Within the novel, imagination is also a stimulus to change. It is Owen’s ability to imagine his own son, Frankie, in the position of the young apprentice, Bert, toiling in the cold, poisonous workshop (p. 562) that enables him to demand that Rushton give the boy a fire. More generally, imagination is also the ability to envisage a different order of society, something of which the philanthropists are consistently incapable. “‘That’s the worst of your arguments” says Crass to Owen, ‘[y]ou can’t never get very far without supposing some bloody ridiclus thing or other. Never mind about supposing things wot ain’t true; let’s ’ave facts and common sense”’ (p. 29). This is a singularly ironic remark since, as the novel shows quite plainly, it is Crass who is ignorant of the facts and devoid of common sense. It is this failure of the philanthropists to understand the society they live in that prevents them from imagining a better one. The society of the imagination is one built on relationships not barriers. It is therefore inclusive and, in this way, the imaginative vision of the novel transcends the limitations of its class based analysis.

One of the reasons why the novel’s imaginative vision is so compelling lies in its fundamental unity, especially of imagery. This quality only became apparent when the full text was published in 1955. The main image in the book is that of a house, which represents both capitalist and socialist society. In repairing and decorating the house known as the ‘Cave’ the philanthropists are seen to be perpetuating the system that oppresses them. Barrington also uses the image of a house to explain the co-operative nature of socialism. ‘The men who put the slates on’, he notes, ‘are just as indispensable as the men who lay the foundations’ (p. 492). The use of the same image for both socialism and capitalism suggests that there is an affinity between the two systems and this complicates other parts of the novel where they are shown to exist in complete opposition to one another.

Capitalism itself is described as the ‘Battle of Life’ (p. 204). There are two main images associated with this battle; crime and evolution, the former being the most obvious. Throughout the novel the philanthropists are ironically referred to as criminals, ironically because it is not they who are shown to commit any illegal acts but rather Rushton, Didlum and Sweater who ‘robbed everybody’ (p.405). That, of course, is why they are called ‘the brigands’. The philanthropists are likened to criminals because their work is equivalent to being sentenced to ‘thirty years’ hard labour’ (p. 130). They are under constant surveillance ‘as if says Philpot to Harlow, ‘we was a couple of bloody convicts’ (p. 157). This remark recalls the design of Victorian prisons whereby inmates, confined to separate cells, were kept under permanent observation by officers stationed on a tower, the panoptican, in the middle of the building.

The system means that ‘[o]ne must either trample on others or be trampled upon oneself (p.204). This is why Tressell refers to it as the ‘Battle of Life’. He claims that this is a Christian

description (ibid.) but the same phrase is also deployed by Darwin who talked about the 'great and complex battle of life.'⁹ Tressell's use of Darwinian ideas and idioms, while it is another instance of unity in the novel, nevertheless complicates its vision of socialism. Owen, for example, believes that the existing order is 'bound to fall to pieces because of its own rottenness' (p.369). That rottenness lies in the way everybody has to compete with everybody else but it is precisely this struggle, according to Darwin, which ensures stability and balance; in short the continuation of the present system. A further point is that while socialism is regarded as 'inevitable' (p. 545), the culmination of the historical process, evolution is ongoing and without any predetermined end. Finally, evolution proposes that nothing could have happened any differently to the way it did, and this view finds expression in the novel through the frequent repetition of the word 'compel'. The meaning of this term, however, is severely at odds with the educational aim of the book which is to teach people that things could be ordered otherwise. In short, the socialism of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is skewed by its evolutionary imagery and diction.

The novel also shows great unity of plot. Incidents are anticipated and situations paralleled. Ruth's baby calls out 'Dad! Dad! Dad!' (p.181) to Slyme, an incident which looks ahead to her giving birth to his child. Similarly, the accidents that Harlow and Easton narrowly avoid while up a ladder (pp.400-1) prefigure Philpot's death in Chapter 46. An example of situations paralleling one another would be the respective meetings of the philanthropists and the brigands. The former gather to organise their annual 'Beano' (Chapter 41) while the latter manipulate a council meeting for their own ends (Chapter 39). The philanthropists are shown to have an exaggerated respect for procedure while the brigands have a cynical disregard of it. The purpose of juxtaposing these scenes in the novel is to underline the point that the philanthropists, in contrast to the brigands, are incapable of taking charge of their own destiny. There is also the further suggestion that democracy is a bankrupt system since its apparatus appears as either farcical or corrupt; a suggestion which reinforces the latent revolutionary socialism of the novel.

The unity of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* can be read in three ways. First, as a metaphor for the socialist society of the future where everything is connected and interdependent. Second, the intricate architecture of the work represents the values of craftsmanship against the 'scamping' that the men are forced to practice by their employers. The third way of reading the unity of the novel is altogether less positive. This way perceives the tightly interlocking structure as an analogy for the capitalist system itself. The parallels and repetitions are symptomatic of the way capitalism seems able to reproduce itself, and this problematises Tressell's repeated claim that the existing state of things can be changed.

***The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and the English Novel Tradition**

Jack Mitchell has situated *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* within the English novel tradition.¹⁰ One characteristic of that tradition is to see society as a whole, as a community, and another is to resolve whatever prevents that community from being realised. Both these inform the ‘condition of England’ novels of the nineteenth century of which Tressell’s is perhaps the last.

Mitchell traces Tressell’s line of descent from John Bunyan through, among others, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Charles Dickens. Tressell himself said that he read Fielding and Dickens while he was writing *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* but it is the influence of Dickens which is most evident in the book, particularly in the way the reader’s attention is directed to the sufferings of children: how their bodies are deformed, how their minds are stultified and their sensibilities brutalised. But the children in the novel are not just victims, they also represent hope for the future: they disregard the class distinctions (pp. 77-8) and, in contrast to the selfishness which the system demands, they show themselves willing to share (p. 136).

In addition to signifying the contradictory qualities of pathos and optimism the term ‘children’ is frequently used of the philanthropists. This brings into relief the latent paternalism in the novel, present in such gestures as Barrington’s gift of £10 to the Owens. Here again Tressell shows his indebtedness to Dickens whose kind hearted capitalists, such as the Cheeryble brothers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, implied that the system did not need to be fundamentally changed.

Tressell’s novel can also be seen as belonging to the tradition of working class writing. The standard working class novel of the nineteenth century such as Thomas Martin Wheeler’s *Sunshine and Shadows* (1849) or H. J. Bramsbury’s *A Working Class Tragedy* (1895), was highly partisan but ‘failed to get inside working class life’ because it relied on the formula of the romance, mystery or adventure novel.¹¹ Tressell was able to overcome this limitation by recourse to the techniques of the realistic novel, those techniques themselves being modified by the commitment to socialism. Hence, unlike the bourgeois novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is more interested in the fate of the community than just the individual.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists and Modernism

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was finished in 1910 – the year, according to Virginia Woolf, that Modernism began.¹² Hence it is not surprising that the novel has certain modernist characteristics, specifically an interest in the unifying power of symbol and a self-consciousness about the problems of artistic representation. The first is apparent in Tressell's symbol of the house which gives a formal unity to a text riddled by contradictions, for example the conflicting notion that people are compelled to behave in certain ways while simultaneously being free to change that behaviour. In this respect Tressell's symbolism operates like that of T. S. Eliot's or James Joyce's; it draws the fragments of modern experience into an ordered whole.

The novel's self-consciousness about art, another modernist feature, is more problematic. One of the basic ideas of modernist art was that 'the principle of reality [had become] peculiarly difficult to grasp.'¹³ This is registered in Tressell's novel by Owen's constant struggle to express reality in such a way that the philanthropists will recognise it (p. 267). At the same time, however, Owen is in no doubt about the nature of that reality; it is completely knowable.

The Modernists were concerned with the process of fiction making, and the political aspect of this is explored in the critique of newspapers, *The Obscurer* and the *Daily Chloroform*. Their fictions, or false pictures of reality, distract the reader's attention from what is actually going on around them. Hence they are like those stories in which readers become so absorbed that they bump into things on the street (p.400). The irony is that the criticism of these fictions takes place within a text that is itself a fiction. Tressell may claim that he has 'invented nothing' (p.14) but this elides his huge debt to the tradition which posits the theory that the novel is a set of techniques for representing reality. Fictions, it seems, can only be exposed by other fictions and this complicates Owen's claim to 'know' reality. At this point, the novel ceases to be a corrective of false consciousness and instead approximates to the modernist preoccupation with the nature of consciousness itself. Indeed it could be argued that *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* supplies the answer to its own question of why the philanthropists cannot see the truth – because there is none to see.

The implication that there is no single truth reflects the break up of a common culture. This opens the way to there being a variety of realities, something which is implicit in the frequent references to the philanthropists each 'telling a different story' (p. 140). These stories are never heard; they are occluded by Owen's lectures on socialism which thereby devalue the philanthropists' experience in much the same way that the system itself does. This is consistent with the operation of 'high' culture in the novel; it is identified with 'humanity' whereas the workers with their 'beer, football, betting and, of course, one other subject [are] 'wild beasts' (p. 545). Owen's lectures and the artefacts of 'high' culture are used to place the workers at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This is exactly how the bible is used by the ruling class in the novel; its authority is used to maintain the workers in a subservient role. Owen, too, does not really want the philanthropists to have their own ideas but to agree with him. Once again, the novel seems to participate in the economy of repression that it sets out to criticise.

Although *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* seems, at times, to be a demonstration of how the system uses fiction and its power to situate persons in order to perpetuate itself, it is also the case that the novel encourages a sceptical approach to these aspects of textuality. The hallucinatory power of fiction is criticised in Chapter 29, 'The Pandorama', which contains the same ideas found in the rest of the novel but which presents them in a way which anticipates some of the techniques of Brecht's epic theatre. The very fact that they are presented as *scenes* is itself a disruption of the written word, as are those diagrams, charts and worksheets found throughout the novel.

The scenes are commented upon by Bert, whose commentary prevents the audience from becoming too absorbed in what they see. This is further prevented by the scenes being complete in

themselves. Hence a storm at sea is followed by police breaking up a crowd in Berlin. Such sharp juxtapositions encourage a detached scrutiny rather than an imaginative identification with what is depicted. The discrete procession of scenes breaks with the novel's linked sequence of episodes which stimulate the reader to want to know what happens next rather than concentrate on what is happening now. The use of song either as a direct comment or else an ironic contrast is also used to break the spell of immediacy and inhibit the emotional involvement that characterises the rest of the novel. And, in Chapter 21, it is further suggested that the philanthropists can break the spell of fiction if they act it out, so distancing themselves from it.

The power of fiction to define and place people is also criticised even as it is practised in the novel. This is apparent when a speaker, who claims to believe every word in the bible, is challenged to drink poison which will not, says the bible, harm one of Christ's followers. In declining the invitation the speaker undermines the authority of the bible to legitimise social divisions. Owen's adherence to 'high' culture is also interrogated in the novel, primarily through his having to consistently argue his case with the philanthropists. Moreover, Owen's negative attitude towards the body expressed in his unease at the philanthropists' interest in sex (p.141) and in his revulsion at their humorous indulgence in 'downward explosions of flatulence' (p.220) gives his position a strictly abstract appeal. The culture of the philanthropists, with its emphasis on physical activities, has a certain vital energy that is missing from the 'rational pleasure[s]' (p. 494) of socialists. Indeed, it is this energy that is the source of the philanthropists' occasional acts of resistance mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists brims with ideas. Although written in the first decade of the twentieth century much of it still applies today. The economic revolution of the 1980s has led to an increase in poverty and greater job insecurity. There is fierce debate about whether ‘popular’ culture is a distraction from the ‘real’ problems or whether it can be a source of opposition to the dominant meanings in our society. Similarly, discussion rages over whether ‘high’ culture is elitist, or whether it answers the need for a felt depth in experience which is not catered for by the institutions of post-industrial capitalism. Tressell’s novel has much to say about all these issues. It portrays, in unremitting detail, the crushing despair of poverty, the brutality of labour relations and the blighting of hope. Its solution is socialism. But, like many of the ideas in the novel, socialism receives contradictory treatment and its relation to ‘high’ culture is certainly problematic.

The problems of the book should not be allowed to detract from its achievement of marrying art and politics in the English novel. Traditionally, these have been kept apart; art invites contemplation, politics action. This obscures the relation between them. Both evaluate life and, in finding it wanting, endeavour to endow it with significance. Socialism, wrote Arnold Wesker, ‘isn’t about talking all the time, it’s living, it’s singing, it’s dancing, it’s being interested in what [is] go[ing] on around you, it’s being concerned about people and the world.’¹⁴

Properly understood, politics makes good the promise of art. To this end *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* issues an emphatic challenge: ‘Every man who is not helping to bring about a better state of affairs for the future is helping to perpetuate the present misery and is therefore the enemy of his own children’ (pp.131-132). Such forthrightness cannot be ignored. It demands we learn more about the world, examine our consciences and evaluate our habits. It also demands we recognise the extent of our obligations and responsibilities, and then act accordingly. The novel, in short, invites us to live, in the largest sense of that word.

GARY DAY

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Preface

In writing this book my intention was to present, in the form of an interesting story, a faithful picture of working-class life – more especially of those engaged in the Building trades – in a small town in the south of England.

I wished to describe the relations existing between the workmen and their employers, the attitude and feelings of these two classes towards each other; the condition of the workers during the different seasons of the year, their circumstances when at work and when out of employment: their pleasures, their intellectual outlook, their religious and political opinions and ideals.

The action of the story covers a period of only a little over twelve months, but in order that the picture might be complete it was necessary to describe how the workers are circumstanced at all periods of their lives, from the cradle to the grave. Therefore the characters include women and children, a young boy – the apprentice – some improvers, journeymen in the prime of life, and worn-out old men.

I designed to show the conditions resulting from poverty and unemployment: to expose the futility of the measures taken to deal with them and to indicate what I believe to be the only real remedy, namely – Socialism. I intended to explain what Socialists understand by the word ‘Poverty’: to define the Socialist theory of the causes of poverty, and to explain how Socialists propose to abolish poverty.

It may be objected that, considering the number of books dealing with these subjects already existing, such a work as this was uncalled for. The answer is that not only are the majority of people opposed to Socialism, but a very brief conversation with an average anti-socialist is sufficient to show that he does not know what Socialism means. The same is true of all the anti-socialist writers and the ‘great statesmen’ who make anti-socialist speeches: unless we believe that they are all deliberate liars and imposters, who to serve their own interests labour to mislead other people, we must conclude that they do not understand Socialism. There is no other possible explanation of the extraordinary things they write and say. The thing they cry out against is not Socialism but a phantom of their own imagining.

Another answer is that ‘The Philanthropists’ is not a treatise or essay, but a novel. My main object was to write a readable story full of human interest and based on the happenings of everyday life, the subject of Socialism being treated incidentally.

This was the task I set myself. To what extent I have succeeded is for others to say; but whatever their verdict, the work possesses at least one merit – that of being true. I have invented nothing. There are no scenes or incidents in the story that I have not either witnessed myself or had conclusive evidence of. As far as I dared I let the characters express themselves in their own sort of language and consequently some passages may be considered objectionable. At the same time I believe that – because it is true – the book is not without its humorous side.

The scenes and characters are typical of every town in the South of England and they will be readily recognized by those concerned. If the book is published I think it will appeal to a very large number of readers. Because it is true it will probably be denounced as a libel on the working classes and their employers, and upon the religious-professing section of the community. But I believe it will be acknowledged as true by most of those who are compelled to spend their lives amid the surroundings it describes, and it will be evident that no attack is made upon sincere religion.

1 An Imperial Banquet. A Philosophical Discussion. The Mysterious Stranger. Britons Never shall be Slaves

The house was named 'The Cave'. It was a large old-fashioned three-storied building standing in about an acre of ground, and situated about a mile outside the town of Mugsborough. It stood back nearly two hundred yards from the main road and was reached by means of a by-road or lane, on each side of which was a hedge formed of hawthorn trees and blackberry bushes. This house had been unoccupied for many years and it was now being altered and renovated for its new owner by the firm of Rushton & Co., Builders and Decorators.

There were, altogether, about twenty-five men working there, carpenters, plumbers, plasterers, bricklayers and painters, besides several unskilled labourers. New floors were being put in where the old ones were decayed, and upstairs two of the rooms were being made into one by demolishing the parting wall and substituting an iron girder. Some of the window frames and sashes were so rotten that they were being replaced. Some of the ceilings and walls were so cracked and broken that they had to be replastered. Openings were being cut through walls and doors were being put where no doors had ever been before. Old broken chimney pots were being taken down and new ones were being taken up and fixed in their places. All the old whitewash had to be washed off the ceilings and all the old paper had to be scraped off the walls preparatory to the house being repainted and decorated. The air was full of the sounds of hammering and sawing, the ringing of trowels, the rattle of pails, the splashing of water brushes, and the scraping of the stripping knives used by those who were removing the old wallpaper. Besides being full of these sounds the air was heavily laden with dust and disease germs, powdered mortar, lime, plaster, and the dirt that had been accumulating within the old house for years. In brief, those employed there might be said to be living in a Tariff Reform Paradise – they had Plenty of Work.

At twelve o'clock Bob Crass – the painters' foreman – blew a prolonged blast upon a whistle and all hands assembled in the kitchen, where Bert the apprentice had already prepared the tea, which was ready in the large galvanized iron pail that he had placed in the middle of the floor. By the side of the pail were a number of old jam-jars, mugs, dilapidated tea-cups and one or two empty condensed milk tins. Each man on the 'job' paid Bert threepence a week for the tea and sugar – they did not have milk – and although they had tea at breakfast-time as well as at dinner, the lad was generally considered to be making a fortune.

Two pairs of steps, laid parallel on their sides at a distance of about eight feet from each other, with a plank laid across, in front of the fire, several upturned pails, and the drawers belonging to the dresser, formed the seating accommodation. The floor of the room was covered with all manner of debris, dust, dirt, fragments of old mortar and plaster. A sack containing cement was leaning against one of the walls, and a bucket containing some stale whitewash stood in one corner.

As each man came in he filled his cup, jam-jar or condensed milk tin with tea from the steaming pail, before sitting down. Most of them brought their food in little wicker baskets which they held on their laps or placed on the floor beside them.

At first there was no attempt at conversation and nothing was heard but the sounds of eating and drinking and the frizzling of the bloater which Easton, one of the painters, was toasting on the end of a pointed stick at the fire.

'I don't think much of this bloody tea,' suddenly remarked Sawkins, one of the labourers.

'Well it oughter be all right,' retorted Bert; 'it's been bilin' ever since 'arf past eleven.'

Bert White was a frail-looking, weedy, pale-faced boy, fifteen years of age and about four feet nine inches in height. His trousers were part of a suit that he had once worn for best, but that was so long ago that they had become too small for him, fitting rather tightly and scarcely reaching the top

of his patched and broken hob-nailed boots. The knees and the bottoms of the legs of his trousers had been patched with square pieces of cloth, several shades darker than the original fabric, and these patches were now all in rags. His coat was several sizes too large for him and hung about him like a dirty ragged sack. He was a pitiable spectacle of neglect and wretchedness as he sat there on an upturned pail, eating his bread and cheese with fingers that, like his clothing, were grimed with paint and dirt.

‘Well then, you can’t have put enough tea in, or else you’ve bin usin’ up wot was left yesterday,’ continued Sawkins.

‘Why the bloody ‘ell don’t you leave the boy alone?’ said Harlow, another painter. ‘If you don’t like the tea you needn’t drink it. For my part, I’m sick of listening to you about it every damn day.’

‘It’s all very well for you to say I needn’t drink it,’ answered Sawkins, ‘but I’ve paid my share an’ I’ve got a right to express an opinion. It’s my belief that ‘arf the money we gives ‘im is spent on penny ‘orribles: ‘e’s always got one in ‘is hand, an’ to make wot tea ‘e does buy last, ‘e collects all the slops wot’s left and biles it up day after day.’

‘No, I don’t!’ said Bert, who was on the verge of tears. ‘It’s not me wot buys the things at all. I gives all the money I gets to Crass, and ‘e buys them ‘imself, so there!’

At this revelation, some of the men furtively exchanged significant glances, and Crass, the foreman, became very red.

‘You’d better keep your bloody thruppence and make your own tea after this week,’ he said, addressing Sawkins, ‘and then p’raps we’ll ‘ave a little peace at meal-times.’

‘An’ you needn’t ask me to cook no bloaters or bacon for you no more,’ added Bert, tearfully, ‘cos I won’t do it.’

Sawkins was not popular with any of the others. When, about twelve months previously, he first came to work for Rushton & Co., he was a simple labourer, but since then he had ‘picked up’ a slight knowledge of the trade, and having armed himself with a putty-knife and put on a white jacket, regarded himself as a fully qualified painter. The others did not perhaps object to him trying to better his condition, but his wages – fivepence an hour – were twopence an hour less than the standard rate, and the result was that in slack times often a better workman was ‘stood off’ when Sawkins was kept on. Moreover, he was generally regarded as a sneak who carried tales to the foreman and the ‘Bloke’. Every new hand who was taken on was usually warned by his new mates ‘not to let the b— r Sawkins see anything.’

The unpleasant silence which now ensued was at length broken by one of the men, who told a dirty story, and in the laughter and applause that followed, the incident of the tea was forgotten.

‘How did you get on yesterday?’ asked Crass, addressing Bundy, the plasterer, who was intently studying the sporting columns of the *Daily Obscurer*.

‘No luck,’ replied Bundy, gloomily. ‘I had a bob each way on Stock well, in the first race, but it was scratched before the start.’

This gave rise to a conversation between Crass, Bundy, and one or two others concerning the chances of different horses in the morrow’s races. It was Friday, and no one had much money, so at the suggestion of Bundy, a Syndicate was formed, each member contributing threepence, for the purpose of backing a dead certainty given by the renowned Captain Kiddem of the *Obscurer*. One of those who did not join the syndicate was Frank Owen, who was as usual absorbed in a newspaper. He was generally regarded as a bit of a crank: for it was felt that there must be something wrong about a man who took no interest in racing or football and was always talking a lot of rot about religion and politics. If it had not been for the fact that he was generally admitted to be an exceptionally good workman, they would have had but little hesitation about thinking that he was mad. This man was about thirty-two years of age, and of medium height, but so slightly built that he appeared taller. There was a suggestion of refinement in his clean-shaven face, but his complexion was ominously clear, and an unnatural colour flushed the thin cheeks.

There was a certain amount of justification for the attitude of his fellow workmen, for Owen held the most unusual and unorthodox opinions on the subjects mentioned.

The affairs of the world are ordered in accordance with orthodox opinions. If anyone [did not think in accordance with these he soon discovered this fact for himself. Owen saw that in the world a small class of people were] possessed of a great abundance and superfluity of the things that are produced by work. He saw also that a very great number – in fact, the majority of the people – lived on the verge of want; and that a smaller but still very large number lived lives of semi-starvation from the cradle to the grave; while a yet smaller but still very great number actually died of hunger, or, maddened by privation, killed themselves and their children in order to put a period to their misery. And strangest of all – in his opinion – he saw that people who enjoyed abundance of the things that are made by work, were the people who did Nothing: and that the others, who lived in want or died of hunger, were the people who worked. And seeing all this he thought that it was wrong, that the system that produced such results was rotten and should be altered. And he had sought out and eagerly read the writings of those who thought they knew how it might be done.

It was because he was in the habit of speaking of these subjects that his fellow workmen came to the conclusion that there was probably something wrong with his mind.

When all the members [of the syndicate] had handed over their contributions, Bundy went out to arrange matters with the bookie, and when he had gone Easton annexed the copy of the *Obscurer* that Bundy had thrown away, and proceeded to laboriously work through some carefully cooked statistics relating to Free Trade and Protection. Bert, his eyes starting out of his head and his mouth wide open, was devouring the contents of a paper called *The Chronicles of Crime*. Ned Dawson, a poor devil who was paid fourpence an hour for acting as mate or labourer to Bundy, or the bricklayers, or anyone else who wanted him, lay down on the dirty floor in a corner of the room and with his coat rolled up as a pillow, went to sleep. Sawkins, with the same intention, stretched himself at full length on the dresser. Another who took no part in the syndicate was Barrington, a labourer, who, having finished his dinner, placed the cup he brought for his tea back into his dinner basket and having closed and placed it on the mantelshelf above, took out an old briar pipe which he slowly filled, and proceeded to smoke in silence.

Some time previously the firm had done some work for a wealthy gentleman who lived in the country, some distance outside Mugsborough. This gentleman also owned some property in the town and it was commonly reported that he had used his influence with Rushton to induce the latter to give Barrington employment. It was whispered amongst the hands that the young man was a distant relative of the gentleman's, and that he had disgraced himself in some way and been disowned by his people. Rushton was supposed to have given him a job in the hope of currying favour with his wealthy client, from whom he hoped to obtain more work. Whatever the explanation of the mystery may have been, the fact remained that Barrington, who knew nothing of the work except what he had learned since he had been taken on, was employed as a painter's labourer at the usual wages – fivepence per hour.

He was about twenty-five years of age and a good deal taller than the majority of the others, being about five feet ten inches in height and slenderly though well and strongly built. He seemed very anxious to learn all that he could about the trade, and although rather reserved in his manner, he had contrived to make himself fairly popular with his workmates. He seldom spoke unless to answer when addressed, and it was difficult to draw him into conversation. At meal-times, as on the present occasion, he generally smoked, apparently lost in thought and unconscious of his surroundings.

Most of the others also lit their pipes and a desultory conversation ensued.

'Is the gent what's bought this 'ouse any relation to Sweater the draper?' asked Payne, the carpenter's foreman.

'It's the same bloke,' replied Crass.

'Didn't he used to be on the Town Council or something?'

‘E’s bin on the Council for years,’ returned Crass. ‘E’s on it now. ’E’s mayor this year. ’E’s bin mayor several times before.’

‘Let’s see,’ said Payne, reflectively, ‘e married old Grinder’s sister, didn’t ’e? You know who I mean, Grinder the greengrocer.’

‘Yes, I believe he did,’ said Crass.

‘It wasn’t Grinder’s sister,’ chimed in old Jack Linden. ‘It was ’is niece. I know, because I remember working in their ’ouse just after they was married, about ten year ago.’

‘Oh yes, I remember now,’ said Payne. ‘She used to manage one of Grinder’s branch shops, didn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ replied Linden. ‘I remember it very well because there was a lot of talk about it at the time. By all accounts, ole Sweater used to be a regler ’ot un: no one never thought as he’d ever git married at all: there was some funny yarns about several young women what used to work for him.’

This important matter being disposed of, there followed a brief silence, which was presently broken by Harlow.

‘Funny name to call a ’ouse, ain’t it?’ he said. “‘The Cave.’” I wonder what made ’em give it a name like that.’

‘They calls ’em all sorts of outlandish names nowadays,’ said old Jack Linden.

‘There’s generally some sort of meaning to it, though,’ observed Payne. ‘For instance, if a bloke backed a winner and made a pile, ’e might call ’is ’ouse, “Epsom Lodge” or “Newmarket Villa”.’

‘Or sometimes there’s a hoak tree or a cherry tree in the garding,’ said another man; ‘then they calls it “Hoak Lodge” or “Cherry Cottage”.’

‘Well, there’s a cave up at the end of this garden,’ said Harlow with a grin, ‘you know, the cesspool, what the drains of the ’ouse runs into; praps they called it after that.’

‘Talking about the drains,’ said old Jack Linden when the laughter produced by this elegant joke had ceased. ‘Talking about the drains, I wonder what they’re going to do about them; the ’ouse aint fit to live in as they are now, and as for that bloody cesspool it ought to be done away with.’

‘So it is going to be,’ replied Crass. ‘There’s going to be a new set of drains altogether, carried right out to the road and connected with the main.’

Crass really knew no more about what was going to be done in this matter than did Linden, but he felt certain that this course would be adopted. He never missed an opportunity of enhancing his own prestige with the men by insinuating that he was in the confidence of the firm.

‘That’s goin’ to cost a good bit,’ said Linden.

‘Yes, I suppose it will,’ replied Crass, ‘but money ain’t no object to old Sweater. ’E’s got tons of it; you know ’e’s got a large wholesale business in London and shops all over the bloody country, besides the one ’e’s got ’ere.’

Easton was still reading the *Obscurer*: he was not about to understand exactly what the compiler of the figures was driving at – probably the latter never intended that anyone should understand – but he was conscious of a growing feeling of indignation and hatred against foreigners of every description, who were ruining this country, and he began to think that it was about time we did something to protect ourselves. Still, it was a very difficult question: to tell the truth, he himself could not make head or tail of it. At length he said aloud, addressing himself to Crass:

‘Wot do you think of this ’ere fissional policy, Bob?’

‘Ain’t thought much about it,’ replied Crass. ‘I don’t never worry my ’ed about politics.’

‘Much better left alone,’ chimed in old Jack Linden sagely, ‘argyfying about politics generally ends up with a bloody row an’ does no good to nobody.’

At this there was a murmur of approval from several of the others. Most of them were averse from arguing or disputing about politics. If two or three men of similar opinions happened to be together they might discuss such things in a friendly and superficial way, but in a mixed company it was better left alone. The ‘Fissional Policy’ emanated from the Tory party. That was the reason why

some of them were strongly in favour of it, and for the same reason others were opposed to it. Some of them were under the delusion that they were Conservatives: similarly, others imagined themselves to be Liberals. As a matter of fact, most of them were nothing. They knew as much about the public affairs of their own country as they did of the condition of affairs in the planet of Jupiter.

Easton began to regret that he had broached so objectionable a subject, when, looking up from his paper, Owen said:

‘Does the fact that you never “trouble your heads about politics” prevent you from voting at election times?’

No one answered, and there ensued a brief silence. Easton however, in spite of the snub he had received, could not refrain from talking.

‘Well, I don’t go in for politics much, either, but if what’s in this ’ere paper is true, it seems to me as we oughter take some interest in it, when the country is being ruined by foreigners.’

‘If you’re goin’ to believe all that’s in that bloody rag you’ll want some salt,’ said Harlow.

The *Obscurer* was a Tory paper and Harlow was a member of the local Liberal club. Harlow’s remark roused Crass.

‘Wot’s the use of talkin’ like that?’ he said; ‘you know very well that the country is being ruined by foreigners. Just go to a shop to buy something; look round the place an’ you’ll see that more than ’arf the damn stuff comes from abroad. They’re able to sell their goods ’ere because they don’t ’ave to pay no dooty, but they takes care to put ’eavy dooties on our goods to keep ’em out of their countries; and I say it’s about time it was stopped.’

‘Ear, ’ear,’ said Linden, who always agreed with Crass, because the latter, being in charge of the job, had it in his power to put in a good – or a bad – word for a man to the boss. ‘Ear, ’ear! Now that’s wot I call common sense.’

Several other men, for the same reason as Linden, echoed Crass’s sentiments, but Owen laughed contemptuously.

‘Yes, it’s quite true that we gets a lot of stuff from foreign countries,’ said Harlow, ‘but they buys more from us than we do from them.’

‘Now you think you know a ’ell of a lot,’ said Crass. ‘Ow much more did they buy from us last year, than we did from them?’

Harlow looked foolish: as a matter of fact his knowledge of the subject was not much wider than Crass’s. He mumbled something about not having no ’ed for figures, and offered to bring full particulars next day.

‘You’re wot I call a bloody windbag,’ continued Crass; ‘you’ve got a ’ell of a lot to say, but wen it comes to the point you don’t know nothin’.’

‘Wy, even ’ere in Mugsborough,’ chimed in Sawkins – who though still lying on the dresser had been awakened by the shouting – ‘We’re overrun with ’em! Nearly all the waiters and the cook at the Grand Hotel where we was working last month is foreigners.’

‘Yes,’ said old Joe Philpot, tragically, ‘and then thers all them Hitalian horgin grinders, an’ the blokes wot sells ’ot chestnuts: an’ wen I was goin’ ’ome last night I see a lot of them Frenchies sellin’ hunions, an’ a little wile afterwards I met two more of ’em comin’ up the street with a bear.’

Notwithstanding the disquieting nature of this intelligence, Owen again laughed, much to the indignation of the others, who thought it was a very serious state of affairs. It was a dam’ shame that these people were allowed to take the bread out of English people’s mouths: they ought to be driven into the bloody sea.

And so the talk continued, principally carried on by Crass and those who agreed with him. None of them really understood the subject: not one of them had ever devoted fifteen consecutive minutes to the earnest investigation of it. The papers they read were filled with vague and alarming accounts of the quantities of foreign merchandise imported into this country, the enormous number of aliens constantly arriving, and their destitute conditions, how they lived, the crimes they committed, and the

injury they did to British trade. These were the seeds which, cunningly sown in their minds, caused to grow up within them a bitter indiscriminating hatred of foreigners. To them the mysterious thing they variously called the 'Fiscal Policy', the 'Fistical Policy', or the 'Fissical Question' was a great Anti-Foreign Crusade. The country was in a hell of a state, poverty, hunger and misery in a hundred forms had already invaded thousands of homes and stood upon the thresholds of thousands more. How came these things to be? It was the bloody foreigner! Therefore, down with the foreigners and all their works. Out with them. Drive them b—s into the bloody sea! The country would be ruined if not protected in some way. This Fiscal, Fistical, Fissical or whatever the hell policy it was called, *was* Protection, therefore no one but a bloody fool could hesitate to support it. It was all quite plain – quite simple. One did not need to think twice about it. It was scarcely necessary to think about it at all.

This was the conclusion reached by Crass and such of his mates who thought they were Conservatives – the majority of them could not have read a dozen sentences aloud without stumbling – it was not necessary to think or study or investigate anything. It was all as clear as daylight. The foreigner was the enemy, and the cause of poverty and bad trade.

When the storm had in some degree subsided,

'Some of you seem to think,' said Owen, sneeringly, 'that it was a great mistake on God's part to make so many foreigners. You ought to hold a mass meeting about it: pass a resolution something like this: "This meeting of British Christians hereby indignantly protests against the action of the Supreme Being in having created so many foreigners, and calls upon him to forthwith rain down fire, brimstone and mighty rocks upon the heads of all those Philistines, so that they may be utterly exterminated from the face of the earth, which rightly belongs to the British people".'

Crass looked very indignant, but could think of nothing to say in answer to Owen, who continued:

'A little while ago you made the remark that you never trouble yourself about what you call politics, and some of the rest agreed with you that to do so is not worth while. Well, since you never "worry" yourself about these things, it follows that you know nothing about them; yet you do not hesitate to express the most decided opinions concerning matters of which you admittedly know nothing. Presently, when there is an election, you will go and vote in favour of a policy of which you know nothing. I say that since you never take the trouble to find out which side is right or wrong you have no right to express any opinion. You are not fit to vote. You should not be allowed to vote.'

Crass was by this time very angry.

'I pays my rates and taxes,' he shouted, 'an' I've got as much right to express an opinion as you 'ave. I votes for who the bloody 'ell I likes. I shan't arst your leave nor nobody else's! Wot the 'ell's it got to do with you who I votes for?'

'It has a great deal to do with me. If you vote for Protection you will be helping to bring it about, and if you succeed, and if Protection is the evil that some people say it is, I shall be one of those who will suffer. I say you have no right to vote for a policy which may bring suffering upon other people, without taking the trouble to find out whether you are helping to make things better or worse.'

Owen had risen from his seat and was walking up and down the room emphasizing his words with excited gestures.

'As for not trying to find out wot side is right,' said Crass, somewhat overawed by Owen's manner and by what he thought was the glare of madness in the latter's eyes, 'I reads the *Ananias* every week, and I generally takes the *Daily Chloroform*, or the *Hobscurer*, so I ought to know summat about it.'

'Just listen to this,' interrupted Easton, wishing to create a diversion and beginning to read from the copy of the *Obscurer* which he still held in his hand:

GREAT DISTRESS IN MUGSBOROUGH.
HUNDREDS OUT OF EMPLOYMENT.
WORK OF THE CHARITY SOCIETY.

789 CASES ON THE BOOKS.

‘Great as was the distress among the working classes last year, unfortunately there seems every prospect that before the winter which has just commenced is over the distress will be even more acute.

Already the Charity Society and kindred associations are relieving more cases than they did at the corresponding time last year. Applications to the Board of Guardians have also been much more numerous, and the Soup Kitchen has had to open its doors on Nov. 7th a fortnight earlier than usual. The number of men, women and children provided with meals is three or four times greater than last year.’

Easton stopped: reading was hard work to him.

‘There’s a lot more,’ he said, ‘about starting relief works: two shillings a day for married men and one shilling for single and something about there’s been 1,572 quarts of soup given to poor families wot was not even able to pay a penny, and a lot more. And ‘ere’s another thing, an advertisement.

‘THE SUFFERING POOR

Sir: Distress among the poor is so acute that I earnestly ask you for aid for The Salvation Army’s great Social work on their behalf. Some 6000 are being sheltered nightly. Hundreds are found work daily. Soup and bread are distributed in the midnight hours to homeless wanderers in London. Additional workshops for the unemployed have been established. Our Social Work for men, women and children, for the characterless and the outcast, is the largest and oldest organized effort of its kind in the country, and greatly needs help. £10,000 is required before Christmas day. Gifts may be made to any specific section or home, if desired. Can you please send us something to keep the work going? Please address cheques, crossed Bank of England (Law Courts Branch), to me at 101, Queen Victoria Street, EC. Balance Sheets and Reports upon application.

‘BRAMWELL BOOTH.’

‘Oh, that’s part of the great ‘appiness an’ prosperity wot Owen makes out Free Trade brings,’ said Crass with a jeering laugh.

‘I never said Free Trade brought happiness or prosperity,’ said Owen.

‘Well, praps you didn’t say exactly them words, but that’s wot it amounts to.’

‘I never said anything of the kind. We’ve had Free Trade for the last fifty years and today most people are living in a condition of more or less abject poverty, and thousands are literally starving. When we had Protection things were worse still. Other countries have Protection and yet many of their people are glad to come here and work for starvation wages. The only difference between Free Trade and Protection is that under certain circumstances one might be a little worse than the other, but as remedies for Poverty, neither of them are of any real use whatever, for the simple reason that they do not deal with the real causes of Poverty.’

‘The greatest cause of poverty is hover-population,’ remarked Harlow.

‘Yes,’ said old Joe Philpot. ‘If a boss wants two men, twenty goes after the job: ther’s too many people and not enough work.’

‘Over-population!’ cried Owen, ‘when there’s thousands of acres of uncultivated land in England without a house or human being to be seen. Is over-population the cause of poverty in France? Is over-population the cause of poverty in Ireland? Within the last fifty years the population of Ireland has been reduced by more than half. Four millions of people have been exterminated by famine or got rid of by emigration, but they haven’t got rid of poverty. P’raps you think that half the people in this country ought to be exterminated as well.’

Here Owen was seized with a violent fit of coughing, and resumed his seat. When the cough had ceased he sat wiping his mouth with his handkerchief and listening to the talk that ensued.

‘Drink is the cause of most of the poverty,’ said Slyme.

This young man had been through some strange process that he called ‘conversion’. He had had a ‘change of ‘art’ and looked down with pious pity upon those he called ‘worldly’ people. He was not ‘worldly’, he did not smoke or drink and never went to the theatre. He had an extraordinary notion

that total abstinence was one of the fundamental principles of the Christian religion. It never occurred to what he called his mind, that this doctrine is an insult to the Founder of Christianity.

‘Yes,’ said Crass, agreeing with Slyme, ‘an’ thers plenty of ’em wot’s too lazy to work when they can get it. Some of the b—s who go about pleading poverty ’ave never done a fair day’s work in all their bloody lives. Then thers all this new fangled machinery,’ continued Crass. ‘That’s wot’s ruinin’ everything. Even in our trade ther’s them machines for trimmin’ wallpaper, an’ now they’ve brought out a paintin’ machine. Ther’s a pump an’ a ’ose pipe, an’ they reckon two men can do as much with this ’ere machine as twenty could without it.’

‘Another thing is women,’ said Harlow, ‘there’s thousands of ’em nowadays doin’ work wot oughter be done by men.’

‘In my opinion ther’s too much of this ’ere eddication, nowadays,’ remarked old Linden. ‘Wot the ’ell’s the good of eddication to the likes of us?’

‘None whatever,’ said Crass, ‘it just puts foolish idears into people’s ’eds and makes ’em too lazy to work.’

Barrington, who took no part in the conversation, still sat silently smoking. Owen was listening to this pitiable farrago with feelings of contempt and wonder. Were they all hopelessly stupid? Had their intelligence never developed beyond the childhood stage? Or was he mad himself?

‘Early marriages is another thing,’ said Slyme: ‘no man oughtn’t to be allowed to get married unless he’s in a position to keep a family.’

‘How can marriage be a cause of poverty?’ said Owen, contemptuously. ‘A man who is not married is living an unnatural life. Why don’t you continue your argument a little further and say that the practice of eating and drinking is the cause of poverty or that if people were to go barefoot and naked there would be no poverty? The man who is so poor that he cannot marry is in a condition of poverty already.’

‘Wot I mean,’ said Slyme, ‘is that no man oughtn’t to marry till he’s saved up enough so as to ’ave some money in the bank; an’ another thing, I reckon a man oughtn’t to get married till ’e’s got a ’ouse of ’is own. It’s easy enough to buy one in a building society if you’re in reg’lar work.’

At this there was a general laugh.

‘Why, you bloody fool,’ said Harlow, scornfully, ‘most of us is walkin’ about ’arf our time. It’s all very well for you to talk; you’ve got almost a constant job on this firm. If they’re doin’ anything at all you’re one of the few wot gets a show in. And another thing,’ he added with a sneer, ‘we don’t all go to the same chapel as old Misery.’

‘Old Misery’ was Rushton & Co.’s manager or walking foreman. ‘Misery’ was only one of the nicknames bestowed upon him by the hands: he was also known as ‘Nimrod’ and ‘Pontius Pilate’.

‘And even if it’s not possible,’ Harlow continued, winking at the others, ‘what’s a man to do during the years he’s savin’ up?’

‘Well, he must conquer hisself,’ said Slyme, getting red.

‘Conquer hisself is right!’ said Harlow and the others laughed again.

‘Of course if a man tried to conquer hisself by his own strength,’ replied Slyme, ‘e would be sure to fail, but when you’ve got the Grace of God in you it’s different.’

‘Chuck it, fer Christ’s sake!’ said Harlow in a tone of disgust. ‘We’ve only just ’ad our dinner!’

‘And wot about drink?’ demanded old Joe Philpot, suddenly.

‘Ear, ’ear,’ cried Harlow. ‘That’s the bleedin’ talk. I wouldn’t mind ’avin’ ’arf a pint now, if somebody else will pay for it.’

Joe Philpot – or as he was usually called, ‘Old Joe’ – was in the habit of indulging freely in the cup that inebriates. He was not very old, being only a little over fifty, but he looked much older. He had lost his wife some five years ago and was now alone in the world, for his three children had died in their infancy. Slyme’s reference to drink had roused Philpot’s indignation; he felt that it was directed

against himself. The muddled condition of his brain did not permit him to take up the cudgels in his own behalf, but he knew that although Owen was a tee-totaller himself, he disliked Slyme.

‘There’s no need for us to talk about drink or laziness,’ returned Owen, impatiently, ‘because they have nothing to do with the matter. The question is, what is the cause of the lifelong poverty of the majority of those who are not drunkards and who *do* work? Why, if all the drunkards and won’t-works and unskilled or inefficient workers could be by some miracle transformed into sober, industrious and skilled workers tomorrow, it would, under the present conditions, be so much the worse for us, because there isn’t enough work for ail *now* and those people by increasing the competition for what work there is, would inevitably cause a reduction of wages and a greater scarcity of employment. The theories that drunkenness, laziness or inefficiency are the causes of poverty are so many devices invented and fostered by those who are selfishly interested in maintaining the present states of affairs, for the purpose of preventing us from discovering the real causes of our present condition.’

‘Well, if we’re all wrong,’ said Crass, with a sneer, ‘praps you can tell us what the real cause is?’

‘An’ praps you think you know how it’s to be altered,’ remarked Harlow, winking at the others.

‘Yes; I do think I know the cause,’ declared Owen, ‘and I do think I know how it could be altered –’

‘It can’t never be haltered,’ interrupted old Linden. ‘I don’t see no sense in all this ’ere talk. There’s always been rich and poor in the world, and there always will be.’

‘Wot I always say is this ’ere,’ remarked Philpot, whose principal characteristic – apart from thirst – was a desire to see everyone comfortable, and who hated rows of any kind. ‘There ain’t no use in the likes of us trubblin our ’eds or quarrelin about politics. It don’t make a dam bit of difference who you votes for or who gets in. They’re hall the same; workin the horicle for their own benefit. You can talk till you’re black in the face, but you won’t never be able to alter it. It’s no use worrying. The sensible thing is to try and make the best of things as we find ‘em: enjoy ourselves, and do the best we can for each other. Life’s too short to quarrel and we’ll hall soon be dead!’

At the end of this lengthy speech, the philosophic Philpot abstractedly grasped a jam-jar and raised it to his lips; but suddenly remembering that it contained stewed tea and not beer, set it down again without drinking.

‘Let us begin at the beginning,’ continued Owen, taking no notice of these interruptions. ‘First of all, what do you mean by Poverty?’

‘Why, if you’ve got no money, of course,’ said Crass impatiently.

The others laughed disdainfully. It seemed to them such a foolish question.

‘Well, that’s true enough as far as it goes,’ returned Owen, ‘that is, as things are arranged in the world at present. But money itself is not wealth: it’s of no use whatever.’

At this there was another outburst of jeering laughter.

‘Supposing for example that you and Harlow were shipwrecked on a desolate island, and *you* had saved nothing from the wreck but a bag containing a thousand sovereigns, and he had a tin of biscuits and a bottle of water.’

‘Make it beer!’ cried Harlow appealingly.

‘Who would be the richer man, you or Harlow?’

‘But then you see we ain’t shipwrecked on no dissolute island at all,’ sneered Crass. ‘That’s the worst of your arguments. You can’t never get very far without supposing some bloody ridiclus thing or other. Never mind about supposing things wot ain’t true; let’s ’ave facts and common sense.’

‘Ear, ’ear,’ said old Linden. ‘That’s wot we want – a little common sense.’

‘What do *you* mean by poverty, then?’ asked Easton.

‘What I call poverty is when people are not able to secure for themselves all the benefits of civilization; the necessaries, comforts, pleasures and refinements of life, leisure, books, theatres, pictures, musk, holidays, travel, good and beautiful homes, good clothes, good and pleasant food.’

Everybody laughed. It was so ridiculous. The idea of the likes of *them* wanting or having such things! Any doubts that any of them had entertained as to Owen's sanity disappeared. The man was as mad as a March hare.

'If a man is only able to provide himself and his family with the bare necessities of existence, that man's family is living in poverty. Since he cannot enjoy the advantages of civilization he might just as well be a savage: better, in fact, for a savage knows nothing of what he is deprived. What we call civilization – the accumulation of knowledge which has come down to us from our forefathers – is the fruit of thousands of years of human thought and toil. It is not the result of the labour of the ancestors of any separate class of people who exist today, and therefore it is by right the common heritage of all. Every little child that is born into the world, no matter whether he is clever or dull, whether he is physically perfect or lame, or blind; no matter how much he may excel or fall short of his fellows in other respects, in one thing at least he is their equal – he is one of the heirs of all the ages that have gone before.'

Some of them began to wonder whether Owen was not sane after all. He certainly must be a clever sort of chap to be able to talk like this. It sounded almost like something out of a book, and most of them could not understand one half of it.

'Why is it,' continued Owen, 'that we are not only deprived of our inheritance – we are not only deprived of nearly all the benefits of civilization, but we and our children are also often unable to obtain even the bare necessities of existence?'

No one answered.

'All these things,' Owen proceeded, 'are produced by those who work. We do our full share of the work, therefore we should have a full share of the things that are made by work.'

The others continued silent. Harlow thought of the over-population theory, but decided not to mention it. Crass, who could not have given an intelligent answer to save his life, for once had sufficient sense to remain silent. He did think of calling out the patent paint-pumping machine and bringing the hosepipe to bear on the subject, but abandoned the idea; after all, he thought, what was the use of arguing with such a fool as Owen?

Sawkins pretended to be asleep.

Philpot, however, had suddenly grown very serious.

'As things are now,' went on Owen, 'instead of enjoying the advantages of civilization we are really worse off than slaves, for if we were slaves our owners in their own interest would see to it that we always had food and –'

'Oh, I don't see that,' roughly interrupted old Linden, who had been listening with evident anger and impatience. 'You can speak for yourself, but I can tell yer I don't put *myself* down as a slave.'

'Nor me neither,' said Crass sturdily. 'Let them call their selves slaves as wants to.'

At this moment a footstep was heard in the passage leading to the kitchen. Old Misery! or perhaps the Bloke himself! Crass hurriedly pulled out his watch.

'Jesus Christ!' he gasped. 'It's four minutes past one!'

Linden frantically seized hold of a pair of steps and began wandering about the room with them.

Sawkins scrambled hastily to his feet and, snatching a piece of sandpaper from the pocket of his apron, began furiously rubbing down the scullery door.

Easton threw down the copy of the *Obscurer* and scrambled hastily to his feet.

The boy crammed the *Chronicles of Crime* into his trousers pocket.

Crass rushed over to the bucket and began stirring up the stale whitewash it contained, and the stench which it gave forth was simply appalling.

Consternation reigned.

They looked like a gang of malefactors suddenly interrupted in the commission of a crime.

The door opened. It was only Bundy returning from his mission to the Bookie.

2 Nimrod: a Mighty Hunter before the Lord

Mr Hunter, as he was called to his face and as he was known to his brethren at the Shining Light Chapel, where he was superintendent of the Sunday School, or ‘Misery’ or ‘Nimrod’; as he was named behind his back by the workmen over whom he tyrannized, was the general or walking foreman or ‘manager’ of the firm whose card is herewith presented to the reader:

RUSHTON & CO. MUGSBOROUGH

Builders, Decorators, and General Contractors

FUNERALS FURNISHED

Estimates given for General Repairs to House Property First-class Work only at Moderate Charges

There were a number of sub-foremen or ‘coddies’, but Hunter was *the* foreman.

He was a tall, thin man whose clothes hung loosely on the angles of his round-shouldered, bony form. His long, thin legs, about which the baggy trousers draped in ungraceful folds, were slightly knock-kneed and terminated in large, flat feet. His arms were very long even for such a tall man, and the huge, bony hands were gnarled and knotted. When he removed his bowler hat, as he frequently did to wipe away with a red handkerchief the sweat occasioned by furious bicycle riding, it was seen that his forehead was high, flat and narrow. His nose was a large, fleshy, hawklike beak, and from the side of each nostril a deep indentation extended downwards until it disappeared in the drooping moustache that concealed his mouth, the vast extent of which was perceived only when he opened it to bellow at the workmen his exhortations to greater exertions. His chin was large and extraordinarily long. The eyes were pale blue, very small and close together, surmounted by spare, light-coloured, almost invisible eyebrows, with a deep vertical cleft between them over the nose. His head, covered with thick, coarse brown hair, was very large at the back; the ears were small and laid close to the head. If one were to make a full-face drawing of his cadaverous visage it would be found that the outline resembled that of the lid of a coffin.

This man had been with Rushton – no one had ever seen the ‘Co.’ – for fifteen years, in fact almost from the time when the latter commenced business. Rushton had at that period realized the necessity of having a deputy who could be used to do all the drudgery and running about so that he himself might be free to attend to the more pleasant or more profitable matters. Hunter was then a journeyman, but was on the point of starting on his own account, when Rushton offered him a constant job as foreman, two pounds a week, and two and a half per cent of the profits of all work done. On the face of it this appeared a generous offer. Hunter closed with it, gave up the idea of starting for himself, and threw himself heart and mind into the business. When an estimate was to be prepared it was Hunter who measured up the work and laboriously figured out the probable cost. When their tenders were accepted it was he who superintended the work and schemed how to scamp it, where possible, using mud where mortar was specified, mortar where there ought to have been cement, sheet zinc where they were supposed to put sheet lead, boiled oil instead of varnish, and three coats of paint where five were paid for. In fact, scamping the work was with this man a kind of mania. It grieved him to see anything done properly. Even when it was more economical to do a thing well, he insisted from force of habit on having it scamped. Then he was almost happy, because he felt that he was doing someone down. If there were an architect superintending the work, Misery would square him or bluff him. If it were not possible to do either, at least he had a try; and in the intervals of watching, driving and bullying the hands, his vulture eye was ever on the look out for fresh jobs. His long red nose was thrust into every estate agent’s office in the town in the endeavour to smell out what properties had recently changed hands or been let, in order that he might interview the new owners and secure the order for whatever alterations or repairs might be required. He it was who entered into unholy compacts with numerous charwomen and nurses of the sick, who in return for a small commission would let him know when some poor sufferer was passing away and would

recommend Rushton & Co. to the bereaved and distracted relatives. By these means often – after first carefully inquiring into the financial position of the stricken family – Misery would contrive to wriggle his unsavoury carcase into the house of sorrow, seeking, even in the chamber of death, to further the interests of Rushton & Co. and to earn his miserable two and a half per cent.

It was to make possible the attainment of this object that Misery slaved and drove and schemed and cheated. It was for this that the workers' wages were cut down to the lowest possible point and their offspring went ill clad, ill shod and ill fed, and were driven forth to labour while they were yet children, because their fathers were unable to earn enough to support their homes.

Fifteen years!

Hunter realized now that Rushton had had considerably the best of the bargain. In the first place, it will be seen that the latter had bought over one who might have proved a dangerous competitor, and now, after fifteen years, the business that had been so laboriously built up, mainly by Hunter's energy, industry and unscrupulous cunning, belonged to Rushton & Co. Hunter was but an employee, liable to dismissal like any other workman, the only difference being that he was entitled to a week's notice instead of an hour's notice, and was but little better off financially than when he started for the firm.

Fifteen years!

Hunter knew now that he had been used, but he also knew that it was too late to turn back. He had not saved enough to make a successful start on his own account even if he had felt mentally and physically capable of beginning all over again, and if Rushton were to discharge him now he was too old to get a job as a journeyman. Further, in his zeal for Rushton & Co. and his anxiety to earn his commission, he had often done things that had roused the animosity of rival firms to such an extent that it was highly improbable that any of them would employ him, and even if they would, Misery's heart failed him at the thought of having to meet on an equal footing those workmen whom he had tyrannized over and oppressed. It was for these reasons that Hunter was as terrified of Rushton as the hands were of himself.

Over the men stood Misery, ever threatening them with dismissal and their wives and children with hunger. Behind Misery was Rushton, ever bullying and goading him on to greater excesses and efforts for the furtherance of the good cause – which was to enable the head of the firm to accumulate money.

Mr Hunter, at the moment when the reader first makes his acquaintance on the afternoon of the day when the incidents recorded in the first chapter took place, was executing a kind of strategical movement in the direction of the house where Crass and his mates were working. He kept to one side of the road because by so doing he could not be perceived by those within the house until the instant of his arrival. When he was within about a hundred yards of the gate he dismounted from his bicycle, there being a sharp rise in the road just there, and as he toiled up, pushing the bicycle in front, his breath showing in white clouds in the frosty air, he observed a number of men hanging about. Some of them he knew; they had worked for him at various times, but were now out of a job. There were five men altogether; three of them were standing in a group, the other two stood each by himself, being apparently strangers to each other and the first three. The three men who stood together were nearest to Hunter and as the latter approached, one of them advanced to meet him.

'Good afternoon, sir.'

Hunter replied by an inarticulate grunt, without stopping; the man followed.

'Any chance of a job, sir?'

'Full up,' replied Hunter, still without stopping. The man still followed, like a beggar soliciting charity.

'Be any use calling in a day or so, sir?'

'Don't think so,' Hunter replied. 'Can if you like; but we're full up.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the man, and turned back to his friends.

By this time Hunter was within a few yards of one of the other two men, who also came to speak to him. This man felt there was no hope of getting a job; still, there was no harm in asking. Besides, he was getting desperate. It was over a month now since he had finished up for his last employer. It had been a very slow summer altogether. Sometimes a fortnight for one firm; then perhaps a week doing nothing; then three weeks or a month for another firm, then out again, and so on. And now it was November. Last winter they had got into debt; that was nothing unusual, but owing to the bad summer they had not been able, as in other years, to pay off the debts accumulated in winter. It was doubtful, too, whether they would be able to get credit again this winter. In fact this morning when his wife sent their little girl to the grocer's for some butter the latter had refused to let the child have it without the money. So although he felt it to be hopeless he accosted Hunter.

This time Hunter stopped: he was winded by his climb up the hill.

'Good afternoon, sir.'

Hunter did not return the salutation; he had not the breath to spare, but the man was not hurt; he was used to being treated like that.

'Any chance of a job, sir?'

Hunter did not reply at once. He was short of breath and he was thinking of a plan that was ever recurring to his mind, and which he had lately been hankering to put into execution. It seemed to him that the long waited for opportunity had come. Just now Rushton & Co. were almost the only firm in Mugsborough who had any work. There were dozens of good workmen out. Yes, this was the time. If this man agreed he would give him a start. Hunter knew the man was a good workman, he had worked for Rushton & Co. before. To make room for him old Linden and some other full-price man could be got rid of; it would not be difficult to find some excuse.

'Well,' Hunter said at last in a doubtful, hesitating kind of way, 'I'm afraid not, Newman. We're about full up.'

He ceased speaking and remained waiting for the other to say something more. He did not look at the man, but stooped down, fidgeting with the mechanism of the bicycle as if adjusting it.

'Things have been so bad this summer,' Newman went on. 'I've had rather a rough time of it. I would be very glad of a job even if it was only for a week or so.'

There was a pause. After a while, Hunter raised his eyes to the other's face, but immediately let them fall again.

'Well,' said he, 'I might – perhaps – be able to let you have a day or two. You can come here to this job,' and he nodded his head in the direction of the house where the men were working. 'Tomorrow at seven. Of course you know the figure?' he added as Newman was about to thank him. 'Six and a half.'

Hunter spoke as if the reduction were already an accomplished fact. The man was more likely to agree, if he thought that others were already working at the reduced rate.

Newman was taken by surprise and hesitated. He had never worked under price; indeed, he had sometimes gone hungry rather than do so; but now it seemed that others were doing it. And then he was so awfully hard up. If he refused this job he was not likely to get another in a hurry. He thought of his home and his family. Already they owed five weeks' rent, and last Monday the collector had hinted pretty plainly that the landlord would not wait much longer. Not only that, but if he did not get a job how were they to live? This morning he himself had had no breakfast to speak of, only a cup of tea and some dry bread. These thoughts crowded upon each other in his mind, but still he hesitated. Hunter began to move off.

'Well,' he said, 'if you like to start you can come here at seven in the morning.' Then as Newman still hesitated he added impatiently, 'Are you coming or not?'

'Yes, sir,' said Newman.

'All right,' said Hunter, affably. 'I'll tell Crass to have a kit ready for you.'

He nodded in a friendly way to the man, who went off feeling like a criminal.

As Hunter resumed his march, well satisfied with himself, the fifth man, who had been waiting all this time, came to meet him. As he approached, Hunter recognized him as one who had started work for Rushton & Co. early in the summer, but who had left suddenly of his own accord, having taken offence at some bullying remark of Hunter's.

Hunter was glad to see this man. He guessed that the fellow must be very hard pressed to come again and ask for work after what had happened.

‘Any chance of a job, sir?’

Hunter appeared to reflect.

‘I believe I have room for one,’ he said at length. ‘But you're such an uncertain kind of chap. You don't seem to care much whether you work or not. You're too independent, you know; one can't say two words to you but you must needs clear off.’

The man made no answer.

‘We can't tolerate that kind of thing, you know,’ Hunter added. ‘If we were to encourage men of your stamp we should never know where we are.’

So saying, Hunter moved away and again proceeded on his journey.

When he arrived within about three yards of the gate he noiselessly laid his machine against the garden fence. The high evergreens that grew inside still concealed him from the observation of anyone who might be looking out of the windows of the house. Then he carefully crept along till he came to the gate post, and bending down, he cautiously peeped round to see if he could detect anyone idling, or talking, or smoking. There was no one in sight except old Jack Linden, who was rubbing down the lobby doors with pumice-stone and water. Hunter noiselessly opened the gate and crept quietly along the grass border of the garden path. His idea was to reach the front door without being seen, so that Linden could not give notice of his approach to those within. In this he succeeded and passed silently into the house. He did not speak to Linden; to do so would have proclaimed his presence to the rest. He crawled stealthily over the house but was disappointed in his quest, for everyone he saw was hard at work. Upstairs he noticed that the door of one of the rooms was closed.

Old Joe Philpot had been working in this room all day, washing off the old whitewash from the ceiling and removing the old papers from the walls with a broad bladed, square topped knife called a stripper. Although it was only a small room, Joe had had to tear into the work pretty hard all the time, for the ceiling seemed to have had two or three coats of whitewash without ever having been washed off, and there were several thicknesses of paper on the walls. The difficulty of removing these papers was increased by the fact that there was a dado which had been varnished. In order to get this off it had been necessary to soak it several times with strong soda water, and although Joe was as careful as possible he had not been able to avoid getting some of this stuff on his fingers. The result was that his nails were all burnt and discoloured and the flesh round them cracked and bleeding. However, he had got it all off at last, and he was not sorry, for his right arm and shoulder were aching from the prolonged strain and in the palm of the right hand there was a blister as large as a shilling, caused by the handle of the stripping knife.

All the old paper being off, Joe washed down the walls with water, and having swept the paper into a heap in the middle of the floor, he mixed with a small trowel some cement on a small board and proceeded to stop up the cracks and holes in the walls and ceiling. After a while, feeling very tired, it occurred to him that he deserved a spell and a smoke for five minutes. He closed the door and placed a pair of steps against it. There were two windows in the room almost opposite each other; these he opened wide in order that the smoke and smell of his pipe might be carried away. Having taken these precautions against surprise, he ascended to the top of the step ladder that he had laid against the door and sat down at ease. Within easy reach was the top of a cupboard where he had concealed a pint of beer in a bottle. To this he now applied himself. Having taken a long pull at the bottle, he tenderly replaced it on the top of the cupboard and proceeded to ‘hinjoy’ a quiet smoke, remarking to himself:

‘This is where we get some of our own back.’

He held, however, his trowel in one hand, ready for immediate action in case of interruption.

Philpot was about fifty-five years old. He wore no white jacket, only an old patched apron; his trousers were old, very soiled with paint and ragged at the bottoms of the legs where they fell over the much-patched, broken and down-at-heel boots. The part of his waistcoat not protected by his apron was covered with spots of dried paint. He wore a coloured shirt and a 'dickey' which was very soiled and covered with splashes of paint, and one side of it was projecting from the opening of the waistcoat. His head was covered with an old cap, heavy and shining with paint. He was very thin and stooped slightly. Although he was really only fifty-five, he looked much older, for he was prematurely aged.

He had not been getting his own back for quite five minutes when Hunter softly turned the handle of the lock. Philpot immediately put out his pipe and descending from his perch opened the door. When Hunter entered Philpot closed it again and, mounting the steps, went on stopping the wall just above. Nimrod looked at him suspiciously, wondering why the door had been closed. He looked all round the room but could see nothing to complain of. He snuffed the air to try if he could detect the odour of tobacco, and if he had not been suffering from a cold in the head there is no doubt that he would have perceived it. However, as it was he could smell nothing, but all the same he was not quite satisfied, although he remembered that Crass always gave Philpot a good character.

'I don't like to have men working on a job like this with the door shut,' he said at length. 'It always gives me the idear that the man's 'avin a mike. You can do what you're doin' just as well with the door open.'

Philpot, muttering something about it being all the same to him – shut or open – got down from the steps and opened the door. Hunter went out again without making any further remark and once more began crawling over the house.

Owen was working by himself in a room on the same floor as Philpot. He was at the window, burning off with a paraffin torch-lamp those parts of the old paintwork that were blistered and cracked.

In this work the flame of the lamp is directed against the old paint, which becomes soft and is removed with a chisel knife, or a scraper called a shavehook. The door was ajar and he had opened the top sash of the window for the purpose of letting in some fresh air, because the atmosphere of the room was foul with the fumes of the lamp and the smell of the burning paint, besides being heavy with moisture. The ceiling had only just been water washed and the walls had just been stripped. The old paper, saturated with water, was piled up in a heap in the middle of the floor.

Presently, as he was working he began to feel conscious of some other presence in the room; he looked round. The door was open about six inches and in the opening appeared a long, pale face with a huge chin, surmounted by a bowler hat and ornamented with a large red nose, a drooping moustache and two small, glittering eyes set very close together. For some seconds this apparition regarded Owen intently, then it was silently withdrawn, and he was again alone. He had been so surprised and startled that he had nearly dropped the lamp, and now that the ghastly countenance was gone, Owen felt the blood surge into his own cheeks. He trembled with suppressed fury and longed to be able to go out there on the landing and hurl the lamp into Hunter's face.

Meanwhile, on the landing outside Owen's door, Hunter stood thinking. Someone must be got rid of to make room for the cheap man tomorrow. He had hoped to catch somebody doing something that would have served as an excuse for instant dismissal, but there was now no hope of that happening. What was to be done? He would like to get rid of Linden, who was now really too old to be of much use, but as the old man had worked for Rushton on and off for many years, Hunter felt that he could scarcely sack him off-hand without some reasonable pretext. Still, the fellow was really not worth the money he was getting. Sevenpence an hour was an absurdly large wage for an old man like him. It was preposterous: he would have to go, excuse or no excuse.

Hunter crawled downstairs again.

Jack Linden was about sixty-seven years old, but like Philpot, and as is usual with working men, he appeared older, because he had had to work very hard all his life, frequently without proper food and clothing. His life had been passed in the midst of a civilization which he had never been permitted to enjoy the benefits of. But of course he knew nothing about all this. He had never expected or wished to be allowed to enjoy such things; he had always been of opinion that they were never intended for the likes of him. He called himself a Conservative and was very patriotic.

At the time when the Boer War commenced, Linden was an enthusiastic jingo: his enthusiasm had been somewhat damped when his youngest son, a reservist, had to go to the front, where he died of fever and exposure. When this soldier son went away, he left his wife and two children, aged respectively four and five years at that time, in his father's care. After he died they stayed on with the old people. The young woman earned a little occasionally by doing needlework, but was really dependent on her father-in-law. Notwithstanding his poverty, he was glad to have them in the house, because of late years his wife had been getting very feeble, and, since the shock occasioned by the news of the death of her son, needed someone constantly with her.

Linden was still working at the vestibule doors when the manager came downstairs. Misery stood watching him for some minutes without speaking. At last he said loudly:

'How much longer are you going to be messing about those doors? Why don't you get them under colour? You were fooling about there when I was here this morning. Do you think it'll pay to have you playing about there hour after hour with a bit of pumice stone? Get the work done! Or if you don't want to, I'll very soon find someone else who does! I've been noticing your style of doing things for some time past and I want you to understand that you can't play the fool with me. There's plenty of better men than you walking about. If you can't do more than you've been doing lately you can clear out; we can do without you even when we're busy.'

Old Jack trembled. He tried to answer, but was unable to speak. If he had been a slave and had failed to satisfy his master, the latter might have tied him up somewhere and thrashed him. Hunter could not do that; he could only take his food away. Old Jack was frightened – it was not only *his* food that might be taken away. At last, with a great effort, for the words seemed to stick in his throat, he said:

'I must clean the work down, sir, before I go on painting.'

'I'm not talking about what you're doing, but the time it takes you to do it!' shouted Hunter. 'And I don't want any back answers or argument about it. You must move yourself a bit quicker or leave it alone altogether.'

Linden did not answer: he went on with his work, his hand trembling to such an extent that he was scarcely able to hold the pumice stone.

Hunter shouted so loud that his voice filled all the house. Everyone heard and was afraid. Who would be the next? they thought.

Finding that Linden made no further answer, Misery again began walking about the house.

As he looked at them the men did their work in a nervous, clumsy, hasty sort of way. They made all sorts of mistakes and messes. Payne, the foreman carpenter, was putting some new boards on a part of the drawing-room floor: he was in such a state of panic that, while driving a nail, he accidentally struck the thumb of his left hand a severe blow with his hammer. Bundy was also working in the drawing-room putting some white-glazed tiles in the fireplace. Whilst cutting one of these in half in order to fit it into its place, he inflicted a deep gash on one of his fingers. He was afraid to leave off to bind it up while Hunter was there, and consequently as he worked the white tiles became all smeared and spattered with blood. Easton, who was working with Harlow on a plank, washing off the old distemper from the hall ceiling, was so upset that he was scarcely able to stand on the plank, and presently the brush fell from his trembling hand with a crash upon the floor.

Everyone was afraid. They knew that it was almost impossible to get a job for any other firm. They knew that this man had the power to deprive them of the means of earning a living; that he possessed the power to deprive their children of bread.

Owen, listening to Hunter over the banisters upstairs, felt that he would like to take him by the throat with one hand and smash his face in with the other.

And then?

Why then he would be sent to gaol, or at the best he would lose his employment: his food and that of his family would be taken away. That was why he only ground his teeth and cursed and beat the wall with his clenched fist. So! and so! and so!

If it were not for them!

Owen's imagination ran riot.

First he would seize him by the collar with his left hand, dig his knuckles into his throat, force him up against the wall and then, with his right fist, smash! smash! smash! until Hunter's face was all cut and covered with blood.

But then, what about those at home? Was it not braver and more manly to endure in silence?

Owen leaned against the wall, white-faced, panting and exhausted.

Downstairs, Misery was still going to and fro in the house and walking up and down in it. Presently he stopped to look at Sawkins' work. This man was painting the woodwork of the back staircase. Although the old paintwork here was very dirty and greasy, Misery had given orders that it was not to be [cleaned before being painted.]

['Just dust it down and slobber the colour on,'] he had said. Consequently, when Crass made the paint, he had put into it an extra large quantity of dryers. To a certain extent this destroyed the 'body' of the colour: it did not cover well; it would require two coats. When Hunter perceived this he was furious. He was sure it could be made to do with one coat with a little care; he believed Sawkins was doing it like this on purpose. Really, these men seemed to have no conscience.

Two coats! and he had estimated for only three.

'Crass!

'Yes, sir.'

'Come here!'

'Yes, sir.'

Crass came hurrying along.

'What's the meaning of this? Didn't I tell you to make this do with one coat? Look at it!'

'It's like this, sir,' said Crass. 'If it had been washed down –'

'Washed down be damned,' shouted Hunter. 'The reason is that the colour ain't thick enough. Take the paint and put a little more body in it and we'll soon see whether it can be done or not. I can make it cover if you can't.'

Crass took the paint, and, superintended by Hunter, made it thicker. Misery then seized the brush and prepared to demonstrate the possibility of finishing the work with one coat. Crass and Sawkins looked on in silence.

Just as Misery was about to commence he fancied he heard someone whispering somewhere. He laid down the brush and crawled stealthily upstairs to see who it was. Directly his back was turned Crass seized a bottle of oil that was standing near and, tipping about half a pint of it into the paint, stirred it up quickly. Misery returned almost immediately: he had not caught anyone; it must have been fancy. He took up the brush and began to paint. The result was worse than Sawkins!

He messed and fooled about for some time, but could not make it come right. At last he gave it up.

'I suppose it'll have to have two coats after all,' he said, mournfully. 'But it's a thousand pities.' He almost wept.

The firm would be ruined if things went on like this.

‘You’d better go on with it,’ he said as he laid down the brush.

He began to walk about the house again. He wanted to go away now, but he did not want them to know that he was gone, so he sneaked out of the back door, crept round the house and out of the gate, mounted his bicycle and rode away.

No one saw him go.

For some time the only sounds that broke the silence were the noises made by the hands as they worked. The musical ringing of Bundy’s trowel, the noise of the carpenters’ hammers and saws and the occasional moving of a pair of steps.

No one dared to speak.

At last Philpot could stand it no longer. He was very thirsty.

He had kept the door of his room open since Hunter arrived.

He listened intently. He felt certain that Hunter must be gone: he looked across the landing and could see Owen working in the front room. Philpot made a little ball of paper and threw it at him to attract his attention. Owen looked round and Philpot began to make signals: he pointed downwards with one hand and jerked the thumb of the other over his shoulder in the direction of the town, winking grotesquely the while. This Owen interpreted to be an inquiry as to whether Hunter had departed. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders to intimate that he did not know.

Philpot cautiously crossed the landing and peeped furtively over the banisters, listening breathlessly. ‘Was it gorn or not?’ he wondered.

He crept along on tiptoe towards Owen’s room, glancing left and right, the trowel in his hand, and looking like a stage murderer. ‘Do you think it’s gorn?’ he asked in a hoarse whisper when he reached Owen’s door.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Owen in a low tone.

Philpot wondered. He *must* have a drink, but it would never do for Hunter to see him with the bottle: he must find out somehow whether he was gone or not.

At last an idea came. He would go downstairs to get some more cement. Having confided this plan to Owen, he crept quietly back to the room in which he had been working, then he walked noisily across the landing again.

‘Got a bit of stopping to spare, Frank?’ he asked in a loud voice.

‘No,’ replied Owen. ‘I’m not using it.’

‘Then I suppose I’ll have to go down and get some. Is there anything I can bring up for you?’

‘No, thanks,’ replied Owen.

Philpot marched boldly down to the scullery, which Crass had utilized as a paint-shop. Crass was there mixing some colour.

‘I want a bit of stopping,’ Philpot said as he helped himself to some.

‘Is the b—r gorn?’ whispered Crass.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Philpot. ‘Where’s his bike?’

‘E always leaves it outside the gate, so’s we can’t see it,’ replied Crass.

‘Tell you what,’ whispered Philpot, after a pause, ‘Give the boy a hempty bottle and let ‘im go to the gate and look to the bikes there. If Misery sees him ‘e can pretend to be goin’ to the shop for some hoil.’

This was done. Bert went to the gate and returned immediately: the bike was gone. As the good news spread through the house a chorus of thanksgiving burst forth.

‘Thank Gord!’ said one.

‘Hope the b—r falls orf and breaks ‘is bloody neck,’ said another.

‘These Bible-thumpers are all the same; no one ever knew one to be any good yet,’ cried a third.

Directly they knew for certain that he was gone, nearly everyone left off work for a few minutes to curse him. Then they again went on working and now that they were relieved of the embarrassment

that Misery's presence inspired, they made better progress. A few of them lit their pipes and smoked as they worked.

One of these was old Jack Linden. He was upset by the bullying he had received, and when he noticed some of the others smoking he thought he would have a pipe; it might steady his nerves. As a rule he did not smoke when working; it was contrary to orders.

As Philpot was returning to work again he paused for a moment to whisper to Linden, with the result that the latter accompanied him upstairs.

On reaching Philpot's room the latter placed the step-ladder near the cupboard and, taking down the bottle of beer, handed it to Linden with the remark, 'Get some of that acrost yer, matey; it'll put yer right.'

While Linden was taking a hasty drink, Joe kept watch on the landing outside in case Hunter should suddenly and unexpectedly reappear.

When Linden was gone downstairs again, Philpot, having finished what remained of the beer and hidden the bottle up the chimney, resumed the work of stopping up the holes and cracks in the ceiling and walls. He must make a bit of a show tonight or there would be a hell of a row when Misery came in the morning.

Owen worked on in a disheartened, sullen way. He felt like a beaten dog.

He was more indignant on poor old Linden's account than on his own, and was oppressed by a sense of impotence and shameful degradation.

All his life it had been the same: incessant work under similar more or less humiliating conditions, and with no more result than being just able to avoid starvation.

And the future, as far as he could see, was as hopeless as the past; darker, for there would surely come a time, if he lived long enough, when he would be unable to work any more.

He thought of his child. Was he to be a slave and a drudge all his life also?

It would be better for the boy to die now.

As Owen thought of his child's future there sprung up within him a feeling of hatred and fury against the majority of his fellow workmen.

They were the enemy. Those who not only quietly submitted like so many cattle to the existing state of things, but defended it, and opposed and ridiculed any suggestion to alter it.

They were the real oppressors – the men who spoke of themselves as 'The likes of us,' who, having lived in poverty and degradation all their lives considered that what had been good enough for them was good enough for the children they had been the cause of bringing into existence.

He hated and despised them because they calmly saw their children condemned to hard labour and poverty for life, and deliberately refused to make any effort to secure for them better conditions than those they had themselves.

It was because they were indifferent to the fate of *their* children that he would be unable to secure a natural and human life for *his*. It was their apathy or active opposition that made it impossible to establish a better system of society under which those who did their fair share of the world's work would be honoured and rewarded. Instead of helping to do this, they abased themselves, and grovelled before their oppressors, and compelled and taught their children to do the same. *They* were the people who were really responsible for the continuance of the present system.

Owen laughed bitterly to himself. What a very comical system it was.

Those who worked were looked upon with contempt, and subjected to every possible indignity. Nearly everything they produced was taken away from them and enjoyed by the people who did nothing. And then the workers bowed down and grovelled before those who had robbed them of the fruits of their labour and were childishly grateful to them for leaving anything at all.

No wonder the rich despised them and looked upon them as dirt. They *were* despicable. They *were* dirt. They admitted it and gloried in it.

While these thoughts were seething in Owen's mind, his fellow workmen were still patiently toiling on downstairs. Most of them had by this time dismissed Hunter from their thoughts. They did not take things so seriously as Owen. They flattered themselves that they had more sense than that. It could not be altered. Grin and bear it. After all, it was only for life! Make the best of things, and get your own back whenever you get a chance.

Presently Harlow began to sing. He had a good voice and it was a good song, but his mates just then did not appreciate either one or the other. His singing was the signal for an outburst of exclamations and catcalls.

'Shut it, for Christ's sake!'

'That's enough of that bloody row!'

And so on. Harlow stopped.

'How's the enemy?' asked Easton presently, addressing no one in particular.

'Don't know,' replied Bundy. 'It must be about half past four. Ask Slyme; he's got a watch.'

It was a quarter past four.

'It gets dark very early now,' said Easton.

'Yes,' replied Bundy. 'It's been very dull all day. I think it's goin' to rain. Listen to the wind.'

'I 'ope not,' replied Easton. 'That means a wet shirt goin' 'ome.'

He called out to old Jack Linden, who was still working at the front doors:

'Is it raining, Jack?'

Old Jack, his pipe still in his mouth, turned to look at the weather. It was raining, but Linden did not see the large drops which splashed heavily upon the ground. He saw only Hunter, who was standing at the gate, watching him. For a few seconds the two men looked at each other in silence. Linden was paralysed with fear. Recovering himself, he hastily removed his pipe, but it was too late.

Misery strode up.

'I don't pay you for smoking,' he said, loudly. 'Make out your time sheet, take it to the office and get your money. I've had enough of you!'

Jack made no attempt to defend himself: he knew it was of no use. He silently put aside the things he had been using, went into the room where he had left his tool-bag and coat, removed his apron and white jacket, folded them up and put them into his tool-bag along with the tools he had been using – a chisel-knife and a shavehook – put on his coat, and, with the tool-bag slung over his shoulder, went away from the house.

Without speaking to anyone else, Hunter then hastily walked over the place, noting what progress had been made by each man during his absence. He then rode away, as he wanted to get to the office in time to give Linden his money.

It was now very cold and dark within the house, and as the gas was not yet laid on, Crass distributed a number of candles to the men, who worked silently, each occupied with his own gloomy thoughts. Who would be the next?

Outside, sombre masses of lead-coloured clouds gathered ominously in the tempestuous sky. The gale roared loudly round the old-fashioned house and the windows rattled discordantly. Rain fell in torrents.

They said it meant getting wet through going home, but all the same. Thank God it was nearly five o'clock!

3 The Financiers

That night as Easton walked home through the rain he felt very depressed. It had been a very bad summer for most people and he had not fared better than the rest. A few weeks with one firm, a few days with another, then out of a job, then on again for a month perhaps, and so on.

William Easton was a man of medium height, about twenty-three years old, with fair hair and moustache and blue eyes. He wore a stand-up collar with a coloured tie and his clothes, though shabby, were clean and neat.

He was married: his wife was a young woman whose acquaintance he had made when he happened to be employed with others painting the outside of the house where she was a general servant. They had 'walked out' for about fifteen months. Easton had been in no hurry to marry, for he knew that, taking good times with bad, his wages did not average a pound a week. At the end of that time, however, he found that he could not honourably delay longer, so they were married.

That was twelve months ago.

As a single man he had never troubled much if he happened to be out of work; he always had enough to live on and pocket money besides, but now that he was married it was different; the fear of being 'out' haunted him all the time.

He had started for Rushton & Co. on the previous Monday after having been idle for three weeks, and as the house where he was working had to be done right through he had congratulated himself on having secured a job that would last till Christmas; but he now began to fear that what had befallen Jack Linden might also happen to himself at any time. He would have to be very careful not to offend Crass in any way. He was afraid the latter did not like him very much as it was. Easton knew that Crass could get him the sack at any time and would not scruple to do so if he wanted to make room for some crony of his own. Crass was the 'caddy' or foreman of the job. Considered as a workman he had no very unusual abilities; he was if anything inferior to the majority of his fellow workmen. But although he had but little real ability he pretended to know everything, and the vague references he was in the habit of making to 'tones', and 'shades', and 'harmony', had so impressed Hunter that the latter had a high opinion of him as a workman. It was by pushing himself forward in this way and by judicious toadying to Hunter that Crass managed to get himself put in charge of work.

Although Crass did as little work as possible himself he took care that the others worked hard. Any man who failed to satisfy him in this respect he reported to Hunter as being 'no good', or 'too slow for a funeral'. The result was that this man was dispensed with at the end of the week. The men knew this, and most of them feared the wily Crass accordingly, though there were a few whose known abilities placed them to a certain extent above the reach of his malice. Frank Owen was one of these.

There were others who by the judicious administration of pipefuls of tobacco and pints of beer, managed to keep in Crass's good graces and often retained their employment when better workmen were 'stood off'.

As he walked home through the rain thinking of these things, Easton realized that it was not possible to foresee what a day or even an hour might bring forth.

By this time he had arrived at his home; it was a small house, one of a long row of similar ones, and it contained altogether four rooms.

The front door opened into a passage about two feet six inches wide and ten feet in length, covered with oilcloth. At the end of the passage was a flight of stairs leading to the upper part of the house. The first door on the left led into the front sitting-room, an apartment about nine feet square, with a bay window. This room was very rarely used and was always very tidy and clean. The mantelpiece was of wood painted black and ornamented with jagged streaks of red and yellow, which were supposed to give it the appearance of marble. On the walls was a paper with a pale terra-cotta ground and a pattern consisting of large white roses with chocolate coloured leaves and stalks.

There was a small iron fender with fire-irons to match, and on the mantelshelf stood a clock in a polished wood case, a pair of blue glass vases, and some photographs in frames. The floor was covered with oilcloth of a tile pattern in yellow and red. On the walls were two or three framed coloured prints such as are presented with Christmas numbers of illustrated papers. There was also a photograph of a group of Sunday School girls with their teachers with the church for the background. In the centre of the room was a round deal table about three feet six inches across, with the legs stained red to look like mahogany. Against one wall was an old couch covered with faded cretonne, four chairs to match standing backs to wall in different parts of the room. The table was covered with a red cloth with a yellow crewel work design in the centre and in each of the four corners, the edges being overcast in the same material. On the table were a lamp and a number of brightly bound books.

Some of these things, as the couch and the chairs, Easton had bought second-hand and had done up himself. The table, oilcloth, fender, hearthrug, etc, had been obtained on the hire system and were not yet paid for. The windows were draped with white lace curtains and in the bay was a small bamboo table on which reposed a large Holy Bible, cheaply but showily bound.

If anyone had ever opened this book they would have found that its pages were as clean as the other things in the room, and on the flyleaf might have been read the following inscription: 'To dear Ruth, from her loving friend Mrs Starvem with the prayer that God's word may be her guide and that Jesus may be her very own Saviour. Oct. 12. 19 -'

Mrs Starvem was Ruth's former mistress, and this had been her parting gift when Ruth left to get married. It was supposed to be a keepsake, but as Ruth never opened the book and never willingly allowed her thoughts to dwell upon the scenes of which it reminded her, she had forgotten the existence of Mrs Starvem almost as completely as that well-to-do and pious lady had forgotten hers.

For Ruth, the memory of the time she spent in the house of 'her loving friend' was the reverse of pleasant. It comprised a series of recollections of petty tyrannies, insults and indignities. Six years of cruelly excessive work, beginning every morning two or three hours before the rest of the household were awake and ceasing only when she went exhausted to bed, late at night.

She had been what is called a 'slavey' but if she had been really a slave her owner would have had some regard for her health and welfare: her 'loving friend' had had none. Mrs Starvem's only thought had been to get out of Ruth the greatest possible amount of labour and to give her as little as possible in return.

When Ruth looked back upon that dreadful time she saw it, as one might say, surrounded by a halo of religion. She never passed by a chapel or heard the name of God, or the singing of a hymn, without thinking of her former mistress. To have looked into this Bible would have reminded her of Mrs Starvem; that was one of the reasons why the book reposed, unopened and unread, a mere ornament on the table in the bay window.

The second door in the passage near the foot of the stairs led into the kitchen or living-room: from here another door led into the scullery. Upstairs were two bedrooms.

As Easton entered the house, his wife met him in the passage and asked him not to make a noise as the child had just gone to sleep. They kissed each other and she helped him to remove his wet overcoat. Then they both went softly into the kitchen.

This room was about the same size as the sitting-room. At one end was a small range with an oven and a boiler, [and] a high mantelpiece painted black. On the mantelshelf was a small round alarm clock and some brightly polished tin canisters. At the other end of the room, facing the fireplace, was a small dresser on the shelves of which were neatly arranged a number of plates and dishes. The walls were papered with oak paper. On one wall, between two coloured almanacks, hung a tin lamp with a reflector behind the light. In the middle of the room was an oblong deal table with a white tablecloth upon which the tea things were set ready. There were four kitchen chairs, two of which were placed close to the table. Overhead, across the room, about eighteen inches down from the ceiling, were stretched several cords upon which were drying a number of linen or calico undergarments, a coloured

shirt, and Easton's white apron and jacket. On the back of a chair at one side of the fire more clothes were drying. At the other side on the floor was a wicker cradle in which a baby was sleeping. Nearby stood a chair with a towel hung on the back, arranged so as to shade the infant's face from the light of the lamp. An air of homely comfort pervaded the room; the atmosphere was warm, and the fire blazed cheerfully over the whitened hearth.

They walked softly over and stood by the cradle side looking at the child; as they looked the baby kept moving uneasily in its sleep. Its face was very flushed and its eyes were moving under the half-closed lids. Every now and again its lips were drawn back slightly, showing part of the gums; presently it began to whimper, drawing up its knees as if in pain.

'He seems to have something wrong with him,' said Easton.

'I think it's his teeth,' replied the mother. 'He's been very restless all day and he was awake nearly all last night.'

'P'r'aps he's hungry.'

'No, it can't be that. He had the best part of an egg this morning and I've nursed him several times today. And then at dinner-time he had a whole saucer full of fried potatoes with little bits of bacon in it.'

Again the infant whimpered and twisted in its sleep, its lips drawn back showing the gums: its knees pressed closely to its body, the little fists clenched, and face flushed. Then after a few seconds it became placid: the mouth resumed its usual shape; the limbs relaxed and the child slumbered peacefully.

'Don't you think he's getting thin?' asked Easton. 'It may be fancy, but he don't seem to me to be as big now as he was three months ago.'

'No, he's not quite so fat,' admitted Ruth. 'It's his teeth what's wearing him out; he don't hardly get no rest at all with them.'

They continued looking at him a little longer. Ruth thought he was a very beautiful child: he would be eight months old on Sunday. They were sorry they could do nothing to ease his pain, but consoled themselves with the reflection that he would be all right once those teeth were through.

'Well, let's have some tea,' said Easton at last.

Whilst he removed his wet boots and socks and placed them in front of the fire to dry and put on dry socks and a pair of slippers in their stead, Ruth half filled a tin basin with hot water from the boiler and gave it to him, and he then went into the scullery, added some cold water and began to wash the paint off his hands. This done he returned to the kitchen and sat down at the table.

'I couldn't think what to give you to eat tonight,' said Ruth as she poured out the tea. 'I hadn't got no money left and there wasn't nothing in the house except bread and butter and that piece of cheese, so I cut some bread and butter and put some thin slices of cheese on it and toasted it on a place in front of the fire. I hope you'll like it: it was the best I could do.'

'That's all right: it smells very nice anyway, and I'm very hungry.'

As they were taking their tea Easton told his wife about Linden's affair and his apprehensions as to what might befall himself. They were both very indignant, and sorry for poor old Linden, but their sympathy for him was soon almost forgotten in their fears for their own immediate future.

They remained at the table in silence for some time: then,

'How much rent do we owe now?' asked Easton.

'Four weeks, and I promised the collector the last time he called that we'd pay two weeks next Monday. He was quite nasty about it.'

'Well, I suppose you'll have to pay it, that's all,' said Easton.

'How much money will you have tomorrow?' asked Ruth.

He began to reckon up his time: he started on Monday and today was Friday; five days, from seven to five, less half an hour for breakfast and an hour for dinner, eight and a half hours a day – forty-two hours and a half. At sevenpence an hour that came to one pound four and ninepence halfpenny.

‘You know I only started on Monday,’ he said, ‘so there’s no back day to come. Tomorrow goes into next week.’

‘Yes, I know,’ replied Ruth.

‘If we pay the two week’s rent that’ll leave us twelve shillings to live on.’

But we won’t be able to keep all that,’ said Ruth, ‘because there’s other things to pay.’

‘What other things?’

‘We owe the baker eight shillings for the bread he let us have while you were not working, and there’s about twelve shillings owing for groceries. We’ll have to pay them something on account. Then we want some more coal; there’s only about a shovelful left, and –’

‘Wait a minit,’ said Easton. ‘The best way is to write out a list of everything we owe; then we shall know exactly where we are. You get me a piece of paper and tell me what to write. Then we’ll see what it all comes to.’

‘Do you mean everything we owe, or everything we must pay tomorrow.’

‘I think we’d better make a list of all we owe first.’

While they were talking the baby was sleeping restlessly, occasionally uttering plaintive little cries. The mother now went and knelt at the side of the cradle, which she gently rocked with one hand, patting the infant with the other.

‘Except the furniture people, the biggest thing we owe is the rent,’ she said when Easton was ready to begin.

‘It seems to me,’ said he, as, after having cleared a space on the table and arranged the paper, he began to sharpen his pencil with a table-knife, ‘that you don’t manage things as well as you might. If you was to make a list of just the things you *must* have before you went out of a Saturday, you’d find the money would go much farther. Instead of doing that you just take the money in your hand without knowing exactly what you’re going to do with it, and when you come back it’s all gone and next to nothing to show for it.’

His wife made no reply: her head was bent over the child.

‘Now, let’s see,’ went on her husband. ‘First of all there’s the rent. How much did you say we owe?’

‘Four weeks. That’s the three weeks you were out and this week.’

‘Four sixes is twenty-four; that’s one pound four,’ said Easton as he wrote it down. ‘Next?’

‘Grocer, twelve shillings.’

Easton looked up in astonishment.

‘Twelve shillings. Why, didn’t you tell me only the other day that you’d paid up all we owed for groceries?’

‘Don’t you remember we owed thirty-five shillings last spring? Well, I’ve been paying that bit by bit all the summer. I paid the last of it the week you finished your last job. Then you were out three weeks – up till last Saturday – and as we had nothing in hand I had to get what we wanted without paying for it.’

‘But do you mean to say it cost us three shillings a week for tea and sugar and butter?’

‘It’s not only them. There’s been bacon and eggs and cheese and other things.’

The man was beginning to become impatient.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘What else?’

‘We owe the baker eight shillings. We did owe nearly a pound, but I’ve been paying it off a little at a time.’

This was added to the list.

‘Then there’s the milkman. I’ve not paid him for four weeks. He hasn’t sent a bill yet, but you can reckon it up; we have two penn’orth every day.’

‘That’s four and eight,’ said Easton, writing it down. ‘Anything else?’

‘One and seven to the greengrocer for potatoes, cabbage, and paraffin oil.’

‘Anything else?’

‘We owe the butcher two and sevenpence.’

‘Why, we haven’t had any meat for a long time,’ said Easton. ‘When was it?’

‘Three weeks ago; don’t you remember? A small leg of mutton.’

‘Oh, yes,’ and he added the item.

‘Then there’s the instalments for the furniture and oilcloth – twelve shillings. A letter came from them today. And there’s something else.’

She took three letters from the pocket of her dress and handed them to him.

‘They all came today. I didn’t show them to you before as I didn’t want to upset you before you had your tea.’

Easton drew the first letter from its envelope.

CORPORATION OF MUGSBOROUGH

General District and Special Rates

FINAL NOTICE

MR W. EASTON,

I have to remind you that the amount due from you as under, in respect of the above Rates, has not been paid, and to request that you will forward the same within Fourteen Days from this date. You are hereby informed that after this notice no further call will be made, or intimation given, before legal proceedings are taken to enforce payment.

By order of the Council.

JAMES LEAH.

Collector, No. 2 District.

District Rate	£– 13 11
Special Rate	10 2
	<hr/>
	£1 4 1

The second communication was dated from the office of the Assistant Overseer of the Poor. It was also a Final Notice and was worded in almost exactly the same way as the other, the principal difference being that it was ‘By order of the Overseers’ instead of ‘the Council’. It demanded the sum of £1 1 5 ¹/₂ for Poor Rate within fourteen days, and threatened legal proceedings in default.

Easton laid this down and began to read the third letter –

J. DIDLUM & CO LTD.

Complete House Furnishers

QUALITY STREET, MUGSBOROUGH

MR W. EASTON,

SIR:

We have to remind you that three monthly payments of four shillings each (12/- in all) became due on the first of this month, and we must request you to let us have this amount *by return of post*.

Under the terms of your agreement you guaranteed that the money should be paid on the Saturday of every fourth week. To prevent unpleasantness, we must request you for the future to forward the full amount punctually upon that day.

Yours truly,

J. DIDLUM & CO. LTD

He read these communications several times in silence and finally with an oath threw them down on the table.

‘How much do we still owe for the oilcloth and the furniture?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know exactly. It was seven pound odd, and we’ve had the things about six months. We paid one pound down and three or four instalments. I’ll get you the card if you like.’

‘No; never mind. Say we’ve paid one pound twelve; so we still owe about six pound.’

He added this amount to the list.

‘I think it’s a great pity we ever had the things at all,’ he said, peevishly. ‘It would have been much better to have gone without until we could pay cash for them: but you would have your way, of course. Now we’ll have this bloody debt dragging on us for years, and before the dam stuff is paid for it’ll be worn out.’

The woman did not reply at once. She was bending down over the cradle arranging the coverings which the restless movements of the child had disordered. She was crying silently, unnoticed by her husband.

For months past – in fact ever since the child was born – she had been existing without sufficient food. If Easton was unemployed they had to stint themselves so as to avoid getting further into debt than was absolutely necessary. When he was working they had to go short in order to pay what they owed; but of what there was Easton himself, without knowing it, always had the greater share. If he was at work she would pack into his dinner basket overnight the best there was in the house. When he was out of work she often pretended, as she gave him his meals, that she had had hers while he was out. And all this time the baby was draining her life away and her work was never done.

She felt very weak and weary as she crouched there, crying furtively and trying not to let him see.

At last she said, without looking round:

‘You know quite well that you were just as much in favour of getting them as I was. If we hadn’t got the oilcloth there would have been illness in the house because of the way the wind used to come up between the floorboards. Even now of a windy day the oilcloth moves up and down.’

‘Well, I’m sure I don’t know,’ said Easton, as he looked alternatively at the list of debts and the three letters. ‘I give you nearly every farthing I earn and I never interfere about anything, because I think it’s your part to attend to the house, but it seems to me you don’t manage things properly.’

The woman suddenly burst into a passion of weeping, laying her head on the seat of the chair that was standing near the cradle.

Easton started up in surprise.

‘Why, what’s the matter?’ he said.

Then as he looked down upon the quivering form of the sobbing woman, he was ashamed. He knelt down by her, embracing her and apologizing, protesting that he had not meant to hurt her like that.

‘I always do the best I can with the money,’ Ruth sobbed. ‘I never spend a farthing on myself, but you don’t seem to understand how hard it is. I don’t care nothing about having to go without things myself, but I can’t bear it when you speak to me like you do lately. You seem to blame me for everything. You usen’t to speak to me like that before I – before – Oh, I am so tired – I am so tired, I wish I could lie down somewhere and sleep and never wake up any more.’

She turned away from him, half kneeling, half sitting on the floor, her arms folded on the seat of the chair, and her head resting upon them. She was crying in a heartbroken helpless way.

‘I’m sorry I spoke to you like that,’ said Easton, awkwardly. ‘I didn’t mean what I said. It’s all my fault. I leave things too much to you, and it’s more than you can be expected to manage. I’ll help you to think things out in future; only forgive me, I’m very sorry. I know you try your best.’

She suffered him to draw her to him, laying her head on his shoulder as he kissed and fondled her, protesting that he would rather be poor and hungry with her than share riches with anyone else.

The child in the cradle – who had been twisting and turning restlessly all this time – now began to cry loudly. The mother took it from the cradle and began to hush and soothe it, walking about the room and rocking it in her arms. The child, however, continued to scream, so she sat down to

nurse it: for a little while the infant refused to drink, struggling and kicking in its mother's arms, then for a few minutes it was quiet, taking the milk in a half-hearted, fretful way. Then it again began to scream and twist and struggle.

They both looked at it in a helpless manner. Whatever could be the matter with it? It must be those teeth.

Then suddenly as they were soothing and patting him, the child vomited all over its own and its mother's clothing a mass of undigested food. Mingled with the curdled milk were fragments of egg, little bits of bacon, bread and particles of potato.

Having rid his stomach of this unnatural burden, the unfortunate baby began to cry afresh, his face very pale, his lips colourless, and his eyes red-rimmed and running with water.

Easton walked about with him while Ruth cleaned up the mess and got ready some fresh clothing. They both agreed that it was the coming teeth that had upset the poor child's digestion. It would be a good job when they were through.

This work finished, Easton, who was still convinced in his own mind that with the aid of a little common sense and judicious management their affairs might be arranged more satisfactorily, said:

'We may as well make a list of all the things we must pay and buy tomorrow. The great thing is to think out exactly what you are going to do before you spend anything; that saves you from getting things you don't really need and prevents you forgetting the things you *must* have. Now, first of all, the rent; two weeks, twelve shillings.'

He took a fresh piece of paper and wrote this item down.

'What else is there that we must pay or buy tomorrow?'

'Well, you know I promised the baker and the grocer that I would begin to pay them directly you got a job, and if I don't keep my word they won't let us have anything another time, so you'd better put down two shillings each for them.'

'I've got that,' said Easton.

'Two and seven for the butcher. We must pay that. I'm ashamed to pass the shop, because when I got the meat I promised to pay him the next week, and it's nearly three weeks ago now.'

'I've put that down. What else?'

'A hundred of coal: one and six.'

'Next?'

'The instalment for the furniture and floor-cloth, twelve shillings.'

'Next?'

'We owe the milkman four weeks; we'd better pay one week on account; that's one and two.'

'Next?'

'The greengrocer; one shilling on account.'

'Anything else?'

'We shall want a piece of meat of some kind; we've had none for nearly three weeks. You'd better say one and six for that.'

'That's down.'

'One and nine for bread; that's one loaf a day.'

'But I've got two shillings down for bread already,' said Easton.

'Yes, I know, dear, but that's to go towards paying off what we owe, and what you have down for the grocer and milkman's the same.'

'Well, go on, for Christ's sake, and let's get it down,' said Easton, irritably.

'We can't say less than three shillings for groceries.'

Easton looked carefully at his list. This time he felt sure that the item was already down; but finding he was mistaken he said nothing and added the amount.

'Well, I've got that. What else?'

'Milk, one and two.'

‘Next?’

‘Vegetables, eightpence.’

‘Yes.’

‘Paraffin oil and firewood, sixpence.’

Again the financier scrutinized the list. He was positive that it was down already. However, he could not find it, so the sixpence was added to the column of figures.

‘Then there’s your boots; you can’t go about with them old things in this weather much longer, and they won’t stand mending again. You remember the man said they were not worth it when you had that patch put on a few weeks ago.’

‘Yes. I was thinking of buying a new pair tomorrow. My socks was wet through tonight. If it’s raining some morning when I’m going out and I have to work all day with wet feet I shall be laid up.’

‘At that second-hand shop down in High Street I saw when I was out this afternoon a very good pair just your size, for two shillings.’

Easton did not reply at once. He did not much fancy wearing the cast-off boots of some stranger, who for all he knew might have suffered from some disease, but then remembering that his old ones were literally falling off his feet he realized that he had practically no choice.

‘If you’re quite sure they’ll fit you’d better get them. It’s better to do that than for me to catch cold and be laid up for God knows how long.’

So the two shillings were added to the list.

‘Is there anything else?’

‘How much does it come to now?’ asked Ruth.

Easton added it all up. When he had finished he remained staring at the figures in consternation for a long time without speaking.

‘Jesus Christ!’ he ejaculated at last.

‘What’s it come to?’ asked Ruth.

‘Forty-four and tenpence.’

‘I knew we wouldn’t have enough,’ said Ruth, wearily. ‘Now if you think I manage so badly, p’raps you can tell me which of those things we ought to leave out.’

‘We’d be all right if it wasn’t for the debts,’ said Easton, doggedly.

‘When you’re not working, we must either get into debt or starve.’

Easton made no answer.

‘What’ll we do about the rates?’ asked Ruth.

‘I’m sure I don’t know: there’s nothing left to pawn except my black coat and vest. You might get something on that.’

‘It’ll have to be paid somehow,’ said Ruth, ‘or you’ll be taken off to jail for a month, the same as Mrs Newman’s husband was last winter.’

‘Well, you’d better take the coat and vest and see what you can get on ‘em tomorrow.’

‘Yes,’ said Ruth; ‘and there’s that brown silk dress of mine – you know, the one I wore when we was married – I might get something on that, because we won’t get enough on the coat and vest. I don’t like parting with the dress, although I never wear it; but we’ll be sure to be able to get it out again, won’t we?’

‘Of course,’ said Easton.

They remained silent for some time, Easton staring at the list of debts and the letters. She was wondering if he still thought she managed badly, and what he would do about it. She knew she had always done her best. At last she said, wistfully, trying to speak plainly for there seemed to be a lump in her throat: ‘And what about tomorrow? Would you like to spend the money yourself, or shall I manage as I’ve done before, or will you tell me what to do?’

‘I don’t know, dear,’ said Easton, sheepishly. ‘I think you’d better do as you think best.’

‘Oh, I’ll manage all right, dear, you’ll see,’ replied Ruth, who seemed to think it a sort of honour to be allowed to starve herself and to wear shabby clothes.

The baby, who had been for some time quietly sitting upon his mother’s lap, looking wonderingly at the fire – his teeth appeared to trouble him less since he got rid of the eggs and bacon and potatoes – now began to nod and doze, which Easton perceiving, suggested that the infant should not be allowed to go to sleep with an empty stomach, because it would probably wake up hungry in the middle of the night. He therefore woke him up as much as possible and mashed a little of the bread and toasted cheese with a little warm milk. Then taking the baby from Ruth he began to try to induce it to eat. As soon, however, as the child understood his object, it began to scream at the top of its voice, closing its lips firmly and turning its head rapidly from side to side every time the spoon approached its mouth. It made such a dreadful noise that Easton at last gave in. He began to walk about the room with it, and presently the child sobbed itself to sleep. After putting the baby into its cradle Ruth set about preparing Easton’s breakfast and packing it into his basket. This did not take very long, there being only bread and butter – or, to be more correct, margarine.

Then she poured what tea was left in the tea-pot into a small saucepan and placed it on the top of the oven, but away from the fire; cut two more slices of bread and spread on them all the margarine that was left; then put them on a plate on the table, covering them with a saucer to prevent them getting hard and dry during the night. Near the plate she placed a clean cup and saucer and the milk and sugar.

In the morning Easton would light the fire and warm up the tea in the saucepan so as to have a cup of tea before going out. If Ruth was awake and he was not pressed for time, he generally took a cup of tea to her in bed.

Nothing now remained to be done but to put some coal and wood ready in the fender so that there would be no unnecessary delay in the morning.

The baby was still sleeping and Ruth did not like to wake him up yet to dress him for the night. Easton was sitting by the fire smoking, so everything being done, Ruth sat down at the table and began sewing. Presently she spoke:

‘I wish you’d let me try to let that back room upstairs: the woman next door has got hers let unfurnished to an elderly woman and her husband for two shillings a week. If we could get someone like that it would be better than having an empty room in the house.’

‘And we’d always have them messing about down here, cooking and washing and one thing and another,’ objected Easton; ‘they’d be more trouble than they was worth.’

‘Well, we might try and furnish it. There’s Mrs Crass across the road has got two lodgers in one room. They pay her twelve shillings a week each; board, lodging and washing. That’s one pound four she has coming in reglar every week. If we could do the same we’d very soon be out of debt.’

‘What’s the good of talking? You’d never be able to do the work even if we had the furniture.’

‘Oh, the work’s nothing,’ replied Ruth, ‘and as for the furniture, we’ve got plenty of spare bedclothes, and we could easily manage without a washstand in our room for a bit, so the only thing we really want is a small bedstead and mattress; we could get them very cheap second-hand.’

‘There ought to be a chest of drawers,’ said Easton doubtfully.

‘I don’t think so,’ replied Ruth. ‘There’s a cupboard in the room and whoever took it would be sure to have a box.’

‘Well, if you think you can do the work I’ve no objection,’ said Easton. ‘It’ll be a nuisance having a stranger in the way all the time, but I suppose we must do something of the sort or else we’ll have to give up the house and take a couple of rooms somewhere. That would be worse than having lodgers ourselves.’

‘Let’s go and have a look at the room,’ he added, getting up and taking the lamp from the wall.

They had to go up two flights of stairs before arriving at the top landing, where there were two doors, one leading into the front room – their bedroom – and the other into the empty back room.

These two doors were at right angles to each other. The wallpaper in the back room was damaged and soiled in several places.

‘There’s nearly a whole roll of this paper on the top of the cupboard,’ said Ruth. ‘You could easily mend all those places. We could hang up a few almanacks on the walls; our washstand could go there by the window; a chair just there, and the bed along that wall behind the door. It’s only a small window, so I could easily manage to make a curtain out of something. I’m sure I could make the room look quite nice without spending hardly anything.’

Easton reached down the roll of paper. It was the same pattern as that on the wall. The latter was a good deal faded, of course, but it would not matter much if the patches showed a little. They returned to the kitchen.

‘Do you think you know anyone who would take it?’ asked Ruth. Easton smoked thoughtfully. No,’ he said at length. ‘But I’ll mention it to one or two of the chaps on the job; they might know of someone.’

‘And I’ll get Mrs Crass to ask her lodgers: p’raps they might have a friend what would like to live near them.’

So it was settled; and as the fire was nearly out and it was getting late, they prepared to retire for the night. The baby was still sleeping, so Easton lifted it, cradle and all, and carried it up the narrow staircase into the front bedroom, Ruth leading the way, carrying the lamp and some clothes for the child. So that the infant might be within easy reach of its mother during the night, two chairs were arranged close to her side of the bed and the cradle placed on them.

‘Now we’ve forgot the clock,’ said Easton, pausing. He was half undressed and had already removed his slippers.

‘I’ll slip down and get it,’ said Ruth.

‘Never mind, I’ll go,’ said Easton, beginning to put his slippers on again.

‘No, you get into bed. I’ve not started undressing yet, I’ll get it,’ replied Ruth who was already on her way down.

‘I don’t know as it was worth the trouble of going down,’ said Ruth when she returned with the clock. ‘It stopped three or four times today.’

‘Well, I hope it don’t stop in the night,’ Easton said. ‘It would be a bit of all right not knowing what time it was in the morning. I suppose the next thing will be that we’ll have to buy a new clock.’

He woke several times during the night and struck a match to see if it was yet time to get up. At half past two the clock was still going and he again fell asleep. The next time he woke up the ticking had ceased. He wondered what time it was? It was still very dark, but that was nothing to go by, because it was always dark at six now. He was wide awake: it must be nearly time to get up. It would never do to be late; he might get the sack.

He got up and dressed himself. Ruth was asleep, so he crept quietly downstairs, lit the fire and heated the tea. When it was ready he went softly upstairs again. Ruth was still sleeping, so he decided not to disturb her. Returning to the kitchen, he poured out and drank a cup of tea, put on his boots, overcoat and hat and taking his basket went out of the house.

The rain was still falling and it was very cold and dark. There was no one else in the street. Easton shivered as he walked along wondering what time it could be. He remembered there was a clock over the front of a jeweller’s shop a little way down the main road. When he arrived at this place he found that the clock being so high up he could not see the figures on the face distinctly, because it was still very dark. He stood staring for a few minutes vainly trying to see what time it was when suddenly the light of a bull’s-eye lantern was flashed into his eyes.

‘You’re about very early,’ said a voice, the owner of which Easton could not see. The light blinded him.

‘What time is it?’ said Easton. ‘I’ve got to get to work at seven and our clock stopped during the night.’

‘Where are you working?’

‘At “The Cave” in Elmore Road. You know, near the old toll gate.’

‘What are you doing there and who are you working for?’ the policeman demanded.

Easton explained.

‘Well,’ said the constable, ‘it’s very strange that you should be wandering about at this hour. It’s only about three-quarters of an hour’s walk from here to Elmore Road. You say you’ve got to get there at seven, and it’s only a quarter to four now. Where do you live? What’s your name?’ Easton gave his name and address and began repeating the story about the clock having stopped.

‘What you say may be all right or it may not,’ interrupted the policeman. ‘I’m not sure but that I ought to take you to the station. All I know about you is that I find you loitering outside this shop. What have you got in that basket?’

‘Only my breakfast,’ Easton said, opening the basket and displaying its contents.

‘I’m inclined to believe what you say,’ said the policeman, after a pause. ‘But to make quite sure I’ll go home with you. It’s on my beat, and I don’t want to run you in if you’re what you say you are, but I should advise you to buy a decent clock, or you’ll be getting yourself into trouble.’

When they arrived at the house Easton opened the door, and after making some entries in his note-book the officer went away, much to the relief of Easton, who went upstairs, set the hands of the clock right and started it going again. He then removed his overcoat and lay down on the bed in his clothes, covering himself with the quilt. After a while he fell asleep, and when he awoke the clock was still ticking.

The time was exactly seven o’clock.

4 The Placard

Frank Owen was the son of a journeyman carpenter who had died of consumption when the boy was only five years old. After that his mother earned a scanty living as a needle-woman. When Frank was thirteen he went to work for a master decorator who was a man of a type that has now almost disappeared, being not merely an employer but a craftsman of a high order.

He was an old man when Frank Owen went to work for him. At one time he had had a good business in the town, and used to boast that he had always done good work, had found pleasure in doing it and had been well paid for it. But of late years the number of his customers had dwindled considerably, for there had arisen a new generation which cared nothing about craftsmanship or art, and everything for cheapness and profit. From this man and by laborious study and practice in his spare time, aided by a certain measure of natural ability, the boy acquired a knowledge of decorative painting and design, and graining and signwriting.

Frank's mother died when he was twenty-four, and a year afterwards he married the daughter of a fellow workman. In those days trade was fairly good and although there was not much demand for the more artistic kinds of work, still the fact that he was capable of doing them, if required, made it comparatively easy for him to obtain employment. Owen and his wife were very happy. They had one child – a boy – and for some years all went well. But gradually this state of things altered: broadly speaking, the change came slowly and imperceptibly, although there were occasional sudden fluctuations.

Even in summer he could not always find work: and in winter it was almost impossible to get a job of any sort. At last, about twelve months before the date that this story opens, he determined to leave his wife and child at home and go to try his fortune in London. When he got employment he would send for them.

It was a vain hope. He found London, if anything, worse than his native town. Wherever he went he was confronted with the legend: 'No hands wanted'. He walked the streets day after day; pawned or sold all his clothes save those he stood in, and stayed in London for six months, sometimes starving and only occasionally obtaining a few days or weeks work.

At the end of that time he was forced to give in. The privations he had endured, the strain on his mind and the foul atmosphere of the city combined to defeat him. Symptoms of the disease that had killed his father began to manifest themselves, and yielding to the repeated entreaties of his wife he returned to his native town, the shadow of his former self.

That was six months ago, and since then he had worked for Rushton & Co. Occasionally when they had no work in hand, he was 'stood off until something came in.

Ever since his return from London, Owen had been gradually abandoning himself to hopelessness. Every day he felt that the disease he suffered from was obtaining a stronger grip on him. The doctor told him to 'take plenty of nourishing food', and prescribed costly medicines which Owen had not the money to buy.

Then there was his wife. Naturally delicate, she needed many things that he was unable to procure for her. And the boy – what hope was there for him? Often as Owen moodily thought of their circumstances and prospects he told himself that it would be far better if they could all three die now, together.

He was tired of suffering himself, tired of impotently watching the sufferings of his wife, and appalled at the thought of what was in store for the child.

Of this nature were his reflections as he walked homewards on the evening of the day when old Linden was dismissed. There was no reason to believe or hope that the existing state of things would be altered for a long time to come.

Thousands of people like himself dragged out a wretched existence on the very verge of starvation, and for the greater number of people life was one long struggle against poverty. Yet practically none of these people knew or even troubled themselves to inquire why they were in that condition; and for anyone else to try to explain to them was a ridiculous waste of time, for they did not want to know.

The remedy was so simple, the evil so great and so glaringly evident, that the only possible explanation of its continued existence was that the majority of his fellow workers were devoid of the power of reasoning. If these people were not mentally deficient they would of their own accord have swept this silly system away long ago. It would not have been necessary for anyone to teach them that it was wrong.

Why, even those who were successful or wealthy could not be sure that they would not eventually die of want. In every workhouse might be found people who had at one time occupied good positions; and their downfall was not in every case their own fault.

No matter how prosperous a man might be, he could not be certain that his children would never want for bread. There were thousands living in misery on starvation wages whose parents had been wealthy people.

As Owen strode rapidly along, his mind filled with these thoughts, he was almost unconscious of the fact that he was wet through to the skin. He was without an overcoat, it was pawned in London, and he had not yet been able to redeem it. His boots were leaky and sodden with mud and rain.

He was nearly home now. At the corner of the street in which he lived there was a newsagent's shop and on a board outside the door was displayed a placard:

TERRIBLE DOMESTIC TRAGEDY
DOUBLE MURDER AND SUICIDE

He went in to buy a copy of the paper. He was a frequent customer here, and as he entered the shopkeeper greeted him by name.

'Dreadful weather,' he remarked as he handed Owen the paper. 'It makes things pretty bad in your line, I suppose?'

'Yes,' responded Owen, 'there's a lot of men idle, but fortunately I happen to be working inside.'

'You're one of the lucky ones, then,' said the other. 'You know, there'll be a job here for some of 'em as soon as the weather gets a little better. All the outside of this block is going to be done up. That's a pretty big job, isn't it?'

'Yes,' returned Owen. 'Who's going to do it?'

'Makehaste and Sloggit. You know, they've got a place over at Windley.'

'Yes, I know the firm,' said Owen, grimly. He had worked for them once or twice himself.

'The foreman was in here today,' the shopkeeper went on. 'He said they're going to make a start Monday morning if it's fine.'

'Well, I hope it will be,' said Owen, 'because things are very quiet just now.'

Wishing the other 'Good night', Owen again proceeded homewards.

Half-way down the street he paused irresolutely: he was thinking of the news he had just heard and of Jack Linden.

As soon as it became generally known that this work was about to be started there was sure to be a rush after it, and it would be a case of first come, first served. If he saw Jack tonight the old man might be in time to secure a job.

Owen hesitated: he was wet through: it was a long way to Linden's place, nearly twenty minutes' walk. Still, he would like to let him know, because unless he was one of the first to apply, Linden would not stand such a good chance as a younger man. Owen said to himself that if he walked very fast there was not much risk of catching cold. Standing about in wet clothes might be dangerous, but so long as one kept moving it was all right.

He turned back and set off in the direction of Linden's house: although he was but a few yards from his own home, he decided not to go in because his wife would be sure to try to persuade him not to go out again.

As he hurried along he presently noticed a small dark object on the doorstep of an untenanted house. He stopped to examine it more closely and perceived that it was a small black kitten. The tiny creature came towards him and began walking about his feet, looking into his face and crying piteously. He stooped down and stroked it, shuddering as his hands came in contact with its emaciated body. Its fur was saturated with rain and every joint of its backbone was distinctly perceptible to the touch. As he caressed it, the starving creature mewed pathetically.

Owen decided to take it home to the boy, and as he picked it up and put it inside his coat the little outcast began to purr.

This incident served to turn his thoughts into another channel. If, as so many people pretended to believe, there was an infinitely loving God, how was it that this helpless creature that He had made was condemned to suffer? It had never done any harm, and was in no sense responsible for the fact that it existed. Was God unaware of the miseries of His creatures? If so, then He was not all-knowing. Was God aware of their sufferings, but unable to help them? Then He was not all-powerful. Had He the power but not the will to make His creatures happy? Then He was not good. No; it was impossible to believe in the existence of an individual, infinite God. In fact, no one did so believe; and least of all those who pretended for various reasons to be the disciples and followers of Christ. The anti-Christians who went about singing hymns, making long prayers and crying Lord, Lord, but never doing the things which He said, who were known by their works to be unbelievers and infidels, unfaithful to the Master they pretended to serve, their lives being passed in deliberate and systematic disregard of His teachings and Commandments. It was not necessary to call in the evidence of science, or to refer to the supposed inconsistencies, impossibilities, contradictions and absurdities contained in the Bible, in order to prove that there was no truth in the Christian religion. All that was necessary was to look at the conduct of the individuals who were its votaries.

5 The Clock-case

Jack Linden lived in a small cottage in Windley. He had occupied this house ever since his marriage, over thirty years ago.

His home and garden were his hobby: he was always doing something; painting, whitewashing, papering and so forth. The result was that although the house itself was not of much account he had managed to get it into very good order, and as a result it was very clean and comfortable.

Another result of his industry was that – seeing the improved appearance of the place – the landlord had on two occasions raised the rent. When Linden first took the house the rent was six shillings a week. Five years after, it was raised to seven shillings, and after the lapse of another five years it had been increased to eight shillings.

During the thirty years of his tenancy he had paid altogether nearly six hundred pounds in rent, more than double the amount of the present value of the house. Jack did not complain of this – in fact, he was very well satisfied. He often said that Mr Sweater was a very good landlord, because on several occasions when, being out of work, he had been a few weeks behind with his rent the agent acting for the benevolent Sweater had allowed Linden to pay off the arrears by instalments. As old Jack was in the habit of remarking, many a landlord would have sold up their furniture and turned them into the street.

As the reader is already aware, Linden's household consisted of his wife, his two grandchildren and his daughter-in-law, the widow and children of his youngest son, a reservist, who died while serving in the South African War. This man had been a plasterer, and just before the war he was working for Rushton & Co.

They had just finished their tea when Owen knocked at their front door. The young woman went to see who was there.

'Is Mr Linden in?'

'Yes. Who is it?'

'My name's Owen.'

Old Jack, however, had already recognized Owen's voice, and came to the door, wondering what he wanted.

'As I was going home I heard that Makehaste and Sloggit are going to start a large job on Monday, so I thought I'd run over and let you know.'

'Are they?' said Linden. 'I'll go and see them in the morning. But I'm afraid I won't stand much chance, because a lot of their regular hands are waiting for a job; but I'll go and see 'em all the same.'

'Well, you know, it's a big job. All the outside of that block at the corner of Kerk Street and Lord Street. They're almost sure to want a few extra hands.'

'Yes, there's something in that,' said Linden. 'Anyhow, I'm much obliged to you for letting me know; but come in out of the rain. You must be wet through.'

'No; I won't stay,' responded Owen. 'I don't want to stand about any longer than I can help in these wet clothes.'

'But it won't take you a minit to drink a cup of tea,' Linden insisted. 'I won't ask you to stop longer than that.'

Owen entered; the old man closed the door and led the way into the kitchen. At one side of the fire, Linden's wife, a frail-looking old lady with white hair, was seated in a large armchair, knitting. Linden sat down in a similar chair on the other side. The two grandchildren, a boy and girl about seven and eight years, respectively, were still seated at the table.

Standing by the side of the dresser at one end of the room was a treadle sewing machine, and on one end of the dresser was a pile of sewing: ladies' blouses in process of making. This was another instance of the goodness of Mr Sweater, from whom Linden's daughter-in-law obtained the work. It

was not much, because she was only able to do it in her spare time, but then, as she often remarked, every little helped.

The floor was covered with linoleum: there were a number of framed pictures on the walls, and on the high mantelshelf were a number of brightly polished tins and copper utensils. The room had that indescribable homelike, cosy air that is found only in those houses in which the inhabitants have dwelt for a very long time.

The younger woman was already pouring out a cup of tea.

Old Mrs Linden, who had never seen Owen before, although she had heard of him, belonged to the Church of England and was intensely religious. She looked curiously at the Atheist as he entered the room. He had taken off his hat and she was surprised to find that he was not repulsive to look at, rather the contrary. But then she remembered that Satan often appears as an angel of light. Appearances are deceitful. She wished that John had not asked him into the house and hoped that no evil consequences would follow. As she looked at him, she was horrified to perceive a small black head with a pair of glistening green eyes peeping out of the breast of his coat, and immediately afterwards the kitten, catching sight of the cups and saucers on the table, began to mew frantically and scrambled suddenly out of its shelter, inflicting a severe scratch on Owen's restraining hands as it jumped to the floor.

It clambered up the tablecloth and began rushing all over the table, darting madly from one plate to another, seeking something to eat.

The children screamed with delight. Their grandmother was filled with a feeling of superstitious alarm. Linden and the young woman stood staring with astonishment at the unexpected visitor.

Before the kitten had time to do any damage, Owen caught hold of it and, despite its struggles, lifted it off the table.

'I found it in the street as I was coming along,' he said. 'It seems to be starving.'

'Poor little thing. I'll give it something,' exclaimed the young woman.

She put some milk and bread into a saucer for it and the kitten ate ravenously, almost upsetting the saucer in its eagerness, much to the amusement of the two children, who stood by watching it admiringly.

Their mother now handed Owen a cup of tea. Linden insisted on his sitting down and then began to talk about Hunter.

'You know I *had* to spend some time on them doors to make 'em look anything at all; but it wasn't the time I took, or even the smoking what made 'im go on like that. He knows very well the time it takes. The real reason is that he thinks I was gettin' too much money. Work is done so rough nowadays that chaps like Sawkins is good enough for most of it. Hunter shoved me off just because I was getting the top money, and you'll see I won't be the only one.'

'I'm afraid you're right,' returned Owen. 'Did you see Rushton when you went for your money?'

'Yes,' replied Linden. 'I hurried up as fast as I could, but Hunter was there first. He passed me on his bike before I got half-way, so I suppose he told his tale before I came. Anyway, when I started to speak to Mr Rushton he wouldn't listen. Said he couldn't interfere between Mr Hunter and the men.'

'Ah! they're a bad lot, them two,' said the old woman, shaking her head sagely. 'But it'll all come 'ome to 'em, you'll see. They'll never prosper. The Lord will punish them.'

Owen did not feel very confident of that. Most of the people he knew who had prospered were very similar in character to the two worthies in question. However, he did not want to argue with this poor old woman.

'When Tom was called up to go to the war,' said the young woman, bitterly, 'Mr Rushton shook hands with him and promised to give him a job when he came back. But now that poor Tom's gone and they know that me and the children's got no one to look to but Father, they do *this*.'

Although at the mention of her dead son's name old Mrs Linden was evidently distressed, she was still mindful of the Atheist's presence, and hastened to rebuke her daughter-in-law.

‘You shouldn’t say we’ve got no one to look to, Mary,’ she said. ‘We’re not as them who are without God and without hope in the world. The Lord is our shepherd. He careth for the widow and the fatherless.’

Owen was very doubtful about this also. He had seen so many badly cared-for children about the streets lately, and what he remembered of his own sorrowful childhood was all evidence to the contrary.

An awkward silence succeeded. Owen did not wish to continue this conversation: he was afraid that he might say something that would hurt the old woman. Besides, he was anxious to get away; he began to feel cold in his wet clothes.

As he put his empty cup on the table he said:

‘Well, I must be going. They’ll be thinking I’m lost, at home.’

The kitten had finished all the bread and milk and was gravely washing its face with one of its forepaws, to the great admiration of the two children, who were sitting on the floor beside it. It was an artful-looking kitten, all black, with a very large head and a very small body. It reminded Owen of a tadpole.

‘Do you like cats?’ he asked, addressing the children.

‘Yes,’ said the boy. ‘Give it to us, will you, mister?’

‘Oh, do leave it ‘ere, mister,’ exclaimed the little girl. ‘I’ll look after it.’

‘So will I,’ said the boy.

‘But haven’t you one of your own?’ asked Owen.

‘Yes; we’ve got a big one.’

‘Well, if you have one already and I give you this, then you’d have two cats, and I’d have none. That wouldn’t be fair, would it?’

‘Well, you can ‘ave a lend of our cat for a little while if you give us this kitten,’ said the boy, after a moment’s thought.

‘Why would you rather have the kitten?’

‘Because it would play: our cat don’t want to play, it’s too old.’

‘Perhaps you’re too rough with it,’ returned Owen.

‘No, it ain’t that; it’s just because it’s old.’

‘You know cats is just the same as people,’ explained the little girl, wisely. ‘When they’re grown up I suppose they’ve got their troubles to think about.’

Owen wondered how long it would be before her troubles commenced. As he gazed at these two little orphans he thought of his own child, and of the rough and thorny way they would all three have to travel if they were so unfortunate as to outlive their childhood.

‘Can we ‘ave it, mister?’ repeated the boy.

Owen would have liked to grant the children’s request, but he wanted the kitten himself. Therefore he was relieved when their grandmother exclaimed:

‘We don’t want no more cats ‘ere: we’ve got one already; that’s quite enough.’

She was not yet quite satisfied in her mind that the creature was not an incarnation of the Devil, but whether it was or not she did not want it, or anything else of Owen’s, in this house. She wished he would go, and take his kitten or his familiar or whatever it was, with him. No good could come of his being there. Was it not written in the Word: ‘If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maran-atha.’ She did not know exactly what Anathema Maran-atha meant, but there could be no doubt that it was something very unpleasant. It was a terrible thing that this blasphemer who – as she had heard – did not believe there was a Hell and said that the Bible was not the Word of God, should be here in the house sitting on one of their chairs, drinking from one of their cups, and talking to their children.

The children stood by wistfully when Owen put the kitten under his coat and rose to go away.

As Linden prepared to accompany him to the front door, Owen, happening to notice a timepiece standing on a small table in the recess at one side of the fireplace, exclaimed:

‘That’s a very nice clock.’

‘Yes, it’s all right, ain’t it?’ said old Jack, with a touch of pride. ‘Poor Tom made that: not the clock itself, but just the case.’

It was the case that had attracted Owen’s attention. It stood about two feet high and was made of fretwork in the form of an Indian mosque, with a pointed dome and pinnacles. It was a very beautiful thing and must have cost many hours of patient labour.

‘Yes,’ said the old woman, in a trembling, broken voice, and looking at Owen with a pathetic expression. ‘Months and months he worked at it. and no one ever guessed who it were for. And then, when my birthday came round, the very first thing I saw when I woke up in the morning were the clock standing on a chair by the bed with a card:

‘To dear mother, from her loving son, Tom. Wishing her many happy birthdays.’

‘But he never had another birthday himself, because just five months afterwards he were sent out to Africa, and he’d only been there five weeks when he died. Five years ago, come the fifteenth of next month.’

Owen, inwardly regretting that he had unintentionally broached so painful a subject, tried to think of some suitable reply, but had to content himself with murmuring some words of admiration of the work.

As he wished her good night, the old woman, looking at him, could not help observing that he appeared very frail and ill: his face was very thin and pale, and his eyes were unnaturally bright.

Possibly the Lord in His infinite loving kindness and mercy was chastening this unhappy castaway in order that He might bring him to Himself. After all, he was not altogether bad: it was certainly very thoughtful of him to come all this way to let John know about that job. She observed that he had no overcoat, and the storm was still raging fiercely outside, furious gusts of wind frequently striking the house and shaking it to its very foundations.

The natural kindness of her character asserted itself; her better feelings were aroused, triumphing momentarily over the bigotry of her religious opinions.

‘Why, you ain’t got no overcoat!’ she exclaimed. ‘You’ll be soaked goin’ ’ome in this rain.’ Then, turning to her husband, she continued: ‘There’s that old one of yours; you might lend him that; it would be better than nothing.’

But Owen would not hear of this: he thought, as he became very conscious of the clammy feel of his saturated clothing, that he could not get much wetter than he already was. Linden accompanied him as far as the front door, and Owen once more set out on his way homeward through the storm that howled around like a wild beast hungry for its prey.

6 It is not My Crime

Owen and his family occupied the top floor of a house that had once been a large private dwelling but which had been transformed into a series of flats. It was situated in Lord Street, almost in the centre of the town.

At one time this had been a most aristocratic locality, but most of the former residents had migrated to the newer suburb at the west of the town. Notwithstanding this fact, Lord Street was still a most respectable neighbourhood, the inhabitants generally being of a very superior type: shop-walkers, shop assistants, barber's clerks, boarding house keepers, a coal merchant, and even two retired jerry-builders.

There were four other flats in the house in which Owen lived. No. 1 (the basement) was occupied by an estate agent's clerk. No. 2 – on a level with the street – was the habitat of the family of Mr Trafaim, a cadaverous-looking gentleman who wore a top hat, boasted of his French descent, and was a shop-walker at Sweater's Emporium. No. 3 was tenanted by an insurance agent, and in No. 4 dwelt a tallyman's traveller.

Lord Street – like most other similar neighbourhoods – supplied a striking answer to those futile theorists who prate of the equality of mankind, for the inhabitants instinctively formed themselves into groups, the more superior types drawing together, separating themselves from the inferior, and rising naturally to the top, while the others gathered themselves into distinct classes, grading downwards, or else isolated themselves altogether; being refused admission to the circles they desired to enter, and in their turn refusing to associate with their inferiors.

The most exclusive set consisted of the families of the coal merchant, the two retired jerry-builders and Mr Trafaim, whose superiority was demonstrated by the fact that, to say nothing of his French extraction, he wore – in addition to the top hat aforesaid – a frock coat and a pair of lavender trousers every day. The coal merchant and the jerry-builders also wore top hats, lavender trousers and frock coats, but only on Sundays and other special occasions. The estate agent's clerk and the insurance agent, though excluded from the higher circle, belonged to another select coterie from which they excluded in their turn all persons of inferior rank, such as shop assistants or barbers.

The only individual who was received with equal cordiality by all ranks, was the tallyman's traveller. But whatever differences existed amongst them regarding each other's social standing they were unanimous on one point at least: they were indignant at Owen's presumption in coming to live in such a refined locality.

This low fellow, this common workman, with his paint-bespattered clothing, his broken boots, and his generally shabby appearance, was a disgrace to the street; and as for his wife she was not much better, because although whenever she came out she was always neatly dressed, yet most of the neighbours knew perfectly well that she had been wearing the same white straw hat all the time she had been there. In fact, the only tolerable one of the family was the boy, and they were forced to admit that he was always very well dressed; so well indeed as to occasion some surprise, until they found out that all the boy's clothes were home-made. Then their surprise was changed into a somewhat grudging admiration of the skill displayed, mingled with contempt for the poverty which made its exercise necessary.

The indignation of the neighbours was increased when it became known that Owen and his wife were not Christians: then indeed everyone agreed that the landlord ought to be ashamed of himself for letting the top flat to such people.

But although the hearts of these disciples of the meek and lowly Jewish carpenter were filled with uncharitableness, they were powerless to do much harm. The landlord regarded their opinion with indifference. All he cared about was the money: although he also was a sincere Christian, he

would not have hesitated to let the top flat to Satan himself, provided he was certain of receiving the rent regularly.

The only one upon whom the Christians were able to inflict any suffering was the child. At first when he used to go out into the street to play, the other children, acting on their parents' instructions, refused to associate with him, or taunted him with his parents' poverty. Occasionally he came home heartbroken and in tears because he had been excluded from some game.

At first, sometimes the mothers of some of the better-class children used to come out with a comical assumption of superiority and dignity and compel their children to leave off playing with Frankie and some other poorly dressed children who used to play in that street. These females were usually overdressed and wore a lot of jewellery. Most of them fancied they were ladies, and if they had only had the sense to keep their mouths shut, other people might possibly have shared the same delusion.

But this was now a rare occurrence, because the parents of the other children found it a matter of considerable difficulty to prevent their youngsters from associating with those of inferior rank, for when left to themselves the children disregarded all such distinctions. Frequently in that street was to be seen the appalling spectacle of the ten-year-old son of the refined and fashionable Trafaim dragging along a cart constructed of a sugar box and an old pair of perambulator wheels with no tyres, in which reposed the plebeian Frankie Owen, armed with a whip, and the dowdy daughter of a barber's clerk: while the nine-year-old heir of the coal merchant rushed up behind...

[Owen's wife and little son were waiting for him in the living room.] This room was about twelve feet square and the ceiling – which was low and irregularly shaped, showing in places the formation of the roof – had been decorated by Owen with painted ornaments.

There were three or four chairs, and an oblong table, covered with a clean white tablecloth, set ready for tea. In the recess at the right of the fireplace – an ordinary open grate – were a number of shelves filled with a miscellaneous collection of books, most of which had been bought second-hand.

There were also a number of new books, mostly cheap editions in paper covers.

Over the back of a chair at one side of the fire, was hanging an old suit of Owen's, and some underclothing, which his wife had placed there to air, knowing that he would be wet through by the time he arrived home...

The woman was half-sitting, half lying, on a couch by the other side of the fire. She was very thin, and her pale face bore the traces of much physical and mental suffering. She was sewing, a task which her reclining position rendered somewhat difficult. Although she was really only twenty-eight years of age, she appeared older.

The boy, who was sitting on the hearthrug playing with some toys, bore a strong resemblance to his mother. He also, appeared very fragile and in his childish face was reproduced much of the delicate prettiness which she had once possessed. His feminine appearance was increased by the fact that his yellow hair hung in long curls on his shoulders. The pride with which his mother regarded this long hair was by no means shared by Frankie himself, for he was always entreating her to cut it off.

Presently the boy stood up and walking gravely over to the window, looked down into the street, scanning the pavement for as far as he could see: he had been doing this at intervals for the last hour.

'I wonder wherever he's got to,' he said, as he returned to the fire.

'I'm sure I don't know,' returned his mother. 'Perhaps he's had to work overtime.'

'You know, I've been thinking lately,' observed Frankie, after a pause, 'that it's a great mistake for Dad to go out working at all. I believe that's the very reason why we're so poor.'

'Nearly everyone who works is more or less poor, dear, but if Dad didn't go out to work we'd be even poorer than we are now. We should have nothing to eat.'

'But Dad says that the people who do nothing get lots of everything.'

'Yes, and it's quite true that most of the people who never do any work get lots of everything, but where do they get it from? And how do they get it?'

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ replied Frankie, shaking his head in a puzzled fashion.

‘Supposing Dad didn’t go to work, or that he had no work to go to, or that he was ill and not able to do any work, then we’d have no money to buy anything. How should we get on then?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ repeated Frankie, looking round the room in a thoughtful manner. ‘The chairs that’s left aren’t good enough to sell, and we can’t sell the beds, or your sofa, but you might pawn my velvet suit.’

‘But even if all the things were good enough to sell, the money we’d get for them wouldn’t last very long, and what should we do then?’

‘Well, I suppose we’d have to go without, that’s all, the same as we did when Dad was in London.’

‘But how do the people who never do any work manage to get lots of money then?’ added Frankie.

‘Oh, there’s lots of different ways. For instance, you remember when Dad was in London, and we had no food in the house, I had to sell the easy chair.’

Frankie nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I remember you wrote a note and I took it to the shop, and afterwards old Didlum came up here and bought it, and then his cart came and a man took it away.’

‘And do you remember how much he gave us for it?’

‘Five shillings,’ replied Frankie, promptly. He was well acquainted with the details of the transaction, having often heard his father and mother discuss it.

‘And when we saw it in his shop window a little while afterwards, what price was marked on it?’

‘Fifteen shillings.’

‘Well, that’s one way of getting money without working.’

Frankie played with his toys in silence for some minutes. At last he said:

‘What other ways?’

‘Some people who have some money already get more in this way: they find some people who have no money and say to them, “Come and work for us.” Then the people who have the money pay the workers just enough wages to keep them alive whilst they are at work. Then, when the things that the working people have been making are finished, the workers are sent away, and as they still have no money, they are soon starving. In the meantime the people who had the money take all the things that the workers have made and sell them for a great deal more money than they gave to the workers for making them. That’s another way of getting lots of money without doing any useful work.’

‘But is there no way to get rich without doing such things as that?’

‘It’s not possible for anyone to become rich without cheating other people.’

‘What about our schoolmaster then? He doesn’t do any work.’

‘Don’t you think it’s useful and necessary and also very hard work teaching all those boys every day? I don’t think I should like to have to do it.’

‘Yes, I suppose what he does *is* some use,’ said Frankie thoughtfully. ‘And it must be rather hard too, I should think. I’ve noticed he looks a bit worried sometimes, and sometimes he gets into a fine old wax when the boys don’t pay proper attention.’

The child again went over to the window, and pulling back the edge of the blind looked down the deserted rain washed street.

‘What about the vicar?’ he remarked as he returned.

Although Frankie did not go to church or Sunday School, the day school that he had attended was that attached to the parish church, and the vicar was in the habit of looking in occasionally.

‘Ah, he really is one of those who live without doing any necessary work, and of all the people who do nothing, the vicar is one of the very worst.’

Frankie looked up at his mother with some surprise, not because he entertained any very high opinion of clergymen in general, for, having been an attentive listener to many conversations between his parents, he had of course assimilated their opinions as far as his infant understanding permitted,

but because at the school the scholars were taught to regard the gentleman in question with the most profound reverence and respect.

‘Why, Mum?’ he asked.

‘For this reason, dearie. You know that all the beautiful things which the people who do nothing have are made by the people who work, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you know that those who work have to eat the very worst food, and wear the very worst clothes, and live in the very worst homes.’

‘Yes,’ said Frankie.

‘And sometimes they have nothing to eat at all, and no clothes to wear except rags, and even no homes to live in.’

‘Yes,’ repeated the child.

‘Well, the vicar goes about telling the Idlers that it’s quite right for them to do nothing, and that God meant them to have nearly everything that is made by those who work. In fact, he tells them that God made the poor for the use of the rich. Then he goes to the workers and tells them that God meant them to work very hard and to give all the good things they make to those who do nothing, and that they should be very thankful to God and to the idlers for being allowed to have even the very worst food to eat and the rags, and broken boots to wear. He also tells them that they mustn’t grumble, or be discontented because they’re poor in this world, but that they must wait till they’re dead, and then God will reward them by letting them go to a place called heaven.’

Frankie laughed.

‘And what about the Idlers?’ he asked.

‘The vicar says that if they believe everything he tells them and give him some of the money they make out of the workers, then God will let them into heaven also.’

‘Well, that’s not fair doos, is it, Mum?’ said Frankie with some indignation.

‘It wouldn’t be if it were true, but then you see it’s not true, it can’t be true.’

‘Why can’t it, Mum?’

‘Oh, for many reasons: to begin with, the vicar doesn’t believe it himself: he only pretends to. For instance, he pretends to believe the Bible, but if we read the Bible we find that Jesus said that God is our father and that all the people in the world are His children, all brothers and sisters. But the vicar says that although Jesus said “brothers and sisters” He really ought to have said “masters and servants”. Again, Jesus said that His disciples should not think of tomorrow, or save up a lot of money for themselves, but they should be unselfish and help those who are in need. Jesus said that His disciples must not think about their own future needs at all, because God will provide for them if they only do as He commands. But the vicar says that is all nonsense.

‘Jesus also said that if anyone tried to do His disciples harm, they must never resist, but forgive those who injured them and pray God to forgive them also. But the vicar says this is all nonsense too. He says that the world would never be able to go on if we did as Jesus taught. The vicar teaches that the way to deal with those that injure us is to have them put into prison, or – if they belong to some other country – to take guns and knives and murder them, and burn their houses. So you see the vicar doesn’t really believe or do any of the things that Jesus said: he only pretends.’

‘But why does he pretend, and go about talking like that, Mum? What does he do it for?’

‘Because he wishes to live without working himself, dear.’

‘And don’t the people know that he’s only pretending?’

‘Some of them do. Most of the idlers know that what the vicar says is not true, but they pretend to believe it, and give him money for saying it, because they want him to go on telling it to the workers so that they will go on working and keep quiet and be afraid to think for themselves.’

‘And what about the workers? Do they believe it?’

‘Most of them do, because when they were little children like you, their mothers taught them to believe, without thinking, whatever the vicar said, and that God made them for the use of the idlers. When they went to school, they were taught the same thing: and now that they’re grown up they really believe it, and they go to work and give nearly everything they make to the idlers, and have next to nothing left for themselves and their children. That’s the reason why the workers’ children have very bad clothes to wear and sometimes no food to eat; and that’s how it is that the idlers and their children have more clothes than they need and more food than they can eat. Some of them have so many clothes that they are not able to wear them and so much food that they are not able to eat it. They just waste it or throw it away.’

‘When I’m grown up into a man,’ said Frankie, with a flushed face, ‘I’m going to be one of the workers, and when we’ve made a lot of things, I shall stand up and tell the others what to do. If any of the idlers come to take our things away, they’ll get something they won’t like.’

In a state of suppressed excitement and scarcely conscious of what he was doing, the boy began gathering up the toys and throwing them violently one by one into the box.

‘I’ll teach ’em to come taking our things away,’ he exclaimed, relapsing momentarily into his street style of speaking.

‘First of all we’ll all stand quietly on one side. Then when the idlers come in and start touching our things, we’ll go up to ’em and say, “‘Ere, watcher doin’ of? Just you put it down, will yer?” And if they don’t put it down at once, it’ll be the worse for ’em, I can tell you.’

All the toys being collected, Frankie picked up the box and placed it noisily in its accustomed corner of the room.

‘I should think the workers will be jolly glad when they see me coming to tell them what to do, shouldn’t you, Mum?’

‘I don’t know, dear; you see so many people have tried to tell them, but they won’t listen, they don’t want to hear. They think it’s quite right that they should work very hard all their lives, and quite right that most of the things they help to make should be taken away from them by the people who do nothing. The workers think that their children are not as good as the children of the idlers, and they teach their children that as soon as ever they are old enough they must be satisfied to work very hard and to have only very bad food and clothes and homes.’

‘Then I should think the workers ought to be jolly well ashamed of themselves, Mum, don’t you?’

‘Well, in one sense they ought, but you must remember that that’s what they’ve always been taught themselves. First, their mothers and fathers told them so; then, their schoolteachers told them so; and then, when they went to church, the vicar and the Sunday School teacher told them the same thing. So you can’t be surprised that they now really believe that God made them and their children to make things for the use of the people who do nothing.’

‘But you’d think their own sense would tell them! How can it be right for the people who do nothing to have the very best and most of everything that’s made, and the very ones who make everything to have hardly any. Why even I know better than that, and I’m only six and a half years old.’

‘But then you’re different, dearie, you’ve been taught to think about it. and Dad and I have explained it to you, often.’

‘Yes, I know,’ replied Frankie confidently. ‘But even if you’d never taught me, I’m sure I should have tumbled to it all right by myself; I’m not such a juggins as you think I am.’

‘So you might, but you wouldn’t if you’d been brought up in the same way as most of the workers. They’ve been taught that it’s very wicked to use their own judgement, or to think. And their children are being taught so now. Do you remember what you told me the other day, when you came home from school, about the Scripture lesson?’

‘About St Thomas?’

‘Yes. What did the teacher say St Thomas was?’

‘She said he was a bad example; and she said I was worse than him because I asked too many foolish questions. She always gets in a wax if I talk too much.’

‘Well, why did she call St Thomas a bad example?’

‘Because he wouldn’t believe what he was told.’

‘Exactly: well, when you told Dad about it what did he say?’

‘Dad told me that really St Thomas was the only sensible man in the whole crowd of Apostles. That is,’ added Frankie, correcting himself, ‘if there ever was such a man at all.’

‘But did Dad say that there never was such a man?’

‘No; he said *he* didn’t believe there ever was, but he told me to just listen to what the teacher said about such things, and then to think about it in my own mind, and wait till I’m grown up and then I can use my own judgement.’

‘Well, now, that’s what *you* were told, but all the other children’s mothers and fathers tell them to believe, without thinking, whatever the teacher says. So it will be no wonder if those children are not able to think for themselves when they’re grown up, will it?’

‘Don’t you think it will be any use, then, for me to tell them what to do to the Idlers?’ asked Frankie, dejectedly.

‘Hark!’ said his mother, holding up her finger.

‘Dad!’ cried Frankie, rushing to the door and flinging it open. He ran along the passage and opened the staircase door before Owen reached the top of the last flight of stairs.

‘Why ever do you come up at such a rate,’ reproachfully exclaimed Owen’s wife as he came into the room exhausted from the climb upstairs and sank panting into the nearest chair.

‘I al–ways–for–get,’ he replied, when he had in some degree recovered. As he lay back in the chair, his face haggard and of a ghastly whiteness, and with the water dripping from his saturated clothing, Owen presented a terrible appearance.

Frankie noticed with childish terror the extreme alarm with which his mother looked at his father.

‘You’re always doing it,’ he said with a whimper. ‘How many more times will Mother have to tell you about it before you take any notice?’

‘It’s all right, old chap,’ said Owen, drawing the child nearer to him and kissing the curly head. ‘Listen, and see if you can guess what I’ve got for you under my coat.’

In the silence the purring of the kitten was distinctly audible.

‘A kitten!’ cried the boy, taking it out of its hiding-place. ‘All black, and I believe it’s half a Persian. Just the very thing I wanted.’

While Frankie amused himself playing with the kitten, which had been provided with another saucer of bread and milk, Owen went into the bedroom to put on the dry clothes, and then, those that he had taken off having been placed with his boots near the fire to dry, he explained as they were taking tea the reason of his late homecoming.

‘I’m afraid he won’t find it very easy to get another job,’ he remarked, referring to Linden. ‘Even in the summer nobody will be inclined to take him on. He’s too old.’

‘It’s a dreadful prospect for the two children,’ answered his wife.

‘Yes,’ replied Owen bitterly, it’s the children who will suffer most. As for Linden and his wife, although of course one can’t help feeling sorry for them, at the same time there’s no getting away from the fact that they deserve to suffer. All their lives they’ve been working like brutes and living in poverty. Although they have done more than their fair share of the work, they have never enjoyed anything like a fair share of the things they have helped to produce. And yet, all their lives they have supported and defended the system that robbed them, and have resisted and ridiculed every proposal to alter it. It’s wrong to feel sorry for such people; they deserve to suffer.’

After tea, as he watched his wife clearing away the tea things and rearranging the drying clothing by the fire, Owen for the first time noticed that she looked unusually ill.

‘You don’t look well tonight, Nora,’ he said, crossing over to her and putting his arm around her.

‘I don’t feel well,’ she replied, resting her head wearily against his shoulder. ‘I’ve been very bad all day and I had to lie down nearly all the afternoon. I don’t know how I should have managed to get the tea ready if it had not been for Frankie.’

‘I set the table for you, didn’t I, Mum?’ said Frankie with pride; ‘and tidied up the room as well.’

‘Yes, darling, you helped me a lot,’ she answered, and Frankie went over to her and kissed her hand.

‘Well, you’d better go to bed at once,’ said Owen, ‘I can put Frankie to bed presently and do whatever else is necessary.’

‘But there are so many things to attend to. I want to see that your clothes are properly dry and to put something ready for you to take in the morning before you go out, and then there’s your breakfast to pack up –’

‘I can manage all that.’

‘I didn’t want to give way to it like this,’ the woman said, ‘because I know you must be tired out yourself, but I really do feel quite done up now.’

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ replied Owen, who was really so fatigued that he was scarcely able to stand. ‘I’ll go and draw the blinds down and light the other lamp; so say good night to Frankie and come at once.’

‘I won’t say good night properly, now, Mum,’ remarked the boy, ‘because Dad can carry me into your room before he puts me into bed.’

A little later, as Owen was undressing Frankie, the latter remarked as he looked affectionately at the kitten, which was sitting on the hearthrug watching the child’s every movement under the impression that it was part of some game:

‘What name do you think we ought to call it, Dad?’

‘You may give him any name you like,’ replied Owen, absently.

‘I know a dog that lives down the road,’ said the boy, ‘his name is Major. How would that do? Or we might call him Sergeant.’

The kitten, observing that he was the subject of their conversation, purred loudly and winked as if to intimate that he did not care what rank was conferred upon him so long as the commissariat department was properly attended to.

‘I don’t know, though,’ continued Frankie, thoughtfully. ‘They’re all right names for dogs, but I think they’re too big for a kitten, don’t you, Dad?’

‘Yes, p’raps they are,’ said Owen.

‘Most cats are called Tom or Kitty, but I don’t want a *common* name for him.’

‘Well, can’t you call him after someone you know?’

‘I know; I’ll call him after a little girl that comes to our school; a fine name, Maud! That’ll be a good one, won’t it Dad?’

‘Yes,’ said Owen.

‘I say, Dad,’ said Frankie, suddenly realizing the awful fact that he was being put to bed. ‘You’re forgetting all about my story, and you promised that you’d have a game of trains with me tonight.’

‘I hadn’t forgotten, but I was hoping that you had, because I’m very tired and it’s very late, long past your usual bedtime, you know. You can take the kitten to bed with you tonight and I’ll tell you two stories tomorrow, because it’s Saturday.’

‘All right, then,’ said the boy, contentedly; ‘and I’ll get the railway station built and I’ll have the lines chalked on the floor, and the signals put up before you come home, so that there’ll be no time wasted. And I’ll put one chair at one end of the room and another chair at the other end, and tie some string across for telegraph wires. That’ll be a very good idea, won’t it, Dad?’ and Owen agreed.

‘But of course I’ll come to meet you just the same as other Saturdays, because I’m going to buy a ha’porth of milk for the kitten out of my penny.’

After the child was in bed, Owen sat alone by the table in the draughty sitting-room, thinking. Although there was a bright fire, the room was very cold, being so close to the roof. The wind roared loudly round the gables, shaking the house in a way that threatened every moment to hurl it to the ground. The lamp on the table had a green glass reservoir which was half full of oil. Owen watched this with unconscious fascination. Every time a gust of wind struck the house the oil in the lamp was agitated and rippled against the glass like the waves of a miniature sea. Staring abstractedly at the lamp, he thought of the future.

A few years ago the future had seemed a region of wonderful and mysterious possibilities of good, but tonight the thought brought no such illusions, for he knew that the story of the future was to be much the same as the story of the past.

The story of the past would continue to repeat itself for a few years longer. He would continue to work and they would all three continue to do without most of the necessities of life. When there was no work they would starve.

For himself he did not care much because he knew that at the best – or worst – it would only be a very few years. Even if he were to have proper food and clothing and be able to take reasonable care of himself, he could not live much longer; but when that time came, what was to become of *them*?

There would be some hope for the boy if he were more robust and if his character were less gentle and more selfish. Under the present system it was impossible for anyone to succeed in life without injuring other people and treating them and making use of them as one would not like to be treated and made use of oneself.

In order to succeed in the world it was necessary to be brutal, selfish and unfeeling: to push others aside and to take advantage of their misfortunes: to undersell and crush out one's competitors by fair means or foul: to consider one's own interests first in every case, absolutely regardless of the wellbeing of others.

That was the ideal character. Owen knew that Frankie's character did not come up to this lofty ideal. Then there was Nora, how would she fare?

Owen stood up and began walking about the room, oppressed with a kind of terror. Presently he returned to the fire and began rearranging the clothes that were drying. He found that the boots, having been placed too near the fire, had dried too quickly and consequently the sole of one of them had begun to split away from the upper: he remedied this as well as he was able and then turned the wetter parts of the clothing to the fire. Whilst doing this he noticed the newspaper, which he had forgotten, in the coat pocket. He drew it out with an exclamation of pleasure. Here was something to distract his thoughts: if not instructive or comforting, it would at any rate be interesting and even amusing to read the reports of the self-satisfied, futile talk of the profound statesmen who with comical gravity presided over the working of the Great System which their combined wisdom pronounced to be the best that could possibly be devised. But tonight Owen was not to read of those things, for as soon as he opened the paper his attention was riveted by the staring headlines of one of the principal columns:

TERRIBLE DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

WIFE AND TWO CHILDREN KILLED SUICIDE OF THE MURDERER

It was one of the ordinary poverty crimes. The man had been without employment for many weeks and they had been living by pawning or selling their furniture and other possessions. But even this resource must have failed at last, and when one day the neighbours noticed that the blinds remained down and that there was a strange silence about the house, no one coming out or going in, suspicions that something was wrong were quickly aroused. When the police entered the house, they found, in one of the upper rooms, the dead bodies of the woman and the two children, with their throats severed, laid out side by side upon the bed, which was saturated with their blood.

There was no bedstead and no furniture in the room except the straw mattress and the ragged clothes and blankets which formed the bed upon the floor.

The man's body was found in the kitchen, lying with outstretched arms face downwards on the floor, surrounded by the blood that had poured from the wound in his throat which had evidently been inflicted by the razor that was grasped in his right hand.

No particle of food was found in the house, and on a nail in the wall in the kitchen was hung a piece of blood-smeared paper on which was written in pencil:

'This is not *my* crime, but society's.'

The report went on to explain that the deed must have been perpetrated during a fit of temporary insanity brought on by the sufferings the man had endured.

'Insanity!' muttered Owen, as he read this glib theory. 'Insanity! It seems to me that he would have been insane if he had *not* killed them.'

Surely it was wiser and better and kinder to send them all to sleep, than to let them continue to suffer.

At the same time he thought it very strange that the man should have chosen to do it that way, when there were so many other cleaner, easier and more painless ways of accomplishing the same object. He wondered why it was that most of these killings were done in more or less the same crude, cruel messy way. No; *he* would set about it in a different fashion. He would get some charcoal, then he would paste strips of paper over the joinings of the door and windows of the room and close the register of the grate. Then he would kindle the charcoal on a tray or something in the middle of the room, and then they would all three just lie down together and sleep; and that would be the end of everything. There would be no pain, no blood, and no mess.

Or one could take poison. Of course, there was a certain amount of difficulty in procuring it, but it would not be impossible to find some pretext for buying some laudanum: one could buy several small quantities at different shops until one had sufficient. Then he remembered that he had read somewhere that vermillion, one of the colours he frequently had to use in his work, was one of the most deadly poisons: and there was some other stuff that photographers used, which was very easy to procure. Of course, one would have to be very careful about poisons, so as not to select one that would cause a lot of pain. It would be necessary to find out exactly how the stuff acted before using it. It would not be very difficult to do so. Then he remembered that among his books was one that probably contained some information about this subject. He went over to the book-shelf and presently found the volume; it was called *The Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine*, rather an old book, a little out of date, perhaps, but still it might contain the information he wanted. Opening it, he turned to the table of contents. Many different subjects were mentioned there and presently he found the one he sought:

Poisons: chemically, physiologically and pathologically considered.

Corrosive Poisons.

Narcotic Poisons.

Slow Poisons.

Consecutive Poisons.

Accumulative Poisons.

He turned to the chapter indicated and, reading it, he was astonished to find what a number of poisons there were within easy reach of whoever wished to make use of them: poisons that could be relied upon to do their work certainly, quickly and without pain. Why, it was not even necessary to buy them: one could gather them from the hedges by the road side and in the fields.

The more he thought of it the stranger it seemed that such a clumsy method as a razor should be so popular. Why almost any other way would be better and easier than that. Strangulation or even hanging, though the latter method could scarcely be adopted in that house, because there were no beams or rafters or anything from which it would be possible to suspend a cord. Still, he could drive some large nails or hooks into one of the walls. For that matter, there were already some clothes-hooks on some of the doors. He began to think that this would be an even more excellent way than poison or charcoal; he could easily pretend to Frankie that he was going to show him some new kind of play.

He could arrange the cord on the hook on one of the doors and then under pretence of play, it would be done. The boy would offer no resistance, and in a few minutes it would all be over.

He threw down the book and pressed his hands over his ears: he fancied he could hear the boy's hands and feet beating against the panels of the door as he struggled in his death agony.

Then, as his arms fell nervelessly by his side again, he thought that he heard Frankie's voice calling.

Dad! Dad!

Owen hastily opened the door.

'Are you calling, Frankie?'

'Yes. I've been calling you quite a long time.'

'What do you want?'

'I want you to come here. I want to tell you something.'

'Well, what is it, dear? I thought you were asleep a long time ago,' said Owen as he came into the room.

'That's just what I want to speak to you about: the kitten's gone to sleep all right, but I can't go. I've tried all different ways, counting and all, but it's no use, so I thought I'd ask you if you'd mind coming and staying with me, and letting me hold your hand for a little while and then p'raps I could go.'

The boy twined his arms round Owen's neck and hugged him very tightly.

'Oh. Dad, I love you so much!' he said. 'I love you so much, I could squeeze you to death.'

'I'm afraid you will, if you squeeze me so tightly as that.'

The boy laughed softly as he relaxed his hold. 'That *would* be a funny way of showing you how much I loved you, wouldn't it, Dad? Squeezing you to death!'

'Yes, I suppose it would,' replied Owen huskily, as he tucked the bedclothes round the child's shoulders. 'But don't talk any more, dear; just hold my hand and try to sleep.'

'All right,' said Frankie.

Lying there very quietly, holding his father's hand and occasionally kissing it, the child presently fell asleep. Then Owen got up very gently and, having taken the kitten out of the bed again and arranged the bedclothes, he softly kissed the boy's forehead and returned to the other room.

Looking about for a suitable place for the kitten to sleep in, he noticed Frankie's toy box, and having emptied the toys on to the floor in a corner of the room, he made a bed in the box with some rags and placed it on its side on the hearthrug, facing the fire, and with some difficulty persuaded the kitten to lie in it. Then, having placed the chairs on which his clothes were drying at a safe distance from the fire, he went into the bedroom. Nora was still awake.

'Are you feeling any better, dear?' he said.

'Yes. I'm ever so much better since I've been in bed, but I can't help worrying about your clothes. I'm afraid they'll never be dry enough for you to put on the first thing in the morning. Couldn't you stay at home till after breakfast, just for once?'

'No; I mustn't do that. If I did Hunter would probably tell me to stay away altogether. I believe he would be glad of an excuse to get rid of another full-price man just now.'

'But if it's raining like this in the morning, you'll be wet through before you get there.'

'It's no good worrying about that, dear: besides, I can wear this old coat that I have on now, over the other.'

'And if you wrap your old shoes in some paper, and take them with you, you can take off your wet boots as soon as you get to the place.'

'Yes, all right,' responded Owen. 'Besides,' he added, reassuringly, even if I do get a little wet, we always have a fire there, you know.'

'Well, I hope the weather will be a little better than this in the morning,' said Nora, isn't it a dreadful night! I keep feeling afraid that the house is going to be blown down.'

Long after Nora was asleep, Owen lay listening to the howling of the wind and the noise of the rain as it poured heavily on the roof...

7 The Exterminating Machines

‘Come on, Saturday!’ shouted Philpot, just after seven o’clock one Monday morning as they were getting ready to commence work.

It was still dark outside, but the scullery was dimly illuminated by the flickering light of two candles which Crass had lighted and stuck on the shelf over the fireplace in order to enable him to see to serve out the different lots of paints and brushes to the men.

‘Yes, it do seem a ‘ell of a long week, don’t it?’ remarked Harlow as he hung his overcoat on a nail and proceeded to put on his apron and blouse. ‘I’ve ‘ad bloody near enough of it already.’

‘Wish to Christ it was breakfast-time,’ growled the more easily satisfied Easton.

Extraordinary as it may appear, none of them took any pride in their work: they did not ‘love’ it. They had no conception of that lofty ideal of ‘work for work’s sake’, which is so popular with the people who do nothing. On the contrary, when the workers arrived in the morning they wished it was breakfast-time. When they resumed work after breakfast they wished it was dinner-time. After dinner they wished it was one o’clock on Saturday.

So they went on, day after day, year after year, wishing their time was over and, without realizing it, really wishing that they were dead.

How extraordinary this must appear to those idealists who believe in ‘work for work’s sake’, but who themselves do nothing but devour or use and enjoy or waste the things that are produced by the labour of those others who are not themselves permitted to enjoy a fair share of the good things they help to create?

Crass poured several lots of colour into separate pots.

‘Harlow,’ he said, ‘you and Sawkins, when he comes, can go up and do the top bedrooms out with this colour. You’ll find a couple of candles up there. It’s only goin’ to ‘ave one coat, so see that you make it cover all right, and just look after Sawkins a bit so as ‘e doesn’t make a bloody mess of it. You do the doors and windows, and let ‘im do the cupboards and skirtings.’

‘That’s a bit of all right, I must say,’ Harlow said, addressing the company generally. ‘We’ve got to teach a b—r like ‘im so as ‘e can do us out of a job presently by working under price.’

‘Well, I can’t ‘elp it,’ growled Crass. ‘You know ‘ow it is: ‘Unter sends ‘im ‘ere to do paintin’, and I’ve got to put ‘im on it. There ain’t nothing else for ‘im to do.’

Further discussion on this subject was prevented by Sawkins’ arrival, nearly a quarter of an hour late.

‘Oh, you ‘ave come, then,’ sneered Crass. ‘Thought p’raps you’d gorn for a ‘oliday.’

Sawkins muttered something about oversleeping himself, and having hastily put on his apron, he went upstairs with Harlow.

‘Now, let’s see,’ Crass said, addressing Philpot. ‘You and Newman ‘ad better go and make a start on the second floor: this is the colour, and ‘ere’s a couple of candles. You’d better not both go in one room or ‘Unter will growl about it. You take one of the front and let Newman take one of the back rooms. Take a bit of stoppin’ with you: they’re goin’ to ‘ave two coats, but you’d better putty up the ‘oles as well as you can, this time.’

‘Only two coats!’ said Philpot. ‘Them rooms will never look nothing with two coats – a light colour like this.’

‘It’s only goin’ to get two, anyway,’ returned Crass, testily. ‘‘Unter said so, so you’ll ‘ave to do the best you can with ‘em, and get ‘em smeared over middlin’ sudden, too.’

Crass did not think it necessary to mention that according to the copy of the specification of the work which he had in his pocket the rooms in question were supposed to have four coats.

Crass now turned to Owen.

‘There’s that drorin’-room,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what’s goin’ to be done with that yet. I don’t think they’ve decided about it. Whatever’s to be done to it will be an extra, because all that’s said about it in the contract is to face it up with putty and give it one coat of white. So you and Easton ‘ad better get on with it.’

Slyme was busy softening some putty by rubbing and squeezing it between his hands.

‘I suppose I’d better finish the room I started on on Saturday?’ he asked.

‘All right,’ replied Crass. ‘Have you got enough colour?’

‘Yes,’ said Slyme.

As he passed through the kitchen on the way to his work, Slyme accosted Bert, the boy, who was engaged in lighting, with some pieces of wood, a fire to boil the water to make the tea for breakfast at eight o’clock.

‘There’s a bloater I want’s cooked,’ he said.

‘All right,’ replied Bert. ‘Put it over there on the dresser along of Philpot’s and mine.’

Slyme took the bloater from his food basket, but as he was about to put it in the place indicated, he observed that his was rather a larger one than either of the other two. This was an important matter. After they were cooked it would not be easy to say which was which: he might possibly be given one of the smaller ones instead of his own. He took out his pocket knife and cut off the tail of the large bloater.

‘Ere it is, then,’ he said to Bert. ‘I’ve cut off the tail of mine so as you’ll know which it is.’

It was now about twenty minutes past seven and all the other men having been started at work, Crass washed his hands under the tap. Then he went into the kitchen and having rigged up a seat by taking two of the drawers out of the dresser and placing them on the floor about six feet apart and laying a plank across, he sat down in front of the fire, which was now burning brightly under the pail, and, lighting his pipe, began to smoke. The boy went into the scullery and began washing up the cups and jars for the men to drink out of.

Bert was a lean, undersized boy about fifteen years of age and about four feet nine inches in height. He had light brown hair and hazel grey eyes, and his clothes were of many colours, being thickly encrusted with paint, the result of the unskilful manner in which he did his work, for he had only been at the trade about a year. Some of the men had nicknamed him ‘the walking paint-shop’, a title which Bert accepted good-humouredly.

This boy was an orphan. His father had been a railway porter who had worked very laboriously for twelve or fourteen hours every day for many years, with the usual result, namely, that he and his family lived in a condition of perpetual poverty. Bert, who was their only child and not very robust, had early shown a talent for drawing, so when his father died a little over a year ago, his mother readily assented when the boy said that he wished to become a decorator. It was a nice light trade, and she thought that a really good painter, such as she was sure he would become, was at least always able to earn a good living. Resolving to give the boy the best possible chance, she decided if possible to place him at Rushton’s, that being one of the leading firms in the town. At first Mr Rushton demanded ten pounds as a premium, the boy to be bound for five years, no wages the first year, two shillings a week the second, and a rise of one shilling every year for the remainder of the term. Afterwards, as a special favour – a matter of charity, in fact, as she was a very poor woman – he agreed to accept five pounds.

This sum represented the thrifty savings of years, but the poor woman parted with it willingly in order that the boy should become a skilled workman. So Bert was apprenticed – bound for five years – to Rushton & Co.

For the first few months his life had been spent in the paint-shop at the yard, a place that was something between a cellar and a stable. There, surrounded by the poisonous pigments and materials of the trade, the youthful artisan worked, generally alone, cleaning the dirty paint-pots brought in by the workmen from finished ‘jobs’ outside, and occasionally mixing paint according to the instructions of Mr Hunter, or one of the sub-foremen.

Sometimes he was sent out to carry materials to the places where the men were working – heavy loads of paint or white lead – sometimes pails of whitewash that his slender arms had been too feeble to carry more than a few yards at a time.

Often his fragile, childish figure was seen staggering manfully along, bending beneath the weight of a pair of steps or a heavy plank.

He could manage a good many parcels at once: some in each hand and some tied together with string and slung over his shoulders. Occasionally, however, there were more than he could carry; then they were put into a handcart which he pushed or dragged after him to the distant jobs.

That first winter the boy's days were chiefly spent in the damp, evil-smelling, stone-flagged paint-shop, without even a fire to warm the clammy atmosphere.

But in all this he had seen no hardship. With the unconsciousness of boyhood, he worked hard and cheerfully. As time went on, the goal of his childish ambition was reached – he was sent out to work with the men! And he carried the same spirit with him, always doing his best to oblige those with whom he was working.

He tried hard to learn, and to be a good boy, and he succeeded, fairly well.

He soon became a favourite with Owen, for whom he conceived a great respect and affection, for he observed that whenever there was any special work of any kind to be done it was Owen who did it. On such occasions, Bert, in his artful, boyish way, would scheme to be sent to assist Owen, and the latter whenever possible used to ask that the boy might be allowed to work with him.

Bert's regard for Owen was equalled in intensity by his dislike of Crass, who was in the habit of jeering at the boy's aspirations. 'There'll be plenty of time for you to think about doin' fancy work arter you've learnt to do plain painting,' he would say.

This morning, when he had finished washing up the cups and mugs, Bert returned with them to the kitchen.

'Now let's see,' said Crass, thoughtfully. 'You've put the tea in the pail, I s'pose.'

'Yes.'

'And now you want a job, don't you?'

'Yes,' replied the boy.

'Well, get a bucket of water and that old brush and a swab, and go and wash off the old whitewash and colouring orf the pantry ceiling and walls.'

'All right,' said Bert. When he got as far as the door leading into the scullery he looked round and said:

'I've got to git them three bloaters cooked by breakfast time.'

'Never mind about that,' said Crass. 'I'll do them.'

Bert got the pail and the brush, drew some water from the tap, got a pair of steps and a short plank, one end of which he rested on the bottom shelf of the pantry and the other on the steps, and proceeded to carry out Crass's instructions.

It was very cold and damp and miserable in the pantry, and the candle only made it seem more so. Bert shivered: he would like to have put his jacket on, but that was out of the question at a job like this. He lifted the bucket of water on to one of the shelves and, climbing up on to the plank, took the brush from the water and soaked about a square yard of the ceiling; then he began to scrub it with the brush.

He was not very skilful yet, and as he scrubbed the water ran down over the stock of the brush, over his hand and down his uplifted arm, wetting the turned-up sleeves of his shirt. When he had scrubbed it sufficiently he rinsed it off as well as he could with the brush, and then, to finish with, he thrust his hand into the pail of water and, taking out the swab, wrung the water out of it and wiped the part of the ceiling that he had washed. Then he dropped it back into the pail, and shook his numbed fingers to restore the circulation. Then he peeped into the kitchen, where Crass was still seated by

the fire, smoking and toasting one of the bloaters at the end of a pointed stick. Bert wished he would go upstairs, or anywhere, so that he himself might go and have a warm at the fire.

“E might just as well ‘ave let me do them bloaters,” he muttered to himself, regarding Crass malignantly through the crack of the door. “This is a fine job to give to anybody – a cold mornin’ like this.”

He shifted the pail of water a little further along the shelf and went on with the work.

A little later. Crass, still sitting by the fire, heard footsteps approaching along the passage. He started up guiltily and, thrusting the hand holding his pipe into his apron pocket, retreated hastily into the scullery. He thought it might be Hunter, who was in the habit of turning up at all sorts of unlikely times, but it was only Easton.

“I’ve got a bit of bacon I want the young ‘un to toast for me,” he said as Crass came back.

“You can do it yourself if you like,” replied Crass affably, looking at his watch. “It’s about ten to eight.”

Easton had been working for Rushton & Co. for a fortnight, and had been wise enough to stand Crass a drink on several occasions: he was consequently in that gentleman’s good books for the time being.

“How are you getting on in there?” Crass asked, alluding to the work Easton and Owen were doing in the drawing-room. “You ain’t fell out with your mate yet, I s’pose?”

“No; ‘e ain’t got much to say this morning; ‘is cough’s pretty bad. I can generally manage to get on orl right with anybody, you know,” Easton added.

“Well, so can I as a rule, but I get a bit sick listening to that bloody fool. Accordin’ to ‘im, everything’s wrong. One day it’s religion, another it’s politics, and the next it’s something else.”

“Yes, it is a bit thick; too much of it,” agreed Easton, “but I don’t take no notice of the bloody fool: that’s the best way.”

“Of course, we know that things is a bit bad just now,” Crass went on, “but if the likes of ‘im could ‘ave their own way they’d make ‘em a bloody sight worse.”

“That’s just what I say,” replied Easton.

“I’ve got a pill ready for ‘im, though, next time ‘e starts yappin’,” Crass contined as he drew a small piece of printed paper from his waistcoat pocket. “Just read that; it’s out of the *Obscurer*.”

Easton took the newspaper cutting and read it: “Very good,” he remarked as he handed it back.

“Yes, I think that’ll about shut ‘im up. Did yer notice the other day when we was talking about poverty and men bein’ out of work, ‘ow ‘e dodged out of answerin’ wot I said about machinery bein’ the cause of it? ‘e never answered me! Started talkin’ about something else.”

“Yes, I remember ‘e never answered it,” said Easton, who had really no recollection of the incident at all.

I mean to tackle ‘im about it at breakfast-time. I don’t see why ‘e should be allowed to get out of it like that. There was a bloke down at the “Cricketers” the other night talkin’ about the same thing – a chap as takes a interest in politics and the like, and ‘e said the very same as me. Why, the number of men what’s been throwed out of work by all this ‘ere new-fangled machinery is something chronic!”

“Of course,” agreed Easton, “everyone knows it.”

“You ought to give us a look in at the “Cricketers” some night. There’s a decent lot of chaps comes there.”

“Yes, I think I will.”

“What ‘ouse do you usually use?” asked Crass after a pause.

Easton laughed. “Well, to tell you the truth I’ve not used anywhere’s lately. Been ‘avin too many ‘ollerdays.”

“That do make a bit of difference, don’t it?” said Crass. “But you’ll be all right ‘ere, till this job’s done. Just watch yerself a bit, and don’t get comin’ late in the mornin’s. Ole Nimrod’s dead nuts on that.”

‘I’ll see to that all right,’ replied Easton. ‘I don’t believe in losing time when there *is* work to do. It’s bad enough when you can’t get it.’

‘You know,’ Crass went on, confidentially. ‘Between me an’ you an’ the gatepost, as the sayin’ is, I don’t think Mr bloody Owen will be ‘ere much longer. Nimrod ‘ates the sight of ‘im.’

Easton had it in his mind to say that Nimrod seemed to hate the sight of all of them: but he made no remark, and Crass continued:

‘E’s ‘eard all about the way Owen goes on about politics and religion, an’ one thing an’ another, an’ about the firm scampin’ the work. You know that sort of talk don’t do, does it?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Unter would ‘ave got rid of ‘im long ago, but it wasn’t ‘im as took ‘im on in the first place. It was Rushton ‘imself as give ‘im a start. It seems Owen took a lot of samples of ‘is work an’ showed ‘em to the Bloke.’

‘Is them the things wot’s ‘angin’ up in the shop-winder?’

‘Yes!’ said Crass, contemptuously. ‘But ‘e’s no good on plain work. Of course ‘e does a bit of grainin’ an’ writin’ – after a fashion – when there’s any to do, and that ain’t often, but on plain work, why, Sawkins is as good as ‘im for most of it, any day!’

‘Yes, I suppose ‘e is,’ replied Easton, feeling rather ashamed of himself for the part he was taking in this conversation.

Although he had for the moment forgotten the existence of Bert, Crass had instinctively lowered his voice, but the boy – who had left off working to warm his hands by putting them into his trousers pockets – managed, by listening attentively, to hear every word.

‘You know there’s plenty of people wouldn’t give the firm no more work if they knowed about it,’ Crass continued. ‘Just fancy sendin’ a b—r like that to work in a lady’s or gentleman’s ‘ouse – a bloody Atheist!’

‘Yes, it is a bit orf, when you look at it like that.’

‘I know my missis – for one – wouldn’t ‘ave a feller like that in our place. We ‘ad a lodger once and she found out that ‘e was a freethinker or something, and she cleared ‘im out, bloody quick, I can tell yer!’

‘Oh, by the way,’ said Easton, glad of an opportunity to change the subject, ‘you don’t happen to know of anyone as wants a room, do you? We’ve got one more than we want, so the wife thought that we might as well let it.’

Crass thought for a moment. ‘Can’t say as I do,’ he answered, doubtfully. ‘Slyme was talking last week about leaving the place ‘e’s lodgin’ at, but I don’t know whether ‘e’s got another place to go to. You might ask him. I don’t know of anyone else.’

‘I’ll speak to ‘im,’ replied Easton. ‘What’s the time? it must be nearly on it.’

‘So it is: just on eight,’ exclaimed Crass, and drawing his whistle he blew a shrill blast upon it to apprise the others of the fact.

‘Has anyone seen old Jack Linden since ‘e got the push?’ inquired Harlow during breakfast.

‘I seen ‘im Saterdy,’ said Slyme.

‘Is ‘e doin’ anything?’

‘I don’t know: I didn’t ‘ave time to speak to ‘im.’

‘No, ‘e ain’t got nothing,’ remarked Philpot. ‘I seen ‘im Saterdy night, an’ ‘e told me ‘e’s been walkin’ about ever since.’

Philpot did not add that he had ‘lent’ Linden a shilling, which he never expected to see again.

‘E won’t be able to get a job again in a ‘urry,’ remarked Easton. ‘E’s too old.’

‘You know, after all, you can’t blame Misery for sackin’ ‘im,’ said Crass after a pause. ‘E was too slow for a funeral.’

‘I wonder how much *you’ll* be able to do when you’re as old as he is?’ said Owen.

‘P’raps I won’t want to do nothing,’ replied Crass with a feeble laugh. ‘I’m goin’ to live on me means.’

‘I should say the best thing old Jack could do would be to go in the union,’ said Harlow.

‘Yes: I reckon that’s what’ll be the end of it,’ said Easton in a matter-of-fact tone.

‘It’s a grand finish, isn’t it?’ observed Owen. ‘After working hard all one’s life to be treated like a criminal at the end.’

‘I don’t know what you call bein’ treated like criminals,’ exclaimed Crass. ‘I reckon they ‘as a bloody fine time of it, an’ we’ve got to find the money.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake don’t start no more arguments,’ cried Harlow, addressing Owen. ‘We ‘ad enough of that last week. You can’t expect a boss to employ a man when ‘e’s too old to work.’

‘Of course not,’ said Crass.

Philpot said – nothing.

‘I don’t see no sense in always grumblin’,’ Crass proceeded. ‘These things can’t be altered. You can’t expect there can be plenty of work for everyone with all this ‘ere labour-savin’ machinery what’s been invented.’

‘Of course,’ said Harlow, ‘the people what used to be employed on the work what’s now done by machinery, has to find something else to do. Some of ‘em goes to our trade, for instance: the result is there’s too many at it, and there ain’t enough work to keep ‘em all goin’.’

‘Yes,’ cried Crass, eagerly. ‘That’s just what I say. Machinery is the real cause of all the poverty. That’s what I said the other day.’

‘Machinery is undoubtedly the cause of unemployment,’ replied Owen, ‘but it’s not the cause of poverty: that’s another matter altogether.’

The others laughed derisively.

‘Well, it seems to me to amount to the same thing,’ said Harlow, and nearly everyone agreed.

‘It doesn’t seem to me to amount to the same thing,’ Owen replied. ‘In my opinion, we are all in a state of poverty even when we have employment – the condition we are reduced to when we’re out of work is more properly described as destitution.’

‘Poverty,’ continued Owen after a short silence, ‘consists in a shortage of the necessaries of life. When those things are so scarce or so dear that people are unable to obtain sufficient of them to satisfy all their needs, those people are in a condition of poverty. If you think that the machinery, which makes it possible to produce all the necessaries of life in abundance, is the cause of the shortage, it seems to me that there must be something the matter with your minds.’

‘Oh, of course we’re all bloody fools except you,’ snarled Crass. ‘When they were servin’ out the sense, they give you such a ‘ell of a lot, there wasn’t none left for nobody else.’

‘If there wasn’t something wrong with your minds,’ continued Owen, ‘you would be able to see that we might have “Plenty of Work” and yet be in a state of destitution. The miserable wretches who toil sixteen or eighteen hours a day – father, mother and even the little children – making match-boxes, or shirts or blouses, have “plenty of work”, but I for one don’t envy them. Perhaps you think that if there was no machinery and we all had to work thirteen or fourteen hours a day in order to obtain a bare living, we should not be in a condition of poverty? Talk about there being something the matter with your minds! If there were not, you wouldn’t talk one day about Tariff Reform as a remedy for unemployment and then the next day admit that Machinery is the cause of it! Tariff Reform won’t do away with the machinery, will it?’

‘Tariff Reform is the remedy for bad trade,’ returned Crass.

‘In that case Tariff Reform is the remedy for a disease that does not exist. If you would only take the trouble to investigate for yourself you would find out that trade was never so good as it is at present: the output – the quantity of commodities of every kind – produced in and exported from this country is greater than it has ever been before. The fortunes amassed in business are larger than ever before: but at the same time – owing, as you have just admitted – to the continued introduction

and extended use of wages-saving machinery, the number of human beings employed is steadily decreasing. I have here,' continued Owen, taking out his pocket-book, 'some figures which I copied from the *Daily Mail Year Book* for 1907, page 33:

"It is a very noticeable fact that although the number of factories and their value have vastly increased in the United Kingdom, there is an absolute decrease in the number of men and women employed in those factories between 1895 and 1901. This is doubtless due to the displacement of hand labour by machinery!"

'Will Tariff Reform deal with that? Are the good, kind capitalists going to abandon the use of wages-saving machinery if we tax all foreign-made goods? Does what you call "Free Trade" help us here? Or do you think that abolishing the House of Lords, or disestablishing the Church, will enable the workers who are displaced to obtain employment? Since it *is* true – as you admit – that machinery is the principal cause of unemployment, what are you going to do about it? What's your remedy?'

No one answered, because none of them knew of any remedy: and Crass began to feel sorry that he had re-introduced the subject at all.

'In the near future,' continued Owen, 'it is probable that horses will be almost entirely superseded by motor cars and electric trams. As the services of horses will be no longer required, all but a few of those animals will be caused to die out: they will no longer be bred to the same extent as formerly. We can't blame the horses for allowing themselves to be exterminated. They have not sufficient intelligence to understand what's being done. Therefore they will submit tamely to the extinction of the greater number of their kind.

'As we have seen, a great deal of the work which was formerly done by human beings is now being done by machinery. This machinery belongs to a few people: it is being worked for the benefit of those few, just the same as were the human beings it displaced. These Few have no longer any need of the services of so many human workers, so they propose to exterminate them! The unnecessary human beings are to be allowed to starve to death! And they are also to be taught that it is wrong to marry and breed children, because the Sacred Few do not require so many people to work for them as before!'

'Yes, and you'll never be able to prevent it, mate!' shouted Crass.

'Why can't we?'

'Because it can't be done!' cried Crass fiercely. 'It's impossible!'

'You're always sayin' that everything's all wrong,' complained Harlow, 'but why the 'ell don't you tell us 'ow they're goin' to be put right?'

'It doesn't seem to me as if any of you really wish to know. I believe that even if it were proved that it could be done, most of you would be sorry and would do all you could to prevent it.'

'E don't know 'isself,' sneered Crass. 'Accordin' to 'im, Tariff Reform ain't no bloody good – Free Trade ain't no bloody good, and everybody else is wrong! But when you arst 'im what ought to be done – 'e's flummuxed.'

Crass did not feel very satisfied with the result of this machinery argument, but he consoled himself with the reflection that he would be able to flatten out his opponent on another subject. The cutting from the *Obscurer* which he had in his pocket would take a bit of answering! When you have a thing in print – in black and white – why there it is, and you can't get away from it! If it wasn't all right, a paper like that would never have printed it. However, as it was now nearly half past eight, he resolved to defer this triumph till another occasion. It was too good a thing to be disposed of in a hurry.

8 The Cap on the Stairs

After breakfast, when they were working together in the drawing-room, Easton, desiring to do Owen a good turn, thought he would put him on his guard, and repeated to him in a whisper the substance of the conversation he had held with Crass concerning him.

‘Of course, you needn’t mention that I told you, Frank,’ he said, ‘but I thought I ought to let you know: you can take it from me, Crass ain’t no friend of yours.’

‘I’ve known that for a long time, mate,’ replied Owen. ‘Thanks for telling me, all the same.’

‘The bloody rotter’s no friend of mine either, or anyone else’s, for that matter,’ Easton continued, ‘but of course it doesn’t do to fall out with ‘im because you never know what he’d go and say to old ‘Unter.’

‘Yes, one has to remember that.’

‘Of course we all know what’s the matter with ‘im as far as *you’re* concerned,’ Easton went on. ‘He don’t like ‘avin’ anyone on the firm wot knows more about the work than ‘e does ‘imself – thinks ‘e might git worked out of ‘is job.’

Owen laughed bitterly.

‘He needn’t be afraid of *me* on *that* account. I wouldn’t have his job if it were offered to me.’

‘But ‘e don’t think so,’ replied Easton, ‘and that’s why ‘e’s got ‘is knife into you.’

‘I believe that what he said about Hunter is true enough,’ said Owen. ‘Every time he comes here he tries to goad me into doing or saying something that would give him an excuse to tell me to clear out. I might have done it before now if I had not guessed what he was after, and been on my guard.’

Meantime, Crass, in the kitchen, had resumed his seat by the fire with the purpose of finishing his pipe of tobacco. Presently he took out his pocket-book and began to write in it with a piece of black-lead pencil. When the pipe was smoked out he knocked the bowl against the grate to get rid of the ash, and placed the pipe in his waistcoat pocket. Then, having torn out the leaf on which he had been writing, he got up and went into the pantry, where Bert was still struggling with the old whitewash.

‘Ain’t yer nearly finished? I don’t want yer to stop in ‘ere all day, yer know.’

‘I ain’t got much more to do now,’ said the boy. ‘Just this bit under the bottom shelf and then I’m done.’

‘Yes, and a bloody fine mess you’ve made, what I can see of it!’ growled Crass. ‘Look at all this water on the floor!’

Bert looked guiltily at the floor and turned very red.

‘I’ll clean it all up,’ he stammered. ‘As soon as I’ve got this bit of wall done, I’ll wipe all the mess up with the swab.’

Crass now took a pot of paint and some brushes and, having put some more fuel on the fire, began in a leisurely way to paint some of the woodwork in the kitchen. Presently Bert came in.

‘I’ve finished out there,’ he said.

‘About time, too. You’ll ‘ave to look a bit livelier than you do, you know, or me and you will fall out.’

Bert did not answer.

‘Now I’ve got another job for yer. You’re fond of drorin, ain’t yer?’ continued Crass in a jeering tone.

‘Yes, a little,’ replied the boy, shamefacedly.

‘Well,’ said Crass, giving him the leaf he had torn out of the pocket-book, ‘you can go to the yard and git them things and put ‘em on a truck and dror it up ‘ere, and git back as soon as you can. Just look at the paper and see if you understand it before you go. I don’t want you to make no mistakes.’

Bert took the paper and with some difficulty read as follows:

1 pare steppes 8 foot
1/2 galoon Plastor off perish
1 pale off witewosh
12 lbs wite led
1/2 galoon Linsede Hoil

Do. Do. turps

'I can make it out all right.'

'You'd better bring the big truck,' said Crass, 'because I want you to take the Venetian blinds with you on it when you take it back tonight. They've got to be painted at the shop.'

'All right.'

When the boy had departed Crass took a stroll through the house to see how the others were getting on. Then he returned to the kitchen and proceeded with his work.

Crass was about thirty-eight years of age, rather above middle height and rather stout. He had a considerable quantity of curly black hair and wore a short beard of the same colour. His head was rather large, but low, and flat on the top. When among his cronies he was in the habit of referring to his obesity as the result of good nature and a contented mind. Behind his back other people attributed it to beer, some even going so far as to nickname him the 'tank'.

There was no work of a noisy kind being done this morning. Both the carpenters and the bricklayers having been taken away, temporarily, to another 'job'. At the same time there was not absolute silence: occasionally Crass could hear the voices of the other workmen as they spoke to each other, sometimes shouting from one room to another. Now and then Harlow's voice rang through the house as he sang snatches of music-hall songs or a verse of a Moody and Sankey hymn, and occasionally some of the others joined in the chorus or interrupted the singer with squeals and catcalls. Once or twice Crass was on the point of telling them to make less row: there would be a fine to do if Nimrod came and heard them. Just as he had made up his mind to tell them to stop the noise, it ceased of itself and he heard loud whispers:

'Look out! Someone's comin'.'

The house became very quiet.

Crass put out his pipe and opened the window and the back door to get rid of the smell of the tobacco smoke. Then he shifted the pair of steps noisily, and proceeded to work more quickly than before. Most likely it was old Misery.

He worked on for some time in silence, but no one came to the kitchen: whoever it was must have gone upstairs. Crass listened attentively. Who could it be? He would have liked to go to see whom it was, but at the same time, if it were Nimrod, Crass wished to be discovered at work. He therefore waited a little longer and presently he heard the sound of voices upstairs but was unable to recognize them. He was just about to go out into the passage to listen, when whoever it was began coming downstairs. Crass at once resumed his work. The footsteps came along the passage leading to the kitchen: slow, heavy, ponderous footsteps, but yet the sound was not such as would be made by a man heavily shod. It was not Misery, evidently.

As the footsteps entered the kitchen, Crass looked round and beheld a very tall, obese figure, with a large, fleshy, coarse-featured, clean-shaven face, and a great double chin, the complexion being of the colour and appearance of the fat of uncooked bacon. A very large fleshy nose and weak-looking pale blue eyes, the slightly inflamed lids being almost destitute of eye-lashes. He had large fat feet cased in soft calfskin boots, with drab-coloured spats. His overcoat, heavily trimmed with sealskin, reached just below the knees, and although the trousers were very wide they were filled by the fat legs within, the shape of the calves being distinctly perceptible. Even as the feet seemed about to burst the uppers of the boots, so the legs appeared to threaten the trousers with disruption. This man was so large that his figure completely filled up the doorway, and as he came in he stooped slightly

to avoid damaging the glittering silk hat on his head. One gloved hand was thrust into the pocket of the overcoat and in the other he carried a small Gladstone bag.

When Crass beheld this being, he touched his cap respectfully.

‘Good morning, sir!’

‘Good morning. They told me upstairs that I should find the foreman here. Are you the foreman?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I see you’re getting on with the work here.’

‘Ho yes, sir, we’re beginning to make a bit hov a show now, sir,’ replied Crass, speaking as if he had a hot potato in his mouth.

‘Mr Rushton isn’t here yet, I suppose?’

‘No, sir: ‘e don’t horfun come hon the job hin the mornin’, sir; ‘e generally comes hafternoons, sir, but Mr ‘Unter’s halmost sure to be ‘ere presently, sir.’

‘It’s Mr Rushton I want to see: I arranged to meet him here at ten o’clock; but’ – looking at his watch – ‘I’m rather before my time.’

‘He’ll be here presently, I suppose,’ added Mr Sweater. ‘I’ll just take a look round till he comes.’

‘Yes, sir,’ responded Crass, walking behind him obsequiously as he went out of the room.

Hoping that the gentleman might give him a shilling, Crass followed him into the front hall and began explaining what progress had so far been made with the work, but as Mr Sweater answered only by monosyllables and grunts, Crass presently concluded that his conversation was not appreciated and returned to the kitchen.

Meantime, upstairs, Philpot had gone into Newman’s room and was discussing with him the possibility of extracting from Mr Sweater the price of a little light refreshment.

‘I think,’ he remarked, ‘that we oughter see-ise this ‘ere tuneropperty to touch ‘im for an allowance.’

‘We won’t git nothin’ out of *‘im*, mate,’ returned Newman. ‘E’s a red-‘ot teetotaller.’

‘That don’t matter. ‘Ow’s ‘e to know that we buys beer with it? We might ‘ave tea, or ginger ale, or lime-juice and glycerine for all ‘e knows!’

Mr Sweater now began ponderously re-ascending the stairs and presently came into the room where Philpot was. The latter greeted him with respectful cordiality:

‘Good morning, sir.’

‘Good morning. You’ve begun painting up here, then.’

‘Yes, sir, we’ve made a start on it,’ replied Philpot, affably.

‘Is this door wet?’ asked Sweater, glancing apprehensively at the sleeve of his coat.

‘Yes, sir,’ answered Philpot, and added, as he looked meaningly at the great man, ‘the paint is wet, sir, but the *painters* is dry.’

‘Confound it!’ exclaimed Sweater, ignoring, or not hearing the latter part of Philpot’s reply. ‘I’ve got some of the beastly stuff on my coat sleeve.’

‘Oh, that’s nothing, sir,’ cried Philpot, secretly delighted. ‘I’ll get that orf for yer in no time. You wait just ‘arf a mo!’

He had a piece of clean rag in his tool bag, and there was a can of turps in the room. Moistening the rag slightly with turps he carefully removed the paint from Sweater’s sleeve.

‘It’s all orf now, sir,’ he remarked, as he rubbed the place with a dry part of the rag. ‘The smell of the turps will go away in about a hour’s time.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sweater.

Philpot looked at him wistfully, but Sweater evidently did not understand, and began looking about the room.

‘I see they’ve put a new piece of skirting here,’ he observed.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Newman, who came into the room just then to get the turps. ‘The old piece was all to bits with dry-rot.’

‘I feel as if I ‘ad a touch of the dry-rot meself, don’t you?’ said Philpot to Newman, who smiled feebly and cast a sidelong glance at Sweater, who did not appear to notice the significance of the remark, but walked out of the room and began climbing up to the next floor, where Harlow and Sawkins were working.

‘Well, there’s a bleeder for yer!’ said Philpot with indignation. ‘After all the trouble I took to clean ‘is coat! Not a bloody stiver! Well, it takes the cake, don’t it?’

‘I told you ‘ow it would be, didn’t I?’ replied Newman.

‘P’raps I didn’t make it plain enough,’ said Philpot, thoughtfully. ‘We must try to get some of our own back somehow, you know.’

Going out on the landing he called softly upstairs:

‘I say, Harlow.’

‘Hallo,’ said that individual, looking over the banisters.

‘Ow are yer getting on up there?’

‘Oh, all right, you know.’

‘Pretty dry job, ain’t it?’ Philpot continued, raising his voice a little and winking at Harlow.

‘Yes, it is, rather,’ replied Harlow with a grin.

‘I think this would be a very good time to take up the collection, don’t you?’

‘Yes, it wouldn’t be a bad idear.’

‘Well, I’ll put me cap on the stairs,’ said Philpot, suiting the action to the word. ‘You never knows yer luck. Things is gettin’ a bit serious on this floor, you know; my mate’s fainted away once already!’

Philpot now went back to his room to await developments: but as Sweater made no sign, he returned to the landing and again hailed Harlow.

‘I always reckon a man can work all the better after ‘e’s ‘ad a drink: you can seem to get over more of it, like.’

‘Oh, that’s true enough,’ responded Harlow. ‘I’ve often noticed it meself.’

Sweater came out of the front bedroom and passed into one of the back rooms without any notice of either of the men.

‘I’m afraid it’s a frost, mate,’ Harlow whispered, and Philpot, shaking his head sadly, returned to work; but in a little while he came out again and once more accosted Harlow.

‘I knowed a case once,’ he said in a melancholy tone, ‘where a chap died – of thirst – on a job just like this; and at the inquest the doctor said as ‘arf a pint would ‘a saved ‘im!’

‘It must ‘ave been a norrible death,’ remarked Harlow.

‘Orrible ain’t the work for it, mate,’ replied Philpot mournfully. ‘It was something chronic!’

After this final heartrending appeal to Sweater’s humanity they returned to work, satisfied that, whatever the result of their efforts, they had done their best. They had placed the matter fully and fairly before him: nothing more could be said: the issue now rested entirely with him.

But it was all in vain. Sweater either did not or would not understand, and when he came downstairs he took no notice whatever of the cap which Philpot had placed so conspicuously in the centre of the landing floor.

9 Who is to Pay?

Sweater reached the hall almost at the same moment that Rushton entered by the front door. They greeted each other in a friendly way and after a few remarks concerning the work that was being done, they went into the drawing-room where Owen and Easton were and Rushton said:

‘What about this room? Have you made up your mind what you’re going to have done to it?’

‘Yes,’ replied Sweater; ‘but I’ll tell you about that afterwards. What I’m anxious about is the drains. Have you brought the plans?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s it going to cost?’

‘Just wait a minute,’ said Rushton, with a slight gesture calling Sweater’s attention to the presence of the two workmen. Sweater understood.

‘You might leave that for a few minutes, will you?’ Rushton continued, addressing Owen and Easton. ‘Go and get on with something else for a little while.’

When they were alone, Rushton closed the door and remarked: ‘It’s always as well not to let these fellows know more than is necessary.’

Sweater agreed.

‘Now this ‘ere drain work is really two separate jobs,’ said Rushton. ‘First, the drains of the house: that is, the part of the work that’s actually on your ground. When that’s done, there will ‘ave to be a pipe carried right along under this private road to the main road to connect the drains of the house with the town main. You follow me?’

‘Perfectly. What’s it going to cost for the lot?’

‘For the drains of the house, £25.0.0. and for the connecting pipe £30.0.0. £55.0.0. for the lot.’

‘Urn! That the lowest you can do it for, eh?’

‘That’s the lowest. I’ve figured it out most carefully, the time and materials, and that’s practically all I’m charging you.’

The truth of the matter was that Rushton had had nothing whatever to do with estimating the cost of this work: he had not the necessary knowledge to do so. Hunter had drawn the plans, calculated the cost and prepared the estimate.

‘I’ve been thinking over this business lately,’ said Sweater, looking at Rushton with a cunning leer. ‘I don’t see why I should have to pay for the connecting pipe. The Corporation ought to pay for that. What do you say?’

Rushton laughed, ‘I don’t see why not,’ he replied.

‘I think we could arrange it all right, don’t you?’ Sweater went on. ‘Anyhow, the work will have to be done, so you’d better let ‘em get on with it. £55.0.0. covers both jobs, you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, all right, you get on with it and we’ll see what can be done with the Corporation later on.’

‘I don’t suppose we’ll find ‘em very difficult to deal with,’ said Rushton with a grin, and Sweater smiled agreement.

As they were passing through the hall they met Hunter, who had just arrived. He was rather surprised to see them, as he knew nothing of their appointment. He wished them ‘Good morning’ in an awkward hesitating undertone as if he were doubtful how his greeting would be received. Sweater nodded slightly, but Rushton ignored him altogether and Nimrod passed on looking and feeling like a disreputable cur that had just been kicked.

As Sweater and Rushton walked together about the house, Hunter hovered about them at a respectful distance, hoping that presently some notice might be taken of him. His dismal countenance became even longer than usual when he observed that they were about to leave the house without

appearing even to know that he was there. However, just as they were going out, Rushton paused on the threshold and called him:

‘Mr Hunter!’

‘Yes, sir.’

Nimrod ran to him like a dog taken notice of by his master: if he had possessed a tail, it is probable that he would have wagged it. Rushton gave him the plans with an intimation that the work was to be proceeded with.

For some time after they were gone. Hunter crawled silently about the house, in and out of the rooms, up and down the corridors and the staircases. After a while he went into the room where Newman was and stood quietly watching him for about ten minutes as he worked. The man was painting the skirting, and just then he came to a part that was split in several places, so he took his knife and began to fill the cracks with putty. He was so nervous under Hunter’s scrutiny that his hand trembled to such an extent that it took him about twice as long as it should have done, and Hunter told him so with brutal directness.

‘Never mind about puttying up such little cracks as them!’ he shouted. ‘Fill ‘em up with the paint. We can’t afford to pay you for messing about like that!’

Newman made no reply.

Misery found no excuse for bullying anyone else, because they were all tearing into it for all they were worth. As he wondered up and down the house like an evil spirit, he was followed by the furtively unfriendly glances of the men, who cursed him in their hearts as he passed.

He sneaked into the drawing-room and after standing with a malignant expression, silently watching Owen and Easton, he came out again without having uttered a word.

Although he frequently acted in this manner, yet somehow today the circumstance worried Owen considerably. He wondered uneasily what it meant, and began to feel vaguely apprehensive. Hunter’s silence seemed more menacing than his speech.

10 The Long Hill

Bert arrived at the shop and with as little delay as possible loaded up the handcart with the things he had been sent for and started on the return journey. He got on all right in the town, because the roads were level and smooth, being paved with wood blocks. If it had only been like that all the way it would have been easy enough, although he was a very small boy for such a large truck, and such a heavy load. While the wood road lasted the principal trouble he experienced was the difficulty of seeing where he was going, the handcart being so high and himself so short. The pair of steps on the cart of course made it all the worse in that respect. However, by taking great care he managed to get through the town all right, although he narrowly escaped colliding with several vehicles, including two or three motor cars and an electric tram, besides nearly knocking over an old woman who was carrying a large bundle of washing. From time to time he saw other small boys of his acquaintance, some of them former schoolmates. Some of these passed by carrying heavy loads of groceries in baskets, and others with wooden trays full of joints of meat.

Unfortunately, the wood paving ceased at the very place where the ground began to rise. Bert now found himself at the beginning of a long stretch of macadamized road which rose slightly and persistently throughout its whole length. Bert had pushed a cart up this road many times before and consequently knew the best method of tackling it. Experience had taught him that a frontal attack on this hill was liable to failure, so on this occasion he followed his usual plan of making diagonal movements, crossing the road repeatedly from right to left and left to right, after the fashion of a sailing ship tacking against the wind, and halting about every twenty yards to rest and take breath. The distance he was to go was regulated, not so much by his powers of endurance as by the various objects by the wayside – the lampposts, for instance. During each rest he used to look ahead and select a certain lamp-post or street corner as the next stopping-place, and when he started again he used to make the most strenuous and desperate efforts to reach it.

Generally the goal he selected was too distant, for he usually overestimated his strength, and whenever he was forced to give in he ran the truck against the kerb and stood there panting for breath and feeling profoundly disappointed at his failure.

On the present occasion, during one of these rests, it flashed upon him that he was being a very long time: he would have to buck up or he would get into a row: he was not even half-way up the road yet!

Selecting a distant lamp-post, he determined to reach it before resting again.

The cart had a single shaft with a cross-piece at the end, forming the handle: he gripped this fiercely with both hands and, placing his chest against it, with a mighty effort he pushed the cart before him.

It seemed to get heavier and heavier every foot of the way. His whole body, but especially the thighs and the calves of his legs, pained terribly, but still he strained and struggled and said to himself that he would not give in until he reached the lamp-post.

Finding that the handle hurt his chest, he lowered it to his waist, but that being even more painful he raised it again to his chest, and struggled savagely on, panting for breath and with his heart beating wildly.

The cart became heavier and heavier. After a while it seemed to the boy as if there were someone at the front of it trying to push him back down the hill. This was such a funny idea that for a moment he felt inclined to laugh, but the inclination went almost as soon as it came and was replaced by the dread that he would not be able to hold out long enough to reach the lamp-post, after all. Clenching his teeth, he made a tremendous effort and staggered forward two or three more steps and then – the cart stopped. He struggled with it despairingly for a few seconds, but all the strength had suddenly gone out of him: his legs felt so weak that he nearly collapsed on to the ground, and the

cart began to move backwards down the hill. He was just able to stick to it and guide it so that it ran into and rested against the kerb, and then he stood holding it in a half-dazed way, very pale, saturated with perspiration, and trembling. His legs in particular shook so much that he felt that unless he could sit down for a little, he would *fall* down.

He lowered the handle very carefully so as not to spill the whitewash out of the pail which was hanging from a hook under the cart, then, sitting down on the kerbstone, he leaned wearily against the wheel.

A little way down the road was a church with a clock in the tower. It was five minutes to ten by this clock. Bert said to himself that when it was ten he would make another start.

Whilst he was resting he thought of many things. Just behind that church was a field with several ponds in it where he used to go with other boys to catch effets. If it were not for the cart he would go across now, to see whether there were any there still. He remembered that he had been very eager to leave school and go to work, but they used to be fine old times after all.

Then he thought of the day when his mother took him to Mr Rushton's office to 'bind' him. He remembered that day very vividly: it was almost a year ago. How nervous he had been! His hand had trembled so that he was scarcely able to hold the pen. And even when it was all over, they had both felt very miserable, somehow. His mother had been very nervous in the office also, and when they got home she cried a lot and held him close to her and kissed him and called him her poor little fatherless boy, and said she hoped he would be good and try to learn. And then he cried as well, and promised her that he would do his best. He reflected with pride that he was keeping his promise about being a good boy and trying to learn: in fact, he knew a great deal about the trade already – he could paint back doors as well as anybody! and railings as well. Owen had taught him lots of things and had promised to do some patterns of graining for him so that he might practise copying them at home in the evenings. Owen was a fine chap. Bert resolved that he would tell him what Crass had been saying to Easton. Just fancy, the cheek of a rotter like Crass, trying to get Owen the sack! It would be more like it if Crass was to be sacked himself, so that Owen could be the foreman.

One minute to ten.

With a heavy heart Bert watched the clock. His legs were still aching very badly. He could not see the hands of the clock moving, but they were creeping on all the same. Now, the minute hand was over the edge of the number, and he began to deliberate whether he might not rest for another five minutes? But he had been such a long time already on his errand that he dismissed the thought. The minute hand was now upright and it was time to go on.

Just as he was about to get up a harsh voice behind him said:

'How much longer are you going to sit there?'

Bert started up guiltily, and found himself confronted by Mr Rushton, who was regarding him with an angry frown, whilst close by towered the colossal figure of the obese Sweater, the expression on his greasy countenance betokening the pain he experienced on beholding such an appalling example of juvenile depravity.

'What do you mean by sich conduct?' demanded Rushton, indignantly. 'The idear of sitting there like that when most likely the men are waiting for them things?'

Crimson with shame and confusion, the boy made no reply.

'You've been there a long time,' continued Rushton, 'I've been watchin' you all the time I've been comin' down the road.'

Bert tried to speak to explain why he had been resting, but his mouth and his tongue had become quite parched from terror and he was unable to articulate a single word.

'You know, that's not the way to get on in life, my boy,' observed Sweater lifting his forefinger and shaking his fat head reproachfully.

'Get along with you at once!' Rushton said, roughly. 'I'm surprised at yer! The idear! Sitting down in my time!'

This was quite true. Rushton was not merely angry, but astonished at the audacity of the boy. That anyone in his employment should dare to have the impertinence to sit down in his time was incredible.

The boy lifted the handle of the cart and once more began to push it up the hill. It seemed heavier now than ever, but he managed to get on somehow. He kept glancing back after Rushton and Sweater, who presently turned a corner and were lost to view: then he ran the cart to the kerb again to have a breathe. He couldn't have kept up much further without a spell even if they had still been watching him, but he didn't rest for more than about half a minute this time, because he was afraid they might be peeping round the corner at him.

After this he gave up the lamp-post system and halted for a minute or so at regular short intervals. In this way, he at length reached the top of the hill, and with a sigh of relief congratulated himself that the journey was practically over.

Just before he arrived at the gate of the house, he saw Hunter sneak out and mount his bicycle and ride away. Bert wheeled his cart up to the front door and began carrying in the things. Whilst thus engaged he noticed Philpot peeping cautiously over the banisters of the staircase, and called out to him:

'Give us a hand with this bucket of whitewash, will yer, Joe?'

'Certainly, me son, with the greatest of hagony,' replied Philpot as he hurried down the stairs.

As they were carrying it in Philpot winked at Bert and whispered:

'Did yer see Pontius Pilate anywheres outside?'

'E went away on 'is bike just as I come in at the gate.'

'Did 'e? Thank Gord for that! I don't wish 'im no 'arm,' said Philpot, fervently, 'but I 'opes 'e gets runned over with a motor.'

In this wish Bert entirely concurred, and similar charitable sentiments were expressed by all the others as soon as they heard that Misery was gone.

Just before four o'clock that afternoon Bert began to load up the truck with the Venetian blinds, which had been taken down some days previously.

'I wonder who'll have the job of paintin' 'em?' remarked Philpot to Newman.

'P'raps's they'll take a couple of us away from 'ere.'

'I shouldn't think so. We're short-'anded 'ere already. Most likely they'll put on a couple of fresh 'ands. There's a 'ell of a lot of work in all them blinds, you know: I reckon they'll 'ave to 'ave three or four coats, the state they're in.'

'Yes. No doubt that's what will be done,' replied Newman, and added with a mirthless laugh:

'I don't suppose they'll have much difficulty in getting a couple of chaps.'

'No, you're right, mate. There's plenty of 'em walkin' about as a week's work would be a Gordsend to.'

'Come to think of it,' continued Newman after a pause, 'I believe the firm used to give all their blind work to old Latham, the Venetian blind maker. Prap's they'll give 'im this lot to do.'

'Very likely,' replied Philpot, 'I should think 'e can do 'em cheaper even than us chaps, and that's all the firm cares about.'

How far their conjectures were fulfilled will appear later.

Shortly after Bert was gone it became so dark that it was necessary to light the candles, and Philpot remarked that although he hated working under such conditions, yet he was always glad when lighting up time came, because then knocking off time was not very far behind.

About five minutes to five, just as they were all putting their things away for the night, Nimrod suddenly appeared in the house. He had come hoping to find some of them ready dressed to go home before the proper time. Having failed in this laudable enterprise, he stood silently by himself for some seconds in the drawing-room. This was a spacious and lofty apartment with a large semicircular bay window. Round the ceiling was a deep cornice. In the semi-darkness the room appeared to be of even

greater proportions than it really was. After standing thinking in this room for a little while, Hunter turned and strode out to the kitchen, where the men were preparing to go home. Owen was taking off his blouse and apron as the other entered. Hunter addressed him with a malevolent snarl:

‘You can call at the office tonight as you go home.’

Owen’s heart seemed to stop beating. All the petty annoyances he had endured from Hunter rushed into his memory, together with what Easton had told him that morning. He stood, still and speechless, holding his apron in his hand and staring at the manager.

‘What for?’ he ejaculated at length. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘You’ll find out what you’re wanted for when you get there,’ returned Hunter as he went out of the room and away from the house.

When he was gone a dead silence prevailed. The hands ceased their preparations for departure and looked at each other and at Owen in astonishment. To stand a man off like that – when the job was not half finished – and for no apparent reason: and of a Monday, too. It was unheard of. There was a general chorus of indignation. Harlow and Philpot especially were very wroth.

‘If it comes to that,’ Harlow shouted, ‘they’ve got no bloody right to do it! We’re intitled to an hour’s notice.’

‘Of course we are!’ cried Philpot, his goggle eyes rolling wildly with wrath. ‘And I should ‘ave it too, if it was me. You take my tip, Frank: *Charge up to six o’clock* on yer time sheet and get some of your own back.’

Everyone joined in the outburst of indignant protest. Everyone, that is, except Crass and Slyme. But then they were not exactly in the kitchen: they were out in the scullery putting their things away, and so it happened that they said nothing, although they exchanged significant looks.

Owen had by this time recovered his self-possession. He collected all his tools and put them with his apron and blouse into his tool-bag with the purpose of taking them with him that night, but on reflection he resolved not to do so. After all, it was not absolutely certain that he was going to be ‘stood off’: possibly they were going to send him to some other job.

They kept all together – some walking on the pavement and some in the road – until they got down town, and then separated. Crass, Sawkins, Bundy and Philpot adjourned to the ‘Cricketers’ for a drink, Newman went on by himself, Slyme accompanied Easton, who had arranged with him to come that night to see the bedroom, and Owen went in the direction of the office.

11 Hands and Brains

Rushton & Co.'s premises were situated in one of the principal streets of Mugsborough and consisted of a double-fronted shop with plate glass windows. The shop extended right through to the narrow back street which ran behind it. The front part of the shop was stocked with wall-hangings, mouldings, stands showing patterns of embossed wall and ceiling decorations, cases of brushes, tins of varnish and enamel, and similar things.

The office was at the rear and was separated from the rest of the shop by a partition, glazed with muranese obscured glass. This office had two doors, one in the partition, giving access to the front shop, and the other by the side of the window and opening on to the back street. The glass of the lower sash of the back window consisted of one large pane on which was painted 'Rushton & Co.' in black letters on a white ground.

Owen stood outside this window for two or three seconds before knocking. There was a bright light in the office. Then he knocked at the door, which was at once opened from the inside by Hunter, and Owen went in.

Rushton was seated in an armchair at his desk, smoking a cigar and reading one of several letters that were lying before him. At the back was a large unframed photograph of the size known as half-plate of the interior of some building. At another desk, or rather table, at the other side of the office, a young woman was sitting writing in a large ledger. There was a typewriting machine on the table at her side.

Rushton glanced up carelessly as Owen came in, but took no further notice of him.

'Just wait a minute,' Hunter said to Owen, and then, after conversing in a low tone with Rushton for a few minutes, the foreman put on his hat and went out of the office through the partition door which led into the front shop.

Owen stood waiting for Rushton to speak. He wondered why Hunter had sneaked off and felt inclined to open the door and call him back. One thing he was determined about: he meant to have some explanation: he would not submit tamely to be dismissed without any just reason.

When he had finished reading the letter, Rushton looked up, and, leaning comfortably back in his chair, he blew a cloud of smoke from his cigar, and said in an affable, indulgent tone, such as one might use to a child:

'You're a bit of a hartist, ain't yer?'

Owen was so surprised at this reception that he was for the moment unable to reply.

'You know what I mean,' continued Rushton; 'decorating work, something like them samples of yours what's hanging up there.'

He noticed the embarrassment of Owen's manner, and was gratified. He thought the man was confused at being spoken to by such a superior person as himself.

Mr Rushton was about thirty-five years of age, with light grey eyes, fair hair and moustache, and his complexion was a whitey drab. He was tall – about five feet ten inches – and rather clumsily built; not corpulent, but fat – in good condition. He appeared to be very well fed and well cared for generally. His clothes were well made, of good quality, and fitted him perfectly. He was dressed in a grey Norfolk suit, dark brown boots and knitted woollen stockings reaching to the knee.

He was a man who took himself very seriously. There was an air of pomposity and arrogant importance about him which – considering who and what he was – would have been entertaining to any observer gifted with a sense of humour.

'Yes,' replied Owen at last. 'I can do a little of that sort of work, although of course I don't profess to be able to do it as well or as quickly as a man who does nothing else.'

'Oh, no, of course not, but I think you could manage this all right. It's that drawing-room at the 'Cave'. Mr Sweater's been speaking to me about it. It seems that when he was over in Paris some

time since he saw a room that took his fancy. The walls and ceiling was not papered, but painted: you know what I mean; sort of panelled out, and decorated with stencils and hand painting. This 'ere's a photer of it: it's done in a sort of *Japanese* fashion.'

He handed the photograph to Owen as he spoke. It represented a room, the walls and ceiling of which were decorated in a Moorish style.

'At first Mr Sweater thought of getting a firm from London to do it. but 'e give up the idear on account of the expense; but if you can do it so that it doesn't cost too much, I think I can persuade 'im to go in for it. But if it's goin' to cost a lot it won't come off at all. 'E'll just 'ave a frieze put up and 'ave the room papered in the ordinary way.'

This was not true: Rushton said it in case Owen might want to be paid extra wages while doing the work. The truth was that Sweater was going to have the room decorated in any case, and intended to get a London firm to do it. He had consented rather unwillingly to let Rushton & Co. submit him an estimate, because he thought they would not be able to do the work satisfactorily.

Owen examined the photograph closely.

'Could you do anything like that in that room?'

'Yes, I think so,' replied Owen.

'Well, you know, I don't want you to start on the job and not be able to finish it. Can you do it or not?'

Rushton felt sure that Owen could do it, and was very desirous that he should undertake it, but he did not want him to know that. He wished to convey the impression that he was almost indifferent whether Owen did the work or not. In fact, he wished to seem to be conferring a favour upon him by procuring him such a nice job as this.

'I'll tell you what I *can* do,' Owen replied. 'I can make you a water-colour sketch – a design – and if you think it good enough, of course, I can reproduce it on the ceiling and the walls, and I can let you know, within a little, how long it will take.'

Rushton appeared to reflect. Owen stood examining the photograph and began to feel an intense desire to do the work.

Rushton shook his head dubiously.

'If I let you spend a lot of time over the sketches and then Mr Sweater does not approve of your design, where do I come in?'

'Well, suppose we put it like this: I'll draw the design at home in the evenings – in my own time. If it's accepted, I'll charge you for the time I've spent upon it. If it's not suitable, I won't charge the time at all.'

Rushton brightened up considerably. 'All right. You can do so,' he said with an affectation of good nature, 'but you mustn't pile it on too thick, in any case, you know, because, as I said before, 'e don't want to spend too much money on it. In fact, if it's going to cost a great deal 'e simply won't 'ave it done at all.'

Rushton knew Owen well enough to be sure that no consideration of time or pains would prevent him from putting the very best that was in him into this work. He knew that if the man did the room at all there was no likelihood of his scamping it for the sake of getting it done quickly; and for that matter Rushton did not wish him to hurry over it. All that he wanted to do was to impress upon Owen from the very first that he must not charge too much time. Any profit that it was possible to make out of the work, Rushton meant to secure for himself. He was a smart man, this Rushton, he possessed the ideal character: the kind of character that is necessary for any man who wishes to succeed in business – to get on in life. In other words, his disposition was very similar to that of a pig – he was intensely selfish.

No one had any right to condemn him for this, because all who live under the present system practise selfishness, more or less. We must be selfish: the System demands it. We must be selfish or we shall be hungry and ragged and finally die in the gutter. The more selfish we are the better off we

shall be. In the 'Battle of Life' only the selfish and cunning are able to survive: all others are beaten down and trampled under foot. No one can justly be blamed for acting selfishly – it is a matter of self-preservation – we must either injure or be injured. It is the system that deserves to be blamed. What those who wish to perpetuate the system deserve is another question.

'When do you think you'll have the drawings ready?' inquired Rushton. 'Can you get them done tonight?'

'I'm afraid not,' replied Owen, feeling inclined to laugh at the absurdity of the question. 'It will need a little thinking about.'

'When can you have them ready then? This is Monday. Wednesday morning?'

Owen hesitated.

'We don't want to keep 'im waiting too long, you know, or 'e may give up the idear altogether.'

'Well, say Friday morning, then,' said Owen, resolving that he would stay up all night if necessary to get it done.

Rushton shook his head.

'Can't you get it done before that? I'm afraid if we keeps 'im waiting all that time we may lose the job altogether.'

'I can't get them done any quicker in my spare time,' returned Owen, flushing. 'If you like to let me stay home tomorrow and charge the time the same as if I had gone to work at the house, I could go to my ordinary work on Wednesday and let you have the drawings on Thursday morning.'

'Oh, all right,' said Rushton as he returned to the perusal of his letters.

That night, long after his wife and Frankie were asleep, Owen worked in the sitting-room, searching through old numbers of the *Decorators' Journal* and through the illustrations in other books of designs for examples of Moorish work, and making rough sketches in pencil.

He did not attempt to finish anything yet: it was necessary to think first; but he roughed out the general plan, and when at last he did go to bed he could not sleep for a long time. He almost fancied he was in the drawing-room at the 'Cave'. First of all it would be necessary to take down the ugly plaster centre flower with its crevices all filled up with old whitewash. The cornice was all right; it was fortunately a very simple one, with a deep cove and without many enrichments. Then, when the walls and the ceiling had been properly prepared, the ornamentation would be proceeded with. The walls, divided into panels and arches containing painted designs and lattice-work; the panels of the door decorated in a similar manner. The mouldings of the door and window frames picked out with colours and gold so as to be in character with the other work; the cove of the cornice, a dull yellow with a bold ornament in colour – gold was not advisable in the hollow because of the unequal distribution of the light, but some of the smaller mouldings of the cornice should be gold. On the ceiling there would be one large panel covered with an appropriate design in gold and colours and surrounded by a wide margin or border. To separate this margin from the centre panel there would be a narrow border, and another border – but wider – round the outer edge of the margin, where the ceiling met the cornice. Both these borders and the margin would be covered with ornamentation in colour and gold. Great care would be necessary when deciding what parts were to be gilded because – whilst large masses of gilding are apt to look garish and in bad taste – a lot of fine gold lines are ineffective, especially on a flat surface, where they do not always catch the light. Process by process he traced the work, and saw it advancing stage by stage until, finally, the large apartment was transformed and glorified. And then in the midst of the pleasure he experienced in the planning of the work there came the fear that perhaps they would not have it done at all.

The question, what personal advantage would he gain never once occurred to Owen. He simply wanted to do the work; and he was so fully occupied with thinking and planning how it was to be done that the question of profit was crowded out.

But although this question of what profit could be made out of the work never occurred to Owen, it would in due course be fully considered by Mr Rushton. In fact, it was the only thing about

the work that Mr Rushton would think of at all: how much money could be made out of it. This is what is meant by the oft-quoted saying, 'The men work with their hands – the master works with his brains.'

12 The Letting of the Room

It will be remembered that when the men separated, Owen going to the office to see Rushton, and the others on their several ways, Easton and Slyme went together.

During the day Easton had found an opportunity of speaking to him about the bedroom. Slyme was about to leave the place where he was at present lodging, and he told Easton that although he had almost decided on another place he would take a look at the room. At Easton's suggestion they arranged that Slyme was to accompany him home that night. As the former remarked, Slyme could come to see the place, and if he didn't like it as well as the other he was thinking of taking, there was no harm done.

Ruth had contrived to furnish the room. Some of the things she had obtained on credit from a second-hand furniture dealer. Exactly how she had managed, Easton did not know, but it was done.

'This is the house,' said Easton. As they passed through, the gate creaked loudly on its hinges and then closed of itself rather noisily.

Ruth had just been putting the child to sleep and she stood up as they came in, hastily fastening the bodice of her dress as she did so.

'I've brought a gentleman to see you,' said Easton.

Although she knew that he was looking out for someone for the room, Ruth had not expected him to bring anyone home in this sudden manner, and she could not help wishing that he had told her beforehand of his intention. It being Monday, she had been very busy all day and she was conscious that she was rather untidy in her appearance. Her long brown hair was twisted loosely into a coil behind her head. She blushed in an embarrassed way as the young man stared at her.

Easton introduced Slyme by name and they shook hands; and then at Ruth's suggestion Easton took a light to show him the room, and while they were gone Ruth hurriedly tidied her hair and dress.

When they came down again Slyme said he thought the room would suit him very well. What were the terms?

Did he wish to take the room only – just to lodge? inquired Ruth, or would he prefer to board as well?

Slyme intimated that he desired the latter arrangement.

In that case she thought twelve shillings a week would be fair. She believed that was about the usual amount. Of course that would include washing, and if his clothes needed a little mending she would do it for him.

Slyme expressed himself satisfied with these terms, which were as Ruth had said – about the usual ones. He would take the room, but he was not leaving his present lodgings until Saturday. It was therefore agreed that he was to bring his box on Saturday evening.

When he had gone, Easton and Ruth stood looking at each other in silence. Ever since this plan of letting the room first occurred to them they had been very anxious to accomplish it; and yet, now that it was done, they felt dissatisfied and unhappy, as if they had suddenly experienced some irreparable misfortune. In that moment they remembered nothing of the darker side of their life together. The hard times and the privations were far off and seemed insignificant beside the fact that this stranger was for the future to share their home. To Ruth especially it seemed that the happiness of the past twelve months had suddenly come to an end. She shrank with involuntary aversion and apprehension from the picture that rose before her of the future in which this intruder appeared the most prominent figure, dominating everything and interfering with every detail of their home life. Of course they had known all this before, but somehow it had never seemed so objectionable as it did now, and as Easton thought of it he was filled with an unreasonable resentment against Slyme, as if the latter had forced himself upon them against their will.

'Damn him!' he thought. 'I wish I'd never brought him here at all!'

Ruth did not appear to him to be very happy about it either.

‘Well?’ he said at last. ‘What do you think of him?’

‘Oh, he’ll be all right, I suppose.’

‘For my part, I wish he wasn’t coming,’ Easton continued.

‘That’s just what I was thinking,’ replied Ruth dejectedly. ‘I don’t like him at all. I seemed to turn against him directly he came in the door.’

‘I’ve a good mind to back out of it, somehow, tomorrow,’ exclaimed Easton after another silence. ‘I could tell him we’ve unexpectedly got some friends coming to stay with us.’

‘Yes,’ said Ruth eagerly, ‘It would be easy enough to make some excuse or other.’

As this way of escape presented itself she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her mind, but almost in the same instant she remembered the reasons which had at first led them to think of letting the room, and she added, disconsolately:

‘It’s foolish for us to go on like this, dear. We must let the room and it might just as well be him as anyone else. We must make the best of it, that’s all.’

Easton stood with his back to the fire, staring gloomily at her.

‘Yes, I suppose that’s the right way to look at it,’ he replied at length, ‘If we can’t stand it, we’ll give up the house and take a couple of rooms, or a small flat – if we can get one.’

Ruth agreed, although neither alternative was very inviting. The unwelcome alteration in their circumstances was after all not altogether without its compensations, because from the moment of arriving at this decision their love for each other seemed to be renewed and intensified. They remembered with acute regret that hitherto they had not always fully appreciated the happiness of that exclusive companionship of which there now remained to them but one week more. For once the present was esteemed at its proper value, being invested with some of the glamour which almost always envelops the past.

13 Penal Servitude and Death

On Tuesday – the day after his interview with Rushton – Owen remained at home working at the drawings. He did not get them finished, but they were so far advanced that he thought he would be able to complete them after tea on Wednesday evening. He did not go to work until after breakfast on Wednesday and his continued absence served to confirm the opinion of the other workmen that he had been discharged. This belief was further strengthened by the fact that a new hand had been sent to the house by Hunter, who came himself also at about a quarter past seven and very nearly caught Philpot in the act of smoking.

During breakfast, Philpot, addressing Crass and referring to Hunter, inquired anxiously:

“Ow’s ‘is temper this mornin’, Bob?”

‘As mild as milk,’ replied Crass. ‘You’d think butter wouldn’t melt in ‘is mouth.’

‘Seemed quite pleased with ‘isself, didn’t ‘e?’ said Harlow.

‘Yes,’ remarked Newman. “E said good morning to me!”

‘So ‘e did to me!’ said Easton. “E come inter the drorin’-room an’ ‘e ses, “Oh, you’re in ‘ere are yer, Easton,” ‘e ses – just like that, quite affable like. So I ses, “Yes sir.” “Well,” ‘e ses, “get it slobbered over as quick as you can,” ‘e ses, “‘cos we ain’t got much for this job: don’t spend a lot of time puttying up. Just smear it over an’ let it go!””

“E certainly seemed very pleased about something,’ said Harlow. ‘I thought prap’s there was a undertaking job in: one o’ them generally puts ‘im in a good humour.’

‘I believe that nothing would please ‘im so much as to see a epidemic break out,’ remarked Philpot. ‘Small-pox, Hinfluenza, Cholery morbus, or anything like that.’

‘Yes: don’t you remember ‘ow good-tempered ‘e was last summer when there was such a lot of Scarlet Fever about?’ observed Harlow.

‘Yes,’ said Crass with a chuckle. ‘I recollect we ‘ad six children’s funerals to do in one week. Ole Misery was as pleased as Punch, because of course as a rule there ain’t many boxin’-up jobs in the summer. It’s in winter as hundertakers reaps their ‘arvest.’

‘We ain’t ‘ad very many this winter, though, so far,’ said Harlow.

‘Not so many as usual,’ admitted Crass, ‘but still, we can’t grumble: we’ve ‘ad one nearly every week since the beginning of October. That’s not so bad, you know.’

Crass took a lively interest in the undertaking department of Rushton & Co.’s business. He always had the job of polishing or varnishing the coffin and assisting to take it home and to ‘lift in’ the corpse, besides acting as one of the bearers at the funeral. This work was more highly paid for than painting.

‘But I don’t think there’s no funeral job in,’ added Crass after a pause. ‘I think it’s because ‘e’s glad to see the end of Owen, if yeh ask me.’

‘Praps that ‘as got something to do with it,’ said Harlow. ‘But all the same I don’t call that a proper way to treat anyone – givin’ a man the push in that way just because ‘e ‘appened to ‘ave a spite against ‘im.’

‘It’s wot I call a bl—dy shame!’ cried Philpot. ‘Owen’s a chap wots always ready to do a good turn to anybody, and ‘e knows ‘is work, although ‘e is a bit of a nuisance sometimes, I must admit, when ‘e gets on about Socialism.’

‘I suppose Misery didn’t say nothin’ about ‘im this mornin’?’ inquired Easton.

‘No,’ replied Crass, and added: ‘I only ‘ope Owen don’t think as I ever said anything against ‘im. ‘E looked at me very funny that night after Nimrod went away. Owen needn’t think nothing like that about *me*, because I’m a chap like this – if I couldn’t do nobody no good, I wouldn’t never do ‘em no ‘arm!’

At this some of the others furtively exchanged significant glances, and Harlow began to smile, but no one said anything.

Philpot, noticing that the newcomer had not helped himself to any tea, called Bert's attention to the fact and the boy filled Owen's cup and passed it over to the new hand.

Their conjectures regarding the cause of Hunter's good humour were all wrong. As the reader knows, Owen had not been discharged at all, and there was nobody dead. The real reason was that, having decided to take on another man. Hunter had experienced no difficulty in getting one at the same reduced rate as that which Newman was working for, there being such numbers of men out of employment. Hitherto the usual rate of pay in Mugsborough had been sevenpence an hour for skilled painters. The reader will remember that Newman consented to accept a job at sixpence halfpenny. So far none of the other workmen knew that Newman was working under price: he had told no one, not feeling sure whether he was the only one or not. The man whom Hunter had taken on that morning also decided in his mind that he would keep his own counsel concerning what pay he was to receive, until he found out what the others were getting.

Just before half past eight Owen arrived and was immediately assailed with questions as to what had transpired at the office. Crass listened with ill-concealed chagrin to Owen's account, but most of the others were genuinely pleased.

'But what a way to speak to anybody!' observed Harlow, referring to Hunter's manner on the previous Monday night.

'You know, I reckon if ole Misery 'ad four legs, 'e'd make a very good pig,' said Philpot, solemnly, 'and you can't expect nothin' from a pig but a grunt.'

During the morning, as Easton and Owen were working together in the drawing-room, the former remarked:

'Did I tell you I had a room I wanted to let, Frank?'

'Yes, I think you did.'

'Well, I've let it to Slyme. I think he seems a very decent sort of chap, don't you?'

'Yes, I suppose he is,' replied Owen, hesitatingly. 'I know nothing against him.'

'Of course, we'd rather 'ave the 'ouse to ourselves if we could afford it, but work is so scarce lately. I've been figuring out exactly what my money has averaged for the last twelve months and how much a week do you think it comes to?'

'God only knows,' said Owen. 'How much?'

'About eighteen bob.'

'So you see we had to do something,' continued Easton; 'and I reckon we're lucky to get a respectable sort of chap like Slyme, religious and teetotal and all that, you know. Don't you think so?'

'Yes, I suppose you are,' said Owen, who, although he intensely disliked Slyme, knew nothing definite against him.

They worked in silence for some time, and then Owen said:

'At the present time there are thousands of people so badly off that, compared with them, *we* are *rich*. Their sufferings are so great that compared with them, we may be said to be living in luxury. You know that, don't you?'

Yes, that's true enough, mate. We really ought to be very thankful: we ought to consider ourselves lucky to 'ave a inside job like this when there's such a lot of chaps walkin' about doin' nothing.'

Yes,' said Owen; 'we're lucky! Although we're in a condition of abject, miserable poverty we must consider ourselves lucky that we're not actually starving.'

Owen was painting the door; Easton was doing the skirting. This work caused no noise, so they were able to converse without difficulty.

'Do you think it's right for us to tamely make up our minds to live for the rest of our lives under such conditions as that?'

‘No; certainly not,’ replied Easton; ‘but things are sure to get better presently. Trade hasn’t always been as bad as it is now. Why, you can remember as well as I can a few years ago there was so much work that we was putting in fourteen and sixteen hours a day. I used to be so done up by the end of the week that I used to stay in bed nearly all day on Sunday.’

‘But don’t you think it’s worth while trying to find out whether it’s possible to so arrange things that we may be able to live like civilized human beings without being alternately worked to death or starved?’

‘I don’t see how we’re goin’ to alter things,’ answered Easton. ‘At the present time, from what I hear, work is scarce everywhere. *We can’t make work, can we?*’

‘Do you think, then, that the affairs of the world are something like the wind or the weather – altogether beyond our control? And that if they’re bad we can do nothing but just sit down and wait for them to get better?’

‘Well, I don’t see ‘ow we can odds it. If the people wot’s got the money won’t spend it, the likes of me and you can’t make ‘em, can we?’

Owen looked curiously at Easton.

‘I suppose you’re about twenty-six now,’ he said. ‘That means that you have about another thirty years to live. Of course, if you had proper food and clothes and hadn’t to work more than a reasonable number of hours every day, there is no natural reason why you should not live for another fifty or sixty years: but we’ll say thirty. Do you mean to say that you are able to contemplate with indifference the prospect of living for another thirty years under such conditions as those we endure at present?’

Easton made no reply.

‘If you were to commit some serious breach of the law, and were sentenced next week to ten years’ penal servitude, you’d probably think your fate a very pitiable one: yet you appear to submit quite cheerfully to this other sentence, which is – that you shall die a premature death after you have done another thirty years’ hard labour.’

Easton continued painting the skirting.

‘When there’s no work,’ Owen went on, taking another dip of paint as he spoke and starting on one of the lower panels of the door, ‘when there’s no work, you will either starve or get into debt. When – as at present – there is a little work, you will live in a state of semi-starvation. When times are what you call “good”, you will work for twelve or fourteen hours a day and – if you’re *very* lucky – occasionally all night. The extra money you then earn will go to pay your debts so that you may be able to get credit again when there’s no work.’

Easton put some putty in a crack in the skirting.

‘In consequence of living in this manner, you will die at least twenty years sooner than is natural, or, should you have an unusually strong constitution and live after you cease to be able to work, you will be put into a kind of jail and treated like a criminal for the remainder of your life.’

Having faced up the cracks, Easton resumed the painting of the skirting.

‘If it were proposed to make a law that all working men and women were to be put to death – smothered, or hung, or poisoned, or put into a lethal chamber – as soon as they reached the age of fifty years, there is not the slightest doubt that you would join in the uproar of protest that would ensue. Yet you submit tamely to have your life shortened by slow starvation, overwork, lack of proper boots and clothing, and through having often to turn out and go to work when you are so ill that you ought to be in bed receiving medical care.’

Easton made no reply: he knew that all this was true, but he was not without a large share of the false pride which prompts us to hide our poverty and to pretend that we are much better off than we really are. He was at that moment wearing the pair of second-hand boots that Ruth had bought for him, but he had told Harlow – who had passed some remark about them – that he had had them for years, wearing them only for best. He felt very resentful as he listened to the other’s talk, and Owen perceived it, but nevertheless he continued:

‘Unless the present system is altered, that is all we have to look forward to; and yet you’re one of the upholders of the present system – you help to perpetuate it!’

‘Ow do I help to perpetuate it?’ demanded Easton.

‘By not trying to find out how to end it – by not helping those who are trying to bring a better state of things into existence. Even if you are indifferent to your own fate – as you seem to be – you have no right to be indifferent to that of the child for whose existence in this world you are responsible. Every man who is not helping to bring about a better state of affairs for the future is helping to perpetuate the present misery, and is therefore the enemy of his own children. There is no such thing as being neutral: we must either help or hinder.

As Owen opened the door to paint its edge, Bert came along the passage.

‘Look out!’ he cried, ‘Misery’s comin’ up the road. ‘E’ll be ‘ere in a minit.’

It was not often that Easton was glad to hear of the approach of Nimrod, but on this occasion he heard Bert’s message with a sigh of relief.

‘I say,’ added the boy in a whisper to Owen, ‘if it comes orf – I mean if you gets the job to do this room – will you ask to ‘ave me along of you?’

‘Yes, all right, sonny,’ replied Owen, and Bert went off to warn the others.

‘Unaware that he had been observed, Nimrod sneaked stealthily into the house and began softly crawling about from room to room, peeping round corners and squinting through the cracks of doors, and looking through keyholes. He was almost pleased to see that everybody was very hard at work, but on going into Newman’s room Misery was not satisfied with the progress made since his last visit. The fact was that Newman had been forgetting himself again this morning. He had been taking a little pains with the work, doing it something like properly, instead of scamping and rushing it in the usual way. The result was that he had not done enough.

‘You know, Newman, this kind of thing won’t do!’ Nimrod howled. ‘You must get over a bit more than this or you won’t suit me! If you can’t move yourself a bit quicker I shall ‘ave to get someone else. You’ve been in this room since seven o’clock this morning and it’s dam near time you was out of it!’

Newman muttered something about being nearly finished now, and Hunter ascended to the next landing – the attics, where the cheap man – Sawkins, the labourer – was at work. Harlow had been taken away from the attics to go on with some of the better work, so Sawkins was now working alone. He had been slogging into it like a Trojan and had done quite a lot. He had painted not only the sashes of the window, but also a large part of the glass, and when doing the skirting he had included part of the floor, sometimes an inch, sometimes half an inch.

The paint was of a dark drab colour and the surface of the newly painted doors bore a strong resemblance to corduroy cloth, and from the bottom corners of nearly every panel there was trickling down a large tear, as if the doors were weeping for the degenerate conditon of the decorative arts. But these tears caused no throb of pity in the bosom of Misery: neither did the corduroy-like surface of the work grate upon his feelings. He perceived them not. He saw only that there was a Lot of Work done and his soul was filled with rapture as he reflected that the man who had accomplished all this was paid only fivepence an hour. At the same time it would never do to let Sawkins know that he was satisfied with the progress made, so he said:

‘I don’t want you to stand too much over this up ‘ere, you know, Sawkins. Just mop it over anyhow, and get away from it as quick as you can.’

‘All right, sir,’ replied Sawkins, wiping the sweat from his brow as Misery began crawling downstairs again.

‘Where’s Harlow got to, then?’ he demanded of Philpot. ‘E wasn’t ‘ere just now, when I came up.’

“E’s gorn downstairs, sir, out the back,” replied Joe, jerking his thumb over his shoulder and winking at Hunter. “E’ll be back in ‘arf a mo.’ And indeed at that moment Harlow was just coming upstairs again.

“Ere, we can’t allow this kind of thing in workin’ hours, you know,” Hunter bellowed. “There’s plenty of time for that in the dinner hour!”

Nimrod now went down to the drawing-room, which Easton and Owen had been painting. He stood here deep in thought for some time, mentally comparing the quantity of work done by the two men in this room with that done by Sawkins in the attics. Misery was not a painter himself: he was a carpenter, and he thought but little of the difference in the quality of the work: to him it was all about the same: just plain painting.

‘I believe it would pay us a great deal better,’ he thought to himself, ‘if we could get hold of a few more lightweights like Sawkins.’ And with his mind filled with this reflection he shortly afterwards sneaked stealthily from the house.

14 Three Children. The Wages of Intelligence

Owen spent the greater part of the dinner hour by himself in the drawing-room making pencil sketches in his pocket-book and taking measurements. In the evening after leaving off, instead of going straight home as usual he went round to the Free Library to see if he could find anything concerning Moorish decorative work in any of the books there. Although it was only a small and ill-equipped institution he was rewarded by the discovery of illustrations of several examples of which he made sketches. After about an hour spent in this way, as he was proceeding homewards he observed two children – a boy and a girl – whose appearance seemed familiar. They were standing at the window of a sweetstuff shop examining the wares exposed therein. As Owen came up the children turned round and they recognized each other simultaneously. They were Charley and Elsie Linden. Owen spoke to them as he drew near and the boy appealed to him for his opinion concerning a dispute they had been having.

‘I say, mister. Which do you think is the best: a fardensworth of everlasting stickjaw torfee, or a prize packet?’

‘I’d rather have a prize packet,’ replied Owen, unhesitatingly.

‘There! I told you so!’ cried Elsie, triumphantly.

‘Well, I don’t care. I’d sooner ‘ave the torfee,’ said Charley, doggedly.

‘Why, can’t you agree which of the two to buy?’

‘Oh no, it’s not that,’ replied Elsie. ‘We was only just *supposing* what we’d buy if we ‘ad a fardin; but we’re not really goin’ to buy nothing, because we ain’t got no money.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Owen. ‘But I think I have some money,’ and putting his hand into his pocket he produced two halfpennies and gave one to each of the children, who immediately went in to buy the toffee and the prize packet, and when they came out he walked along with them, as they were going in the same direction as he was: indeed, they would have to pass by his house.

‘Has your grandfather got anything to do yet?’ he inquired as they went along.

‘No. ‘E’s still walkin’ about, mister,’ replied Charley.

When they reached Owen’s door he invited them to come up to see the kitten, which they had been inquiring about on the way. Frankie was delighted with these two visitors, and whilst they were eating some home-made cakes that Nora gave them, he entertained them by displaying the contents of his toy box, and the antics of the kitten, which was the best toy of all, for it invented new games all the time: acrobatic performances on the rails of chairs; curtain climbing; running slides up and down the oilcloth; hiding and peeping round corners and under the sofa. The kitten cut so many comical capers, and in a little while the children began to create such an uproar, that Nora had to interfere lest the people in the flat underneath should be annoyed.

However, Elsie and Charley were not able to stay very long, because their mother would be anxious about them, but they promised to come again some other day to play with Frankie.

‘I’m going to ‘ave a prize next Sunday at our Sunday School,’ said Elsie as they were leaving.

‘What are you going to get it for?’ asked Nora.

‘Cause I learned my text properly. I had to learn the whole of the first chapter of Matthew by heart and I never made one single mistake! So teacher said she’d give me a nice book next Sunday.’

‘I ‘ad one too, the other week, about six months ago, didn’t I, Elsie?’ said Charley.

‘Yes,’ replied Elsie and added: ‘Do they give prizes at your Sunday School, Frankie?’

‘I don’t go to Sunday School.’

‘Ain’t you never been?’ said Charley in a tone of surprise.

‘No,’ replied Frankie. ‘Dad says I have quite enough of school all the week.’

‘You ought to come to ours, man!’ urged Charley. ‘It’s not like being in school at all! And we ‘as a treat in the summer, and prizes and sometimes a magic lantern ‘tainment. It ain’t ‘arf all right, I can tell you.’

Frankie looked inquiringly at his mother.

‘Might I go, Mum?’

‘Yes, if you like, dear.’

‘But I don’t know the way.’

‘Oh, it’s not far from ‘ere,’ cried Charley. ‘We ‘as to pass by your ouse when we’re goin’, so I’ll call for you on Sunday if you like.’

‘It’s only just round in Duke Street; you know, the “Shining Light Chapel”,’ said Elsie. ‘It commences at three o’clock.’

‘All right,’ said Nora, ‘I’ll have Frankie ready at a quarter to three. But now you must run home as fast as you can. Did you like those cakes?’

‘Yes, thank you very much,’ answered Elsie.

‘Not ‘arf!’ said Charley.

‘Does your mother make cakes for you sometimes?’

‘She used to, but she’s too busy now, making blouses and one thing and another,’ Elsie answered.

‘I suppose she hasn’t much time for cooking,’ said Nora, ‘so I’ve wrapped up some more of those cakes in this parcel for you to take home for tomorrow. I think you can manage to carry it all right, can’t you, Charley?’

‘I think I’d better carry it myself,’ said Elsie. ‘Charley’s *so* careless, he’s sure to lose some of them.’

‘I ain’t no more careless than you are,’ cried Charley, indignantly. ‘What about the time you dropped the quarter of butter you was sent for in the mud?’

‘That wasn’t carelessness: that was an accident, and it wasn’t butter at all: it was margarine, so there!’

Eventually it was arranged that they were to carry the parcel in turns, Elsie to have first innings. Frankie went downstairs to the front door with them to see them off, and as they went down the street he shouted after them:

‘Mind you remember, next Sunday!’

‘All right,’ Charley shouted back. ‘We shan’t forget.’

On Thursday Owen stayed at home until after breakfast to finish the designs which he had promised to have ready that morning.

When he took them to the office at nine o’clock, the hour at which he had arranged to meet Rushton, the latter had not yet arrived, and he did not put in an appearance until half an hour later. Like the majority of the people who do brain work, he needed a great deal more rest than those who do only mere physical labour.

‘Oh, you’ve brought them sketches, I suppose,’ he remarked in a surly tone as he came in. ‘You know, there was no need for you to wait: you could ‘ave left ‘em ‘ere and gone on to your job.’

He sat down at his desk and looked carelessly at the drawing that Owen handed to him. It was on a sheet of paper about twenty-four by eighteen inches. The design was drawn with pencil and one half of it was coloured.

‘That’s for the ceiling,’ said Owen. ‘I hadn’t time to colour all of it.’

With an affectation of indifference, Rushton laid the drawing down and took the other which Owen handed to him.

‘This is for the large wall. The same design would be adapted for the other walls; and this one shows the door and the panels under the window.’

Rushton expressed no opinion about the merits of the drawings. He examined them carelessly one after the other, and then, laying them down, he inquired:

‘How long would it take you to do this work – if we get the job?’

‘About three weeks: say 150 hours. That is – the decorative work only. Of course, the walls and ceiling would have to be painted first: they will need three coats of white.’

Rushton scribbled a note on a piece of paper.

‘Well,’ he said, after a pause, ‘you can leave these ‘ere and I’ll see Mr Sweater about it and tell ‘im what it will cost, and if he decides to have it done I’ll let you know.’

He put the drawings aside with the air of a man who has other matters to attend to, and began to open one of the several letters that were on his desk. He meant this as an intimation that the audience was at an end and that he desired the ‘hand’ to retire from the presence. Owen understood this, but he did not retire, because it was necessary to mention one or two things which Rushton would have to allow for when preparing the estimate.

‘Of course I should want some help,’ he said. ‘I should need a man occasionally, and the boy most of the time. Then there’s the gold leaf – say, fifteen books.’

‘Don’t you think it would be possible to use gold paint?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Is there anything else?’ inquired Rushton as he finished writing down these items.

‘I think that’s all, except a few sheets of cartridge paper for stencils and working drawings. The quantity of paint necessary for the decorative work will be very small.’

As soon as Owen was gone, Rushton took up the designs and examined them attentively.

‘These are all right,’ he muttered. ‘Good enough for anywhere. If he can paint anything like as well as this on the walls and ceiling of the room, it will stand all the looking at that anyone in this town is likely to give it.’

‘Let’s see,’ he continued. ‘He said three weeks, but he’s so anxious to do the job that he’s most likely under-estimated the time; I’d better allow four weeks: that means about 200 hours: 200 hours at eightpence: how much is that? And say he has a painter to help him half the time. 100 hours at sixpence-ha’penny.’

He consulted a ready reckoner that was on the desk.

‘Time, £9.7.6. Materials: fifteen books of gold, say a pound. Then there’s the cartridge paper and the colours – say another pound, at the outside. Boy’s time? Well, he gets no wages as yet, so we needn’t mention that at all. Then there’s the preparing of the room. Three coats of white paint. I wish Hunter was here to give me an idea what it will cost.’

As if in answer to his wish, Nimrod entered the office at that moment, and in reply to Rushton’s query said that to give the walls and ceiling three coats of paint would cost about three pounds five for time and material. Between them the two brain workers figured that fifteen pounds would cover the entire cost of the work – painting and decorating.

‘Well, I reckon we can charge Sweater forty-five pounds for it,’ said Rushton. ‘It isn’t like an ordinary job, you know. If he gets a London firm to do it, it’ll cost him double that, if not more.’

Having arrived at this decision, Rushton rung up Sweater’s Emporium on the telephone, and, finding that Mr Sweater was there, he rolled up the designs and set out for that gentleman’s office.

The men work with their hands, and the masters work with their brains. What a dreadful calamity it would be for the world and for mankind if all these brain workers were to go on strike.

15 The Undeserving Persons and the Upper and Nether Millstones

Hunter had taken on three more painters that morning. Bundy and two labourers had commenced the work of putting in the new drains; the carpenters were back again doing some extra work, and there was also a plumber working on the house; so there was quite a little crowd in the kitchen at dinner-time. Crass had been waiting for a suitable opportunity to produce the newspaper cutting which it will be remembered he showed to Easton on Monday morning, but he had waited in vain, for there had been scarcely any 'political' talk at meal-times all the week, and it was now Thursday. As far as Owen was concerned, his thoughts were so occupied with the designs for the drawing-room that he had no time for anything else, and most of the others were only too willing to avoid a subject which frequently led to unpleasantness. As a rule Crass himself had no liking for such discussion, but he was so confident of being able to 'flatten out' Owen with the cutting from the *Obscurer* that he had several times tried to lead the conversation into the desired channel, but so far without success.

During dinner – as they called it – various subjects were discussed. Harlow mentioned that he had found traces of bugs in one of the bedrooms upstairs and this called forth a number of anecdotes of those vermin and of houses infested by them. Philpot remembered working in a house over at Windley; the people who lived in it were very dirty and had very little furniture; no bedsteads, the beds consisting of dilapidated mattresses and rags on the floor. He declared that these ragged mattresses used to wander about the rooms by themselves. The house was so full of fleas that if one placed a sheet of newspaper on the floor one could hear and see them jumping on it. In fact, directly one went into that house one was covered from head to foot with fleas! During the few days he worked at that place, he lost several pounds in weight, and of evenings as he walked homewards the children and the people in the streets, observing his ravaged countenance, thought he was suffering from some disease and used to get out of his way when they saw him coming.

There were several other of these narratives, four or five men talking at the top of their voices at the same time, each one telling a different story. At first each story-teller addressed himself to the company generally, but after a while, finding it impossible to make himself heard, he would select some particular individual who seemed disposed to listen and tell him the story. It sometimes happened that in the middle of the tale the man to whom it was being told would remember a somewhat similar adventure of his own, which he would immediately proceed to relate without waiting for the other to finish, and each of them was generally so interested in the gruesome details of his own story that he was unconscious of the fact that the other was telling one at all. In a contest of this kind the victory usually went to the man with the loudest voice, but sometimes a man who had a weak voice, scored by repeating the same tale several times until someone heard it.

Barrington, who seldom spoke and was an ideal listener, was appropriated by several men in succession, who each told him a different yarn. There was one man sitting on an up-ended pail in the far corner of the room and it was evident from the movements of his lips that he also was relating a story, although nobody knew what it was about or heard a single word of it, for no one took the slightest notice of him...

[When the uproar had subsided Harlow remembered the case of a family whose house got into such a condition that the landlord had given them notice and the father had committed] suicide because the painters had come to turn 'em out of house and home. There were a man and his wife and daughter – a girl about seventeen – living in the house, and all three of 'em used to drink like hell. As for the woman, she *could* shift it and no mistake! Several times a day she used to send the girl with a jug to the pub at the corner. When the old man was out, one could have anything one liked

to ask for from either of 'em for half a pint of beer, but for his part, said Harlow, he could never fancy it. They were both too ugly.

The finale of this tale was received with a burst of incredulous laughter by those who heard it.

'Do you 'ear what Harlow says, Bob?' Easton shouted to Crass.

'No. What was it?'

'E ses 'e once 'ad a chance to 'ave something but 'e wouldn't take it on because it was too ugly!'

'If it 'ad bin me, I should 'ave shut me bl—y eyes,' cried Sawkins. 'I wouldn't pass it for a trifle like that.'

'No,' said Crass amid laughter, 'and you can bet your life 'e didn't lose it neither, although 'e tries to make 'imself out to be so innocent.'

'I always thought old Harlow was a bl—y liar,' remarked Bundy, 'but now we knows 'e is.'

Although everyone pretended to disbelieve him, Harlow stuck to his version of the story.

'It's not their faces you want, you know,' added Bundy as he helped himself to some more tea.

'I know it wasn't my old woman's face that I was after last night,' observed Crass; and then he proceeded amid roars of laughter to give a minutely detailed account of what had taken place between himself and his wife after they had retired for the night.

This story reminded the man on the pail of a very strange dream he had had a few weeks previously: 'I dreamt I was walkin' along the top of a 'igh cliff or some sich place, and all of a sudden the ground give way under me feet and I began to slip down and down and to save meself from going over I made a grab at a tuft of grass as was growin' just within reach of me 'and. And then I thought that some feller was 'ittin me on the 'ead with a bl—y great stick, and tryin' to make me let go of the tuft of grass. And then I woke up to find my old woman shouting out and punchin' me with 'er fists. She said I was pullin' 'er 'air!'

While the room was in an uproar with the merriment induced by these stories, Crass rose from his seat and crossed over to where his overcoat was hanging on a nail in the wall, and took from the pocket a piece of card about eight inches by about four inches. One side of it was covered with printing, and as he returned to his seat Crass called upon the others to listen while he read it aloud. He said it was one of the best things he had ever seen: it had been given to him by a bloke at the Cricketers the other night.

Crass was not a very good reader, but he was able to read this all right because he had read it so often that he almost knew it by heart. It was entitled 'The Art of Flatulence', and it consisted of a number of rules and definitions. Shouts of laughter greeted the reading of each paragraph, and when he had ended, the piece of dirty card was handed round for the benefit of those who wished to read it for themselves. Several of the men, however, when it was offered to them, refused to take it, and with evident disgust suggested that it should be put into the fire. This view did not commend itself to Crass, who, after the others had finished with it, put it back again in the pocket of his coat.

Meanwhile, Bundy stood up to help himself to some more tea. The cup he was drinking from had a large piece broken out of one side and did not hold much, so he usually had to have three or four helpings.

'Anyone else want any?' he asked.

Several cups and jars were passed to him. These vessels had been standing on the floor, and the floor was very dirty and covered with dust, so before dipping them into the pail, Bundy – who had been working at the drains all morning – wiped the bottoms of the jars upon his trousers, on the same place where he was in the habit of wiping his hands when he happened to get some dirt on them. He filled the jars so full that as he held them by the rims and passed them to their owners part of the contents slopped over and trickled through his fingers. By the time he had finished the floor was covered with little pools of tea.

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