The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists

By

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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; 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 relating 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 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.

Chapter 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 cut through walls and doors were being put where no doors had 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 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 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 drizzling 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 lightly 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 'him 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 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 Stockwell, 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 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 think 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, 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 ain't 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 fissical 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 'Fissical 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 going 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'.'

'Why, 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 undiscriminating hatred of foreigners. To them the mysterious thing they variously called the 'Friscal 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 Friscal, 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 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 is 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 600 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 that 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 say 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 an '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 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 Ruston & 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 all 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 there '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 ridclus 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, music, 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 necessaries 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 full, 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 and also often unable to obtain even the bare necessaries 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.