Chapter 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 superintendant 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 of '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 dropping 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 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 probably 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 carcass 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 right 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 excuses 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 strategic 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 useless 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 pleased 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 stripping 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 sniffed the air to try if he could detect the odour of tobacco, and if he had not been suffering 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 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 around 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 almost 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 the 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 of 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!