Chapter 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 no 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 'coddy' 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 nearly 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 to 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 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 of 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 minnit,' 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 Friday--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

£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,

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 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 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 the 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 quite, taking the milk in a half-hearted, fretful way. Then it 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 old 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 all 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 these 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 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 work 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 way 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 hag 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 work 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.