

## Chapter 4

### The Placard

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

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

Frank's mother died when he was twenty-four, and a year afterwards he married the daughter of a fellow workman. In those days trade was fairly good and although there was not much demand for the more artistic kinds of work, still the fact that he was capable of doing

them, if required, made it comparatively easy for him to obtain employment. Owen and his wife were very happy. They had one child--a boy--and for some years all went well. But gradually this state of things altered: broadly speaking, the change came slowly and imperceptibly, although there were occasional sudden fluctuations.

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

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

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

That was six months ago, and since then he had worked for Rushton & Co.

Occasionally when they had no work in hand, he was 'stood off' until something came in.

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

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

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

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

Thousands of people like himself dragged out a wretched existence on the very verge of starvation, and for the greater number of people life was one long struggle against poverty. Yet practically none of these

people knew or even troubled themselves to inquire why they were in that condition; and for anyone else to try to explain to them was a ridiculous waste of time, for they did not want to know.

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

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

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

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

He was nearly home now. At the corner of the street in which he lived

there was a newsagent's shop and on a board outside the door was displayed a placard:

TERRIBLE DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

DOUBLE MURDER AND SUICIDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

again.

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

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

This incident served to turn his thoughts into another channel. If, as so many people pretended to believe, there was an infinitely loving God, how was it that this helpless creature that He had made was condemned to suffer? It had never done any harm, and was in no sense responsible for the fact that it existed. Was God unaware of the miseries of His creatures? If so, then He was not all-knowing. Was God aware of their sufferings, but unable to help them? Then He was not all-powerful. Had He the power but not the will to make His creatures happy? Then He was not good. No; it was impossible to believe in the existence of an individual, infinite God.. In fact, no one did so believe; and least of all those who pretended for various reasons to be the disciples and followers of Christ. The anti-Christians who went about singing hymns, making long prayers and crying Lord,

Lord, but never doing the things which He said, who were known by their words to be unbelievers and infidels, unfaithful to the Master they pretended to serve, their lives being passed in deliberate and systematic disregard of His teachings and Commandments. It was not necessary to call in the evidence of science, or to refer to the supposed inconsistencies, impossibilities, contradictions and absurdities contained in the Bible, in order to prove there was no truth in the Christian religion. All that was necessary was to look at the conduct of the individuals who were its votaries.