

## Chapter 5

### The Clock-case

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

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

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

During the thirty years of his tenancy he had paid altogether nearly six hundred pounds in rent, more than double the amount of the present value of the house. Jack did not complain of this--in fact he was very well satisfied. He often said that Mr Sweater was a very good landlord, because on several occasions when, being out of work, he had been a few weeks behind with his rent the agent acting for the benevolent Mr Sweater had allowed Linden to pay off the arrears by

instalments. As old Jack was in the habit of remarking, many a landlord would have sold up their furniture and turned them into the street.

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

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

'Is Mr Linden in?'

'Yes. Who is it?'

'My name's Owen.'

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

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

'Are they?' said Linden. 'I'll go and see them in the morning. But

I'm afraid I won't stand much chance, because a lot of their regular hands are waiting for a job; but I'll go and see 'em all the same.'

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

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

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

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

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

Standing by the side of the dresser at one end of the room was a treadle sewing machine, and on one end of the dresser was a a pile of sewing: ladies' blouses in process of making. This was another

instance of the goodness of Mr Sweater, from whom Linden's daughter-in-law obtained the work. It was not much, because she was only able to do it in her spare time, but then, as she often remarked, every little helped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'You know I HAD to spend some time on them doors to make 'em look anything at all; but it wasn't the time I took, or even the smoking what made 'im go on like that. He knows very well the time it takes. The real reason is that he thinks I was gettin' too much money. Work

is done so rough nowadays that chaps like Sawkins is good enough for most of it. Hunter shoved me off just because I was getting the top money, and you'll see I won't be the only one.'

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

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

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

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

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

Although at the mention of her dead son's name old Mrs Linden was

evidently distressed, she was still mindful of the Atheist's presence, and hastened to rebuke her daughter-in-law.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'So will I,' said the boy.

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

'Yes; we've got a big one.'

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

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

'Why would you rather have the kitten?'

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

'Perhaps you're too rough with it,' returned Owen.

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

'You know cats is just the same as people,' explained the little girl,



wisely. 'When they're grown up I suppose they've got their troubles to think about.'

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

'Can we 'ave it, mister?' repeated the boy.

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

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

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

of God, should be here in the house sitting on one of their chairs, drinking from one of their cups, and talking to their children.

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

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

'That's a very nice clock.'

'Yes, it's all right, ain't it?' said old Jack, with a touch of pride.

'Poor Tom made that: not the clock itself, but just the case.'

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

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

'To dear mother, from her loving son, Tom.'

Wishing her many happy birthdays.'

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

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

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

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

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

'Why, you ain't got no overcoat!' she exclaimed. 'You'll be soaked

goin' 'ome in this rain.' Then, turning to her husband, she continued:  
'There's that old one of yours; you might lend him that; it would be  
better than nothing.'

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