Chapter 6

It is not My Crime

Owen and his family occupied the top floor of a house that had once been a large private dwelling but which had been transformed into a series of flats. It was situated in Lord Street, almost in the centre of the town.

At one time this had been a most aristocratic locality, but most of the former residents had migrated to the newer suburb at the west of the town. Notwithstanding this fact, Lord Street was still a most respectable neighbourhood, the inhabitants generally being of a very superior type: shop-walkers, shop assistants, barber's clerks, boarding house keepers, a coal merchant, and even two retired jerry-builders.

There were four other flats in the house in which Owen lived. No. 1 (the basement) was occupied by an estate agent's clerk. No. 2--on a level with the street--was the habitat of the family of Mr Trafaim, a cadaverous-looking gentleman who wore a top hat, boasted of his French descent, and was a shop-walker at Sweater's Emporium. No. 3 was tenanted by an insurance agent, and in No. 4 dwelt a tallyman's traveller.

Lord Street--like most other similar neighbourhoods--supplied a striking answer to those futile theorists who prate of the equality of

mankind, for the inhabitants instinctively formed themselves into groups, the more superior types drawing together, separating themselves from the inferior, and rising naturally to the top, while the others gathered themselves into distinct classes, grading downwards, or else isolated themselves altogether; being refused admission to the circles they desired to enter, and in their turn refusing to associate with their inferiors.

The most exclusive set consisted of the families of the coal merchant, the two retired jerry-builders and Mr Trafaim, whose superiority was demonstrated by the fact that, to say nothing of his French extraction, he wore--in addition to the top hat aforesaid--a frock coat and a pair of lavender trousers every day. The coal merchant and the jerry builders also wore top hats, lavender trousers and frock coats, but only on Sundays and other special occasions. The estate agent's clerk and the insurance agent, though excluded from the higher circle, belonged to another select coterie from which they excluded in their turn all persons of inferior rank, such as shop assistants or barbers.

The only individual who was received with equal cordiality by all ranks, was the tallyman's traveller. But whatever differences existed amongst them regarding each other's social standing they were unanimous on one point at least: they were indignant at Owen's presumption in coming to live in such a refined locality.

This low fellow, this common workman, with his paint-bespattered clothing, his broken boots, and his generally shabby appearance, was a

disgrace to the street; and as for his wife she was not much better, because although whenever she came out she was always neatly dressed, yet most of the neighbours knew perfectly well that she had been wearing the same white straw hat all the time she had been there. In fact, the only tolerable one of the family was the boy, and they were forced to admit that he was always very well dressed; so well indeed as to occasion some surprise, until they found out that all the boy's clothes were home-made. Then their surprise was changed into a somewhat grudging admiration of the skill displayed, mingled with contempt for the poverty which made its exercise necessary.

The indignation of the neighbours was increased when it became known that Owen and his wife were not Christians: then indeed everyone agreed that the landlord ought to be ashamed of himself for letting the top flat to such people.

But although the hearts of these disciples of the meek and lowly Jewish carpenter were filled with uncharitableness, they were powerless to do much harm. The landlord regarded their opinion with indifference. All he cared about was the money: although he also was a sincere Christian, he would not have hesitated to let the top flat to Satan himself, provided he was certain of receiving the rent regularly.

The only one upon whom the Christians were able to inflict any suffering was the child. At first when he used to go out into the street to play, the other children, acting on their parents' instructions, refused to associate with him, or taunted him with his

parents' poverty. Occasionally he came home heartbroken and in tears because he had been excluded from some game.

At first, sometimes the mothers of some of the better-class children used to come out with a comical assumption of superiority and dignity and compel their children to leave off playing with Frankie and some other poorly dressed children who used to play in that street. These females were usually overdressed and wore a lot of jewellery. Most of them fancied they were ladies, and if they had only had the sense to keep their mouths shut, other people might possibly have shared the same delusion.

But this was now a rare occurrence, because the parents of the other children found it a matter of considerable difficulty to prevent their youngsters from associating with those of inferior rank, for when left to themselves the children disregarded all such distinctions. Frequently in that street was to be seen the appalling spectacle of the ten-year-old son of the refined and fashionable Trafaim dragging along a cart constructed of a sugar box and an old pair of perambulator wheels with no tyres, in which reposed the plebeian Frankie Owen, armed with a whip, and the dowdy daughter of a barber's clerk: while the nine-year-old heir of the coal merchant rushed up behind...

Owen's wife and little son were waiting for him in the living room. This room was about twelve feet square and the ceiling--which was low and irregularly shaped, showing in places the formation of the roof--had been decorated by Owen with painted ornaments.

There were three or four chairs, and an oblong table, covered with a clean white tablecloth, set ready for tea. In the recess at the right of fireplace--an ordinary open grate--were a number of shelves filled with a miscellaneous collection of books, most of which had been bought second-hand.

There were also a number of new books, mostly cheap editions in paper covers.

Over the back of a chair at one side of the fire, was hanging an old suit of Owen's, and some underclothing, which his wife had placed there to air, knowing that he would be wet through by the time he arrived home...

The woman was half-sitting, half lying, on a couch by the other side of the fire. She was very thin, and her pale face bore the traces of much physical and mental suffering. She was sewing, a task which her reclining position rendered somewhat difficult. Although she was really only twenty-eight years of age, she appeared older.

The boy, who was sitting on the hearthrug playing with some toys, bore a strong resemblance to his mother. He also, appeared very fragile and in his childish face was reproduced much of the delicate prettiness which she had once possessed. His feminine appearance was increased by the fact that his yellow hair hung in long curls on his shoulders. The pride with which his mother regarded this long hair was by no means

shared by Frankie himself, for he was always entreating her to cut it off.

Presently the boy stood up and walking gravely over to the window, looked down into the street, scanning the pavement for as far as he could see: he had been doing this at intervals for the last hour.

'I wonder wherever he's got to,' he said, as he returned to the fire.

'I'm sure I don't know,' returned his mother. 'Perhaps he's had to work overtime.'

'You know, I've been thinking lately,' observed Frankie, after a pause, 'that it's a great mistake for Dad to go out working at all. I believe that's the very reason why we're so poor.'

'Nearly everyone who works is more or less poor, dear, but if Dad didn't go out to work we'd be even poorer than we are now. We should have nothing to eat.'

'But Dad says that the people who do nothing get lots of everything.'

'Yes, and it's quite true that most of the people who never do any work get lots of everything, but where do they get it from? And how do they get it?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' replied Frankie, shaking his head in a puzzled

fashion.

'Supposing Dad didn't go to work, or that he had no work to go to, or that he was ill and not able to do any work, then we'd have no money to buy anything. How should we get on then?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' repeated Frankie, looking round the room in a thoughtful manner, 'The chairs that's left aren't good enough to sell, and we can't sell the beds, or your sofa, but you might pawn my velvet suit.'

'But even if all the things were good enough to sell, the money we'd get for them wouldn't last very long, and what should we do then?'

'Well, I suppose we'd have to go without, that's all, the same as we did when Dad was in London.'

'But how do the people who never do any work manage to get lots of money then?' added Frankie.

'Oh, there's lots of different ways. For instance, you remember when Dad was in London, and we had no food in the house, I had to sell the easy chair.'

Frankie nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'I remember you wrote a note and I took it to the shop, and afterwards old Didlum came up here and bought it, and then his cart came and a man took it away.'

'And do you remember how much he gave us for it?'

'Five shillings,' replied Frankie, promptly. He was well acquainted with the details of the transaction, having often heard his father and mother discuss it.

'And when we saw it in his shop window a little while afterwards, what price was marked on it?'

'Fifteen shillings.'

Well, that's one way of getting money without working.

Frankie played with his toys in silence for some minutes. At last he said:

'What other ways?'

'Some people who have some money already get more in this way: they find some people who have no money and say to them, "Come and work for us." Then the people who have the money pay the workers just enough wages to keep them alive whilst they are at work. Then, when the things that the working people have been making are finished, the workers are sent away, and as they still have no money, they are soon starving. In the meantime the people who had the money take all the things that the workers have made and sell them for a great deal more

money than they gave to the workers for making them. That's another way of getting lots of money without doing any useful work.'

'But is there no way to get rich without doing such things as that?'

'It's not possible for anyone to become rich without cheating other people.'

'What about our schoolmaster then? He doesn't do any work.'

'Don't you think it's useful and and also very hard work teaching all those boys every day? I don't think I should like to have to do it.'

'Yes, I suppose what he does is some use,' said Frankie thoughtfully. 'And it must be rather hard too, I should think. I've noticed he looks a bit worried sometimes, and sometimes he gets into a fine old wax when the boys don't pay proper attention.'

The child again went over to the window, and pulling back the edge of the blind looked down the deserted rain washed street.

'What about the vicar?' he remarked as he returned.

Although Frankie did not go to church or Sunday School, the day school that he had attended was that attached to the parish church, and the vicar was in the habit of looking in occasionally.

'Ah, he really is one of those who live without doing any necessary work, and of all the people who do nothing, the vicar is one of the very worst.'

Frankie looked up at his mother with some surprise, not because he entertained any very high opinion of clergymen in general, for, having been an attentive listener to many conversations between his parents, he had of course assimilated their opinions as far as his infant understanding permitted, but because at the school the scholars were taught to regard the gentleman in question with the most profound reverence and respect.

'Why, Mum?' he asked.

'For this reason, dearie. You know that all the beautiful things which the people who do nothing have are made by the people who work, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'And you know that those who work have to eat the very worst food, and wear the very worst clothes, and live in the very worst homes.'

'Yes,' said Frankie.

'And sometimes they have nothing to eat at all, and no clothes to wear except rags, and even no homes to live in.'

'Yes,' repeated the child.

'Well, the vicar goes about telling the Idlers that it's quite right for them to do nothing, and that God meant them to have nearly everything that is made by those who work. In fact, he tells them that God made the poor for the use of the rich. Then he goes to the workers and tells them that God meant them to work very hard and to give all the good things they make to those who do nothing, and that they should be very thankful to God and to the idlers for being allowed to have even the very worst food to eat and the rags, and broken boots to wear. He also tells them that they mustn't grumble, or be discontented because they're poor in this world, but that they must wait till they're dead, and then God will reward them by letting them go to a place called Heaven.'

Frankie laughed.

'And what about the Idlers?' he asked.

'The vicar says that if they believe everything he tells them and give him some of the money they make out of the workers, then God will let them into heaven also.'

'Well, that's not fair doos, is it, Mum?' said Frankie with some indignation.

'It wouldn't be if it were true, but then you see it's not true, it can't be true.'

'Why can't it, Mum?'

'Oh, for many reasons: to begin with, the vicar doesn't believe it himself: he only pretends to. For instance, he pretends to believe the Bible, but if we read the Bible we find that Jesus said that God is our father and that all the people in the world are His children, all brothers and sisters. But the vicar says that although Jesus said "brothers and sisters" He really ought to have said "masters and servants". Again, Jesus said that His disciples should not think of tomorrow, or save up a lot of money for themselves, but they should be unselfish and help those who are in need. Jesus said that His disciples must not think about their own future needs at all, because God will provide for them if they only do as He commands. But the vicar says that is all nonsense.

'Jesus also said that if anyone tried to do His disciples harm, they must never resist, but forgive those who injured them and pray God to forgive them also. But the vicar says this is all nonsense too. He says that the world would never be able to go on if we did as Jesus taught. The vicar teaches that the way to deal with those that injure us is to have them put into prison, or--if they belong to some other country--to take guns and knives and murder them, and burn their houses. So you see the vicar doesn't really believe or do any of the things that Jesus said: he only pretends.'

'But why does he pretend, and go about talking like that, Mum? What does he do it for?'

'Because he wishes to live without working himself, dear.'

'And don't the people know he's only pretending?'

'Some of them do. Most of the idlers know that what the vicar says is not true, but they pretend to believe it, and give him money for saying it, because they want him to go on telling it to the workers so that they will go on working and keep quiet and be afraid to think for themselves.'

'And what about the workers? Do they believe it?

'Most of them do, because when they were little children like you, their mothers taught them to believe, without thinking, whatever the vicar said, and that God made them for the use of the idlers. When they went to school, they were taught the same thing: and now that they're grown up they really believe it, and they go to work and give nearly everything they make to the idlers, and have next to nothing left for themselves and their children. That's the reason why the workers' children have very bad clothes to wear and sometimes no food to eat; and that's how it is that the idlers and their children have more clothes than they need and more food than they can eat. Some of them have so much food that they are not able to eat it. They just

waste it or throw it away.'

'When I'm grown up into a man,' said Frankie, with a flushed face, 'I'm going to be one of the workers, and when we've made a lot of things, I shall stand up and tell the others what to do. If any of the idlers come to take our things away, they'll get something they won't like.'

In a state of suppressed excitement and scarcely conscious of what he was doing, the boy began gathering up the toys and throwing the violently one by one into the box.

'I'll teach 'em to come taking our things away,' he exclaimed, relapsing momentarily into his street style of speaking.

'First of all we'll all stand quietly on one side. Then when the idlers come in and start touching our things, we'll go up to 'em and say, "'Ere, watcher doin' of? Just you put it down, will yer?" And if they don't put it down at once, it'll be the worse for 'em, I can tell you.'

All the toys being collected, Frankie picked up the box and placed it noisily in its accustomed corner of the room.

'I should think the workers will be jolly glad when they see me coming to tell them what to do, shouldn't you, Mum?'

'I don't know dear; you see so many people have tried to tell them, but

they won't listen, they don't want to hear. They think it's quite right that they should work very hard all their lives, and quite right that most of the things they help to make should be taken away from them by the people who do nothing. The workers think that their children are not as good as the children of the idlers, and they teach their children that as soon as ever they are old enough they must be satisfied to work very hard and to have only very bad good and clothes and homes.'

'Then I should think the workers ought to be jolly ashamed of themselves, Mum, don't you?'

'Well, in one sense they ought, but you must remember that that's what they've always been taught themselves. First, their mothers and fathers told them so; then, their schoolteachers told them so; and then, when they went to church, the vicar and the Sunday School teacher told them the same thing. So you can't be surprised that they now really believe that God made them and their children to make things for the use of the people who do nothing.'

'But you'd think their own sense would tell them! How can it be right for the people who do nothing to have the very best and most of everything thats made, and the very ones who make everything to have hardly any. Why even I know better than that, and I'm only six and a half years old.'

'But then you're different, dearie, you've been taught to think about

it, and Dad and I have explained it to you, often.'

'Yes, I know,' replied Frankie confidently. 'But even if you'd never taught me, I'm sure I should have tumbled to it all right by myself; I'm not such a juggins as you think I am.'

'So you might, but you wouldn't if you'd been brought up in the same way as most of the workers. They've been taught that it's very wicked to use their own judgement, or to think. And their children are being taught so now. Do you remember what you told me the other day, when you came home from school, about the Scripture lesson?'

'About St Thomas?'

'Yes. What did the teacher say St Thomas was?'

'She said he was a bad example; and she said I was worse than him because I asked too many foolish questions. She always gets in a wax if I talk too much.'

'Well, why did she call St Thomas a bad example?'

'Because he wouldn't believe what he was told.'

'Exactly: well, when you told Dad about it what did he say?'

'Dad told me that really St Thomas was the only sensible man in the

whole crowd of Apostles. That is,' added Frankie, correcting himself, 'if there ever was such a man at all.'

'But did Dad say that there never was such a man?'

'No; he said HE didn't believe there ever was, but he told me to just listen to what the teacher said about such things, and then to think about it in my own mind, and wait till I'm grown up and then I can use my own judgement.'

'Well, now, that's what YOU were told, but all the other children's mothers and fathers tell them to believe, without thinking, whatever the teacher says. So it will be no wonder if those children are not able to think for themselves when they're grown up, will it?'

'Don't you think it will be any use, then, for me to tell them what to do to the Idlers?' asked Frankie, dejectedly.

'Hark!' said his mother, holding up her finger.

'Dad!' cried Frankie, rushing to the door and flinging it open. He ran along the passage and opened the staircase door before Owen reached the top of the last flight of stairs.

'Why ever do you come up at such a rate,' reproachfully exclaimed Owen's wife as he came into the room exhausted from the climb upstairs and sank panting into the nearest chair.

'I al-ways-for-get,' he replied, when he had in some degree recovered. As he lay back in the chair, his face haggard and of a ghastly whiteness, and with the water dripping from his saturated clothing, Owen presented a terrible appearance.

Frankie noticed with childish terror the extreme alarm with which his mother looked at his father.

'You're always doing it,' he said with a whimper. 'How many more times will Mother have to tell you about it before you take nay notice?'

'It's all right, old chap,' said Owen, drawing the child nearer to him and kissing the curly head. 'Listen, and see if you can guess what I've got for you under my coat.'

In the silence the purring of the kitten was distinctly audible.

'A kitten!' cried the boy, taking it out of its hiding-place. 'All black, and I believe it's half a Persian. Just the very thing I wanted.'

While Frankie amused himself playing with the kitten, which had been provided with another saucer of bread and milk, Owen went into the bedroom to put on the dry clothes, and then, those that he had taken off having been placed with his boots near the fire to dry, he explained as they were taking tea the reason of his late homecoming.

'I'm afraid he won't find it very easy to get another job,' he remarked, referring to Linden. 'Even in the summer nobody will be inclined to take him on. He's too old.'

'It's a dreadful prospect for the two children,' answered his wife.

'Yes,' replied Owen bitterly. 'It's the children who will suffer most. As for Linden and his wife, although of course one can't help feeling sorry for them, at the same time there's no getting away from the fact that they deserve to suffer. All their lives they've been working like brutes and living in poverty. Although they have done more than their fair share of the work, they have never enjoyed anything like a fair share of the things they have helped to produce. And yet, all their lives they have supported and defended the system that robbed them, and have resisted and ridiculed every proposal to alter it. It's wrong to feel sorry for such people; they deserve to suffer.'

After tea, as he watched his wife clearing away the tea things and rearranging the drying clothing by the fire, Owen for the first time noticed that she looked unusually ill.

'You don't look well tonight, Nora,' he said, crossing over to her and putting his arm around her.

'I don't feel well,' she replied, resting her head wearily against his shoulder. 'I've been very bad all day and I had to lie down nearly all

the afternoon. I don't know how I should have managed to get the tea ready if it had not been for Frankie.'

'I set the table for you, didn't I, Mum?' said Frankie with pride; 'and tidied up the room as well.'

'Yes, darling, you helped me a lot,' she answered, and Frankie went over to her and kissed her hand.

'Well, you'd better go to bed at once,' said Owen. 'I can put Frankie to bed presently and do whatever else is necessary.'

'But there are so many things to attend to. I want to see that your clothes are properly dry and to put something ready for you to take in the morning before you go out, and then there's your breakfast to pack up--'

'I can manage all that.'

'I didn't want to give way to it like this,' the woman said, 'because I know you must be tired out yourself, but I really do feel quite done up now.'

'Oh, I'm all right,' replied Owen, who was really so fatigued that he was scarcely able to stand. 'I'll go and draw the blinds down and light the other lamp; so say good night to Frankie and come at once.'

'I won't say good night properly, now, Mum,' remarked the boy, 'because Dad can carry me into your room before he puts me into bed.'

A little later, as Owen was undressing Frankie, the latter remarked as he looked affectionately at the kitten, which was sitting on the hearthrug watching the child's every movement under the impression that it was part of some game:

'What name do you think we ought to call it, Dad?'

'You may give him any name you like,' replied Owen, absently.

'I know a dog that lives down the road,' said the boy, 'his name is Major. How would that do? Or we might call him Sergeant.'

The kitten, observing that he was the subject of their conversation, purred loudly and winked as if to intimate that he did not care what rank was conferred upon him so long as the commisariat department was properly attended to.

'I don't know, though,' continued Frankie, thoughtfully. 'They're all right names for dogs, but I think they're too big for a kitten, don't you, Dad?'

'Yes, p'raps they are,' said Owen.

'Most cats are called Tom or Kitty, but I don't want a COMMON name for

him.'

'Well, can't you call him after someone you know?'

'I know; I'll call him after a little girl that comes to our school; a fine name, Maud! That'll be a good one, won't it Dad?'

'Yes,' said Owen.

'I say, Dad,' said Frankie, suddenly realizing the awful fact that he was being put to bed. 'You're forgetting all about my story, and you promised that you'd have a game of trains with me tonight.'

'I hadn't forgotten, but I was hoping that you had, because I'm very tired and it's very late, long past your usual bedtime, you know. You can take the kitten to bed with you tonight and I'll tell you two stories tomorrow, because it's Saturday.'

'All right, then,' said the boy, contentedly; 'and I'll get the railway station built and I'll have the lines chalked on the floor, and the signals put up before you come home, so that there'll be no time wasted. And I'll put one chair at one end of the room and another chair at the other end, and tie some string across for telegraph wires. That'll be a very good idea, won't it, Dad?' and Owen agreed.

'But of course I'll come to meet you just the same as other Saturdays, because I'm going to buy a ha'porth of milk for the kitten out of my

penny.'

After the child was in bed, Owen sat alone by the table in the draughty sitting-room, thinking. Although there was a bright fire, the room was very cold, being so close to the roof. The wind roared loudly round the gables, shaking the house in a way that threatened every moment to hurl it to the ground. The lamp on the table had a green glass reservoir which was half full of oil. Owen watched this with unconscious fascination. Every time a gust of wind struck the house the oil in the lamp was agitated and rippled against the glass like the waves of a miniature sea. Staring abstractedly at the lamp, he thought of the future.

A few years ago the future had seemed a region of wonderful and mysterious possibilities of good, but tonight the thought brought no such illusions, for he knew that the story of the future was to be much the same as the story of the past.

The story of the past would continue to repeat itself for a few years longer. He would continue to work and they would all three continue to do without most of the necessaries of life. When there was no work they would starve.

For himself he did not care much because he knew that at the best--or worst--it would only be a very few years. Even if he were to have proper food and clothing and be able to take reasonable care of himself, he could not live much longer; but when that time came, what

was to become of THEM?

There would be some hope for the boy if he were more robust and if his character were less gentle and more selfish. Under the present system it was impossible for anyone to succeed in life without injuring other people and treating them and making use of them as one would not like to be treated and made use of oneself.

In order to succeed in the world it was necessary to be brutal, selfish and unfeeling: to push others aside and to take advantage of their misfortunes: to undersell and crush out one's competitors by fair means or foul: to consider one's own interests first in every case, absolutely regardless of the wellbeing of others.

That was the ideal character. Owen knew that Frankie's character did not come up to this lofty ideal. Then there was Nora, how would she fare?

Owen stood up and began walking about the room, oppressed with a kind of terror. Presently he returned to the fire and began rearranging the clothes that were drying. He found that the boots, having been placed too near the fire, had dried too quickly and consequently the sole of one of them had begun to split away from the upper: he remedied this as well as he was able and then turned the wetter parts of the clothing to the fire. Whilst doing this he noticed the newspaper, which he had forgotten, in the coat pocket. He drew it out with an exclamation of pleasure. Here was something to distract his thoughts: if not

instructive or comforting, it would at any rate be interesting and even amusing to read the reports of the self-satisfied, futile talk of the profound statesmen who with comical gravity presided over the working of the Great System which their combined wisdom pronounced to be the best that could possibly be devised. But tonight Owen was not to read of those things, for as soon as he opened the paper his attention was riveted by the staring headline of one of the principal columns:

TERRIBLE DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

Wife And Two Children Killed

Suicide of the Murderer

It was one of the ordinary poverty crimes. The man had been without employment for many weeks and they had been living by pawning or selling their furniture and other possessions. But even this resource must have failed at last, and when one day the neighbours noticed that the blinds remained down and that there was a strange silence about the house, no one coming out or going in, suspicions that something was wrong were quickly aroused. When the police entered the house, they found, in one of the upper rooms, the dead bodies of the woman and the two children, with their throats severed, laid out side by side upon the bed, which was saturated with their blood.

There was no bedstead and no furniture in the room except the straw mattress and the ragged clothes and blankets which formed the bed upon the floor.

The man's body was found in the kitchen, lying with outstretched arms face downwards on the floor, surrounded by the blood that had poured from the wound in his throat which had evidently been inflicted by the razor that was grasped in his right hand.

No particle of food was found in the house, and on a nail in the wall in the kitchen was hung a piece of blood-smeared paper on which was written in pencil:

'This is not my crime, but society's.'

The report went on to explain that the deed must have been perpetrated during a fit of temporary insanity brought on by the sufferings the man had endured.

'Insanity!' muttered Owen, as he read this glib theory. 'Insanity! It seems to me that he would have been insane if he had NOT killed them.'

Surely it was wiser and better and kinder to send them all to sleep, than to let them continue to suffer.

At the same time he thought it very strange that the man should have chosen to do it that way, when there were so many other cleaner, easier and more painless ways of accomplishing the same object. He wondered why it was that most of these killings were done in more or less the same crude, cruel messy way. No; HE would set about it in a different fashion. He would get some charcoal, then he would paste strips of

paper over the joinings of the door and windows of the room and close the register of the grate. Then he would kindle the charcoal on a tray or something in the middle of the room, and then they would all three just lie down together and sleep; and that would be the end of everything. There would be no pain, no blood, and no mess.

Or one could take poison. Of course, there was a certain amount of difficulty in procuring it, but it would not be impossible to find some pretext for buying some laudanum: one could buy several small quantities at different shops until one had sufficient. Then he remembered that he had read somewhere that vermillion, one of the colours he frequently had to use in his work, was one of the most deadly poisons: and there was some other stuff that photographers used, which was very easy to procure. Of course, one would have to be very careful about poisons, so as not to select one that would cause a lot of pain. It would be necessary to find out exactly how the stuff acted before using it. It would not be very difficult to do so. Then he remembered that among his books was one that probably contained some information about this subject. He went over to the book-shelf and presently found the volume; it was called The Cyclopedia of Practical Medicine, rather an old book, a little out of date, perhaps, but still it might contain the information he wanted. Opening it, he turned to the table of contents. Many different subjects were mentioned there and presently he found the one he sought:

Poisons: chemically, physiologically and pathologically considered.

Corrosive Poisons.

Narcotic Poisons.

Slow Poisons.

Consecutive Poisons.

Accumulative Poisons.

He turned to the chapter indicated and, reading it, he was astonished to find what a number of poisons there were within easy reach of whoever wished to make use of them: poisons that could be relied upon to do their work certainly, quickly and without pain. Why, it was not even necessary to buy them: one could gather them from the hedges by the road side and in the fields.

The more he thought of it the stranger it seemed that such a clumsy method as a razor should be so popular. Why almost any other way would be better and easier than that. Strangulation or even hanging, though the latter method could scarcely be adopted in that house, because there were no beams or rafters or anything from which it would be possible to suspend a cord. Still, he could drive some large nails or hooks into one of the walls. For that matter, there were already some clothes-hooks on some of the doors. He began to think that this would be an even more excellent way than poison or charcoal; he could easily pretend to Frankie that he was going to show him some new kind of play.

He could arrange the cord on the hook on one of the doors and then under pretence of play, it would be done. The boy would offer no resistance, and in a few minutes it would all be over.

He threw down the book and pressed his hands over his ears: he fancied he could hear the boy's hands and feet beating against the panels of the door as he struggled in his death agony.

Then, as his arms fell nervelessly by his side again, he thought that he heard Frankie's voice calling.

'Dad! Dad!'

Owen hastily opened the door.

'Are you calling, Frankie?'

'Yes. I've been calling you quite a long time.'

'What do you want?'

'I want you to come here. I want to tell you something.'

'Well, what is it dear? I thought you were asleep a long time ago,' said Owen as he came into the room.

'That's just what I want to speak to you about: the kitten's gone to sleep all right, but I can't go. I've tried all different ways, counting and all, but it's no use, so I thought I'd ask you if you'd mind coming and staying with me, and letting me hold you hand for a little while and the p'raps I could go.'

The boy twined his arms round Owen's neck and hugged him very tightly.

'Oh, Dad, I love you so much!' he said. 'I love you so much, I could squeeze you to death.'

'I'm afraid you will, if you squeeze me so tightly as that.'

The boy laughed softly as he relaxed his hold. 'That WOULD be a funny way of showing you how much I love you, wouldn't it, Dad? Squeezing you to death!'

'Yes, I suppose it would,' replied Owen huskily, as he tucked the bedclothes round the child's shoulders. 'But don't talk any more, dear; just hold my hand and try to sleep.'

'All right,' said Frankie.

Lying there very quietly, holding his father's hand and occasionally kissing it, the child presently fell asleep. Then Owen got up very gently and, having taken the kitten out of the bed again and arranged the bedclothes, he softly kissed the boy's forehead and returned to the other room.

Looking about for a suitable place for the kitten to sleep in, he noticed Frankie's toy box, and having emptied the toys on to the floor in a corner of the room, he made a bed in the box with some rags and

placed it on its side on the hearthrug, facing the fire, and with some difficulty persuaded the kitten to lie in it. Then, having placed the chairs on which his clothes were drying at a safe distance from the fire, he went into the bedroom. Nora was still awake.

'Are you feeling any better, dear?' he said.

'Yes, I'm ever so much better since I've been in bed, but I can't help worrying about your clothes. I'm afraid they'll never be dry enough for you to put on the first thing in the morning. Couldn't you stay at home till after breakfast, just for once?'

'No; I mustn't do that. If I did Hunter would probably tell me to stay away altogether. I believe he would be glad of an excuse to get rid of another full-price man just now.'

'But if it's raining like this in the morning, you'll be wet through before you get there.'

'It's no good worrying about that dear: besides, I can wear this old coat that I have no now, over the other.'

'And if you wrap your old shoes in some paper, and take them with you, you can take off your wet boots as soon as you get to the place.'

'Yes, all right,' responded Owen. 'Besides,' he added, reassuringly, 'even if I do get a little wet, we always have a fire there, you know.'

'Well, I hope the weather will be a little better than this in the morning,' said Nora. 'Isn't it a dreadful night! I keep feeling afraid that the house is going to be blown down.'

Long after Nora was asleep, Owen lay listening to the howling of the wind and the noise of the rain as it poured heavily on the roof...