Chapter 7

The Exterminating Machines

'Come on, Saturday!' shouted Philpot, just after seven o'clock one Monday morning as they were getting ready to commence work.

It was still dark outside, but the scullery was dimly illuminated by the flickering light of two candles which Crass had lighted and stuck on the shelf over the fireplace in order to enable him to see to serve out the different lots of paints and brushes to the men.

'Yes, it do seem a 'ell of a long week, don't it?' remarked Harlow as he hung his overcoat on a nail and proceeded to put on his apron and blouse. 'I've 'ad bloody near enough of it already.'

'Wish to Christ it was breakfast-time,' growled the more easily satisfied Easton.

Extraordinary as it may appear, none of them took any pride in their work: they did not 'love' it. They had no conception of that lofty ideal of 'work for work's sake', which is so popular with the people who do nothing. On the contrary, when the workers arrived in the morning they wished it was breakfast-time. When they resumed work after breakfast they wished it was dinner-time. After dinner they wished it was one o'clock on Saturday.

So they went on, day after day, year after year, wishing their time was over and, without realizing it, really wishing that they were dead.

How extraordinary this must appear to those idealists who believe in 'work for work's sake', but who themselves do nothing but devour or use and enjoy or waste the things that are produced by the labour of those others who are not themselves permitted to enjoy a fair share of the good things they help to create?

Crass poured several lots of colour into several pots.

'Harlow,' he said, 'you and Sawkins, when he comes, can go up and do the top bedrooms out with this colour. You'll find a couple of candles up there. It's only goin' to 'ave one coat, so see that you make it cover all right, and just look after Sawkins a bit so as 'e doesn't make a bloody mess of it. You do the doors and windows, and let 'im do the cupboards and skirtings.'

'That's a bit of all right, I must say,' Harlow said, addressing the company generally. 'We've got to teach a b--r like 'im so as 'e can do us out of a job presently by working under price.'

'Well, I can't 'elp it,' growled Crass. 'You know 'ow it is: 'Unter sends 'im 'ere to do paintin', and I've got to put 'im on it. There ain't nothing else for 'im to do.'

Further discussion on this subject was prevented by Sawkins' arrival, nearly a quarter of an hour late.

'Oh, you 'ave come, then,' sneered Crass. 'Thought p'raps you'd gorn for a 'oliday.'

Sawkins muttered something about oversleeping himself, and having hastily put on his apron, he went upstairs with Harlow.

'Now, let's see,' Crass said, addressing Philpot. 'You and Newman 'ad better go and make a start on the second floor: this is the colour, and 'ere's a couple of candles. You'd better not both go in one room or 'Unter will growl about it. You take one of the front and let Newman take one of the back rooms. Take a bit of stoppin' with you: they're goin' to 'ave two coats, but you'd better putty up the 'oles as well as you can, this time.'

'Only two coats!' said Philpot. 'Them rooms will never look nothing with two coats--a light colour like this.'

'It's only goin' to get two, anyway,' returned Crass, testily. ''Unter said so, so you'll 'ave to do the best you can with 'em, and get 'em smeared over middlin' sudden, too.'

Crass did not think it necessary to mention that according to the copy of the specification of the work which he had in his pocket the rooms in question were supposed to have four coats.

Crass now turned to Owen.

'There's that drorin'-room,' he said. 'I don't know what's goin' to be done with that yet. I don't think they've decided about it. Whatever's to be done to it will be an extra, because all that's said about it in the contract is to face it up with putty and give it one coat of white. So you and Easton 'ad better get on with it.'

Slyme was busy softening some putty by rubbing and squeezing it between his hands.

'I suppose I'd better finish the room I started on on Saturday?' he asked.

'All right,' replied Crass. 'Have you got enough colour?'

'Yes,' said Slyme.

As he passed through the kitchen on the way to his work, Slyme accosted Bert, the boy, who was engaged in lighting, with some pieces of wood, a fire to boil the water to make the tea for breakfast at eight o'clock.

'There's a bloater I want's cooked,' he said.

'All right,' replied Bert. 'Put it over there on the dresser along of Philpot's and mine.'

Slyme took the bloater from his food basket, but as he was about to put it in the place indicated, he observed that his was rather a larger one than either of the other two. This was an important matter. After they were cooked it would not be easy to say which was which: he might possibly be given one of the smaller ones instead of his own. He took out his pocket knife and cut off the tail of the large bloater.

''Ere it is, then,' he said to Bert. 'I've cut the tail of mine so as you'll know which it is.'

It was now about twenty minutes past seven and all the other men having been started at work, Crass washed his hands under the tap. Then he went into the kitchen and having rigged up a seat by taking two of the drawers out of the dresser and placing them on the floor about six feet apart and laying a plank across, he sat down in front of the fire, which was now burning brightly under the pail, and, lighting his pipe, began to smoke. The boy went into the scullery and began washing up the cups and jars for the men to drink out of.

Bert was a lean, undersized boy about fifteen years of age and about four feet nine inches in height. He had light brown hair and hazel grey eyes, and his clothes were of many colours, being thickly encrusted with paint, the result of the unskillful manner in which he did his work, for he had only been at the trade about a year. Some of the men had nicknamed him 'the walking paint-shop', a title which Bert accepted good-humouredly.

This boy was an orphan. His father had been a railway porter who had worked very laboriously for twelve or fourteen hours every day for many years, with the usual result, namely, that he and his family lived in a condition of perpetual poverty. Bert, who was their only child and not very robust, had early shown a talent for drawing, so when his father died a little over a year ago, his mother readily assented when the boy said that he wished to become a decorator. It was a nice light trade, and she thought that a really good painter, such as she was sure he would become, was at least always able to earn a good living. Resolving to give the boy the best possible chance, she decided if possible to place him at Rushton's, that being one of the leading firms in the town. At first Mr Rushton demanded ten pounds as a premium, the boy to be bound for five years, no wages the first year, two shillings a week the second, and a rise of one shilling every year for the remainder of the term. Afterwards, as a special favour--a matter of charity, in fact, as she was a very poor woman--he agreed to accept five pounds.

This sum represented the thrifty savings of years, but the poor woman parted with it willingly in order that the boy should become a skilled workman. So Bert was apprenticed--bound for five years--to Rushton & Co.

For the first few months his life had been spent in the paint-shop at the yard, a place that was something between a cellar and a stable. There, surrounded by the poisonous pigments and materials of the trade,

the youthful artisan worked, generally alone, cleaning the dirty
paint-pots brought in by the workmen from finished 'jobs' outside, and
occasionally mixing paint according to the instructions of Mr Hunter,
or one of the sub-foremen.

Sometimes he was sent out to carry materials to the places where the
men were working--heavy loads of paint or white lead--sometimes pails
of whitewash that his slender arms had been too feeble to carry more
than a few yards at a time.

Often his fragile, childish figure was seen staggering manfully along,
bending beneath the weight of a pair of steps or a heavy plank.

He could manage a good many parcels at once: some in each hand and some
tied together with string and slung over his shoulders. Occasionally,
however, there were more than he could carry; then they were put into a
handcart which he pushed or dragged after him to the distant jobs.

That first winter the boy's days were chiefly spent in the damp,
evil-smelling, stone-flagged paint-shop, without even a fire to warm
the clammy atmosphere.

But in all this he had seen no hardship. With the unconsciousness of
boyhood, he worked hard and cheerfully. As time went on, the goal of
his childish ambition was reached--he was sent out to work with the
men! And he carried the same spirit with him, always doing his best to
oblige those with whom he was working.

He tried hard to learn, and to be a good boy, and he succeeded, fairly well.

He soon became a favourite with Owen, for whom he conceived a great respect and affection, for he observed that whenever there was any special work of any kind to be done it was Owen who did it. On such occasions, Bert, in his artful, boyish way, would scheme to be sent to assist Owen, and the latter whenever possible used to ask that the boy might be allowed to work with him.

Bert's regard for Owen was equalled in intensity by his dislike of Crass, who was in the habit of jeering at the boy's aspirations. 'There'll be plenty of time for you to think about doin' fancy work after you've learnt to do plain painting,' he would say.

This morning, when he had finished washing up the cups and mugs, Bert returned with them to the kitchen.

'Now let's see,' said Crass, thoughtfully, 'You've put the tea in the pail, I s'pose.'

'Yes.'

'And now you want a job, don't you?'

'Yes,' replied the boy.

'Well, get a bucket of water and that old brush and a swab, and go and wash off the old whitewash and colouring orf the pantry ceiling and walls.'

'All right,' said Bert. When he got as far as the door leading into the scullery he looked round and said:

'I've got to git them three bloaters cooked by breakfast time.'

'Never mind about that,' said Crass. 'I'll do them.'

Bert got the pail and the brush, drew some water from the tap, got a pair of steps and a short plank, one end of which he rested on the bottom shelf of the pantry and the other on the steps, and proceeded to carry out Crass's instructions.

It was very cold and damp and miserable in the pantry, and the candle only made it seem more so. Bert shivered: he would like to have put his jacket on, but that was out of the question at a job like this. He lifted the bucket of water on to one of the shelves and, climbing up on to the plank, took the brush from the water and soaked about a square yard of the ceiling; then he began to scrub it with the brush.

He was not very skilful yet, and as he scrubbed the water ran down over the stock of the brush, over his hand and down his uplifted arm, wetting the turned-up sleeves of his shirt. When he had scrubbed it

sufficiently he rinsed it off as well as he could with the brush, and then, to finish with, he thrust his hand into the pail of water and, taking out the swab, wrung the water out of it and wiped the part of the ceiling that he had washed. Then he dropped it back into the pail, and shook his numbed fingers to restore the circulation. Then he peeped into the kitchen, where Crass was still seated by the fire, smoking and toasting one of the bloaters at the end of a pointed stick. Bert wished he would go upstairs, or anywhere, so that he himself might go and have a warm at the fire.

''E might just as well 'ave let me do them bloaters,' he muttered to himself, regarding Crass malignantly through the crack of the door. 'This is a fine job to give to anybody--a cold mornin' like this.'

He shifted the pail of water a little further along the shelf and went on with the work.

A little later, Crass, still sitting by the fire, heard footsteps approaching along the passage. He started up guiltily and, thrusting the hand holding his pipe into his apron pocket, retreated hastily into the scullery. He thought it might be Hunter, who was in the habit of turning up at all sorts of unlikely times, but it was only Easton.

'I've got a bit of bacon I want the young 'un to toast for me,' he said as Crass came back.

'You can do it yourself if you like,' replied Crass affably, looking at

his watch. 'It's about ten to eight.'

Easton had been working for Rushton & Co. for a fortnight, and had been wise enough to stand Crass a drink on several occasions: he was consequently in that gentleman's good books for the time being.

'How are you getting on in there?' Crass asked, alluding to the work Easton and Owen were doing in the drawing-room. 'You ain't fell out with your mate yet, I s'pose?'

'No; 'e ain't got much to say this morning; 'is cough's pretty bad. I can generally manage to get on orl right with anybody, you know,' Easton added.

'Well, so can I as a rule, but I get a bit sick listening to that bloody fool. Accordin' to 'im, everything's wrong. One day it's religion, another it's politics, and the next it's something else.'

'Yes, it is a bit thick; too much of it,' agreed Easton, 'but I don't take no notice of the bloody fool: that's the best way.'

'Of course, we know that things is a bit bad just now,' Crass went on, 'but if the likes of 'im could 'ave their own way they'd make 'em a bloody sight worse.'

'That's just what I say,' replied Easton.

'I've got a pill ready for 'im, though, next time 'e start yappin','
Crass continued as he drew a small piece of printed paper from his
waistcoat pocket. 'Just read that; it's out of the Obscurer.'

Easton took the newspaper cutting and read it: 'Very good,' he remarked
as he handed it back.

'Yes, I think that'll about shut 'im up. Did yer notice the other day
when we was talking about poverty and men bein' out of work, 'ow 'e
dodged out of answerin' wot I said about machinery bein' the cause of
it?   'e never answered me! Started talkin' about something else.'

'Yes, I remember 'e never answered it,' said Easton, who had really no
recollection of the incident at all.

'I mean to tackle 'im about it at breakfast-time. I don't see why 'e
should be allowed to get out of it like that. There was a bloke down
at the "Cricketers" the other night talkin' about the same thing--a
chap as takes a interest in politics and the like, and 'e said the very
same as me. Why, the number of men what's been throwed out of work by
all this 'ere new-fangled machinery is something chronic!'

'Of course,' agreed Easton, 'everyone knows it.'

'You ought to give us a look in at the "Cricketers" some night. There's
a lot of decent chaps comes there.'

'Yes, I think I will.'

'What 'ouse do you usually use?' asked Crass after a pause.

Easton laughed. 'Well, to tell you the truth I've not used anywhere's lately. Been 'avin too many 'ollerdays.'

'That do make a bit of difference, don't it?' said Crass. 'But you'll be all right 'ere, till this job's done. Just watch yerself a bit, and don't get comin' late in the mornin's. Old Nimrod's dead nuts on that.'

'I'll see to that all right,' replied Easton. 'I don't believe in losing time when there IS work to do. It's bad enough when you can't get it.'

'You know,' Crass went on, confidentially. 'Between me an' you an' the gatepost, as the sayin' is, I don't think Mr bloody Owen will be 'ere much longer. Nimrod 'ates the sight of 'im.'

Easton had it in his mind to say that Nimrod seemed to hate the sight of all of them: but he made no remark, and Crass continued:

''E's 'eard all about the way Owen goes on about politics and religion, an' one thing an' another, an' about the firm scampin' the work. You know that sort of talk don't do, does it?'

'Of course not.'

''Unter would 'ave got rid of 'im long ago, but it wasn't 'im as took 'im on in the first place. It was Rushton 'imself as give 'im a start. It seems Owen took a lot of samples of 'is work an' showed 'em to the Bloke.'

'Is them the things wot's 'angin' up in the shop-winder?'

'Yes!' said Crass, contemptuously. 'But 'e's no good on plain work. Of course 'e does a bit of grainin' an' writin'--after a fashion--when there's any to do, and that ain't often, but on plain work, why, Sawkins is as good as 'im for most of it, any day!'

'Yes, I suppose 'e is,' replied Easton, feeling rather ashamed of himself for the part he was taking in this conversation.

Although he had for the moment forgotten the existence of Bert, Crass had instinctively lowered his voice, but the boy--who had left off working to warm his hands by putting them into his trousers pockets--managed, by listening attentively, to hear every word.

'You know there's plenty of people wouldn't give the firm no more work if they knowed about it,' Crass continued. 'Just fancy sendin' a b--r like that to work in a lady's or gentleman's 'ouse--a bloody Atheist!'

'Yes, it is a bit orf, when you look at it like that.'

'I know my missis--for one--wouldn't 'ave a feller like that in our place. We 'ad a lodger once and she found out that 'e was a freethinker or something, and she cleared 'im out, bloody quick, I can tell yer!'

'Oh, by the way,' said Easton, glad of an opportunity to change the subject, 'you don't happen to know of anyone as wants a room, do you? We've got one more than we want, so the wife thought that we might as well let it.'

Crass thought for a moment. 'Can't say as I do,' he answered, doubtfully. 'Slyme was talking last week about leaving the place 'e's lodging at, but I don't know whether 'e's got another place to go to. You might ask him. I don't know of anyone else.'

'I'll speak to 'im,' replied Easton. 'What's the time? it must be nearly on it.'

'So it is: just on eight,' exclaimed Crass, and drawing his whistle he blew a shrill blast upon it to apprise the others of the fact.

'Has anyone seen old Jack Linden since 'e got the push?' inquired Harlow during breakfast.

'I seen 'im Saterdy,' said Slyme.

'Is 'e doin' anything?'

'I don't know: I didn't 'ave time to speak to 'im.'

'No, 'e ain't got nothing,' remarked Philpot. 'I seen 'im Saterdy night, an' 'e told me 'e's been walkin' about ever since.'

Philpot did not add that he had 'lent' Linden a shilling, which he never expected to see again.

''E won't be able to get a job again in a 'urry,' remarked Easton. ''E's too old.'

'You know, after all, you can't blame Misery for sackin' 'im,' said Crass after a pause. ''E was too slow for a funeral.'

'I wonder how much YOU'LL be able to do when you're as old as he is?' said Owen.

'P'raps I won't want to do nothing,' replied Crass with a feeble laugh. 'I'm goin' to live on me means.'

'I should say the best thing old Jack could do would be to go in the union,' said Harlow.

'Yes: I reckon that's what'll be the end of it,' said Easton in a matter-of-fact tone.

'It's a grand finish, isn't it?' observed Owen. 'After working hard all one's life to be treated like a criminal at the end.'

'I don't know what you call bein' treated like criminals,' exclaimed Crass. 'I reckon they 'as a bloody fine time of it, an' we've got to find the money.'

'Oh, for God's sake don't start no more arguments,' cried Harlow, addressing Owen. 'We 'ad enough of that last week. You can't expect a boss to employ a man when 'e's too old to work.'

'Of course not,' said Crass.

Philpot said--nothing.

'I don't see no sense in always grumblin',' Crass proceeded. 'These things can't be altered. You can't expect there can be plenty of work for everyone with all this 'ere labour-savin' machinery what's been invented.'

'Of course,' said Harlow, 'the people what used to be employed on the work what's now done by machinery, has to find something else to do. Some of 'em goes to our trade, for instance: the result is there's too many at it, and there ain't enough work to keep 'em all goin'.'

'Yes,' cried Crass, eagerly. 'That's just what I say. Machinery is the real cause of the poverty. That's what I said the other day.'

'Machinery is undoubtedly the cause of unemployment,' replied Owen, 'but it's not the cause of poverty: that's another matter altogether.'

The others laughed derisively.

'Well, it seems to me to amount to the same thing,' said Harlow, and nearly everyone agreed.

'It doesn't seem to me to amount to the same thing,' Owen replied. 'In my opinion, we are all in a state of poverty even when we have employment--the condition we are reduced to when we're out of work is more properly described as destitution.'

'Poverty,' continued Owen after a short silence, 'consists in a shortage of the necessaries of life. When those things are so scarce or so dear that people are unable to obtain sufficient of them to satisfy all their needs, those people are in a condition of poverty. If you think that the machinery, which makes it possible to produce all the necessaries of life in abundance, is the cause of the shortage, it seems to me that there must be something the matter with your minds.'

'Oh, of course we're all bloody fools except you,' snarled Crass. 'When they were servin' out the sense, they give you such a 'ell of a lot, there wasn't none left for nobody else.'

'If there wasn't something wrong with your minds,' continued Owen, 'you

would be able to see that we might have "Plenty of Work" and yet be in a state of destitution. The miserable wretches who toil sixteen or eighteen hours a day--father, mother and even the little children--making match-boxes, or shirts or blouses, have "plenty of work", but I for one don't envy them. Perhaps you think that if there was no machinery and we all had to work thirteen or fourteen hours a day in order to obtain a bare living, we should not be in a condition of poverty? Talk about there being something the matter with your minds! If there were not, you wouldn't talk one day about Tariff Reform as a remedy for unemployment and then the next day admit that Machinery is the cause of it! Tariff Reform won't do away with the machinery, will it?'

'Tariff Reform is the remedy for bad trade,' returned Crass.

'In that case Tariff Reform is the remedy for a disease that does not exist. If you would only take the trouble to investigate for yourself you would find out that trade was never so good as it is at present: the output--the quantity of commodities of every kind--produced in and exported from this country is greater than it has ever been before. The fortunes amassed in business are larger than ever before: but at the same time--owing, as you have just admitted--to the continued introduction and extended use of wages-saving machinery, the number of human beings being employed is steadily decreasing. I have here,' continued Owen, taking out his pocket-book, 'some figures which I copied from the Daily Mail Year Book for 1907, page 33:

'"It is a very noticeable fact that although the number of factories and their value have vastly increased in the United Kingdom, there is an absolute decrease in the number of men and women employed in those factories between 1895 and 1901. This is doubtless due to the displacement of hand labour by machinery!"

'Will Tariff Reform deal with that? Are the good, kind capitalists going to abandon the use of wages-saving machinery if we tax all foreign-made goods? Does what you call "Free Trade" help us here? Or do you think that abolishing the House of Lords, or disestablishing the Church, will enable the workers who are displaced to obtain employment? Since it IS true--as you admit--that machinery is the principal cause of unemployment, what are you going to do about it? What's your remedy?'

No one answered, because none of them knew of any remedy: and Crass began to feel sorry that he had re-introduced the subject at all.

'In the near future,' continued Owen, 'it is probable that horses will be almost entirely superseded by motor cars and electric trams. As the services of horses will be no longer required, all but a few of those animals will be caused to die out: they will no longer be bred to the same extent as formerly. We can't blame the horses for allowing themselves to be exterminated. They have not sufficient intelligence to understand what's being done. Therefore they will submit tamely to the extinction of the greater number of their kind.

'As we have seen, a great deal of the work which was formerly done by

human beings is now being done by machinery. This machinery belongs to a few people: it is worked for the benefit of those few, just the same as were the human beings it displaced. These Few have no longer any need of the services of so many human workers, so they propose to exterminate them! The unnecessary human beings are to be allowed to starve to death! And they are also to be taught that it is wrong to marry and breed children, because the Sacred Few do not require so many people to work for them as before!'

'Yes, and you'll never be able to prevent it, mate!' shouted Crass.

'Why can't we?'

'Because it can't be done!' cried Crass fiercely. 'It's impossible!'

'You're always sayin' that everything's all wrong,' complained Harlow, 'but why the 'ell don't you tell us 'ow they're goin' to be put right?'

'It doesn't seem to me as if any of you really wish to know. I believe that even if it were proved that it could be done, most of you would be sorry and would do all you could to prevent it.'

''E don't know 'isself,' sneered Crass. 'Accordin' to 'im, Tariff Reform ain't no bloody good--Free Trade ain't no bloody good, and everybody else is wrong! But when you arst 'im what ought to be done--'e's flummoxed.'

Crass did not feel very satisfied with the result of this machinery argument, but he consoled himself with the reflection that he would be able to flatten out his opponent on another subject. The cutting from the Obscurer which he had in his pocket would take a bit of answering! When you have a thing in print--in black and white--why there it is, and you can't get away from it! If it wasn't right, a paper like that would never have printed it. However, as it was now nearly half past eight, he resolved to defer this triumph till another occasion. It was too good a thing to be disposed of in a hurry.