

Chapter 8

The Cap on the Stairs

After breakfast, when they were working together in the drawing-room, Easton, desiring to do Owen a good turn, thought he would put him on his guard, and repeated to him in a whisper the substance of the conversation he had held with Crass concerning him.

'Of course, you needn't mention that I told you, Frank,' he said, 'but I thought I ought to let you know: you can take it from me, Crass ain't no friend of yours.'

'I've know that for a long time, mate,' replied Owen. 'Thanks for telling me, all the same.'

'The bloody rotter's no friend of mine either, or anyone else's, for that matter,' Easton continued, 'but of course it doesn't do to fall out with 'im because you never know what he'd go and say to ol' 'Unter.'

'Yes, one has to remember that.'

'Of course we all know what's the matter with 'im as far as YOU'RE concerned,' Easton went on. 'He don't like 'avin' anyone on the firm wot knows more about the work than 'e does 'imself--thinks 'e might git worked out of 'is job.'

Owen laughed bitterly.

'He needn't be afraid of ME on THAT account. I wouldn't have his job if it were offered to me.'

'But 'e don't think so,' replied Easton, 'and that's why 'e's got 'is knife into you.'

'I believe that what he said about Hunter is true enough,' said Owen.

'Every time he comes here he tries to goad me into doing or saying something that would give him an excuse to tell me to clear out. I might have done it before now if I had not guessed what he was after, and been on my guard.'

Meantime, Crass, in the kitchen, had resumed his seat by the fire with the purpose of finishing his pipe of tobacco. Presently he took out his pocket-book and began to write in it with a piece of black-lead pencil. When the pipe was smoked out he knocked the bowl against the grate to get rid of the ash, and placed the pipe in his waistcoat pocket. Then, having torn out the leaf on which he had been writing, he got up and went into the pantry, where Bert was still struggling with the old whitewash.

'Ain't yer nearly finished? I don't want yer to stop in 'ere all day, yer know.'

'I ain't got much more to do now,' said the boy. 'Just this bit under the bottom shelf and then I'm done.'

'Yes, and a bloody fine mess you've made, what I can see of it!' growled Crass. 'Look at all this water on the floor!'

Bert looked guiltily at the floor and turned very red.

'I'll clean it all up', he stammered. 'As soon as I've got this bit of wall done, I'll wipe all the mess up with the swab.'

Crass now took a pot of paint and some brushes and, having put some more fuel on the fire, began in a leisurely way to paint some of the woodwork in the kitchen. Presently Bert came in.

'I've finished there,' he said.

'About time, too. You'll 'ave to look a bit livelier than you do, you know, or me and you will fall out.'

Bert did not answer.

'Now I've got another job for yer. You're fond of drorin, ain't yer?' continued Crass in a jeering tone.

'Yes, a little,' replied the boy, shamefacedly.

'Well,' said Crass, giving him the leaf he had torn out of the pocket-book, 'you can go up to the yard and git them things and put 'em on a truck and dror it up 'ere, and git back as soon as you can. Just look at the paper and see if you understand it before you go. I don't want you to make no mistakes.'

Bert took the paper and with some difficulty read as follows:

I pare steppes 8 foot
1/2 gallon Plastor off perish
1 pale off witewosh
12 lbs wite led
1/2 gallon Linsede Hoil
Do. Do. turps

'I can make it out all right.'

'You'd better bring the big truck,' said Crass, 'because I want you to take the venetian blinds with you on it when you take it back tonight. They've got to be painted at the shop.'

'All right.'

When the boy had departed Crass took a stroll through the house to see how the others were getting on. Then he returned to the kitchen and proceeded with his work.

Crass was about thirty-eight years of age, rather above middle height and rather stout. He had a considerable quantity of curly black hair and wore a short beard of the same colour. His head was rather large, but low, and flat on top. When among his cronies he was in the habit of referring to his obesity as the result of good nature and a contented mind. Behind his back other people attributed it to beer, some even going to far as to nickname him the 'tank'.

There was no work of a noisy kind being done this morning. Both the carpenters and the bricklayers having been taken away, temporarily, to another 'job'. At the same time there was not absolute silence: occasionally Crass could hear the voices of the other workmen as they spoke to each other, sometimes shouting from one room to another. Now and then Harlow's voice rang through the house as he sang snatches of music-hall songs or a verse of a Moody and Sankey hymn, and occasionally some of the others joined in the chorus or interrupted the singer with squeals and catcalls. Once or twice Crass was on the point of telling them to make less row: there would be a fine to do if Nimrod came and heard them. Just as he had made up his mind to tell them to stop the noise, it ceased of itself and he heard loud whispers:

'Look out! Someone's comin'.'

The house became very quiet.

Crass put out his pipe and opened the window and the back door to get rid of the smell of the tobacco smoke. Then he shifted the pair of

steps noisily, and proceeded to work more quickly than before. Most likely it was old Misery.

He worked on for some time in silence, but no one came to the kitchen: whoever it was must have gone upstairs. Crass listened attentively. Who could it be? He would have liked to go to see whom it was, but at the same time, if it were Nimrod, Crass wished to be discovered at work. He therefore waited a little longer and presently he heard the sound of voices upstairs but was unable to recognize them. He was just about to go out into the passage to listen, when whoever it was began coming downstairs. Crass at once resumed his work. The footsteps came along the passage leading to the kitchen: slow, heavy, ponderous footsteps, but yet the sound was not such as would be made by a man heavily shod. It was not Misery, evidently.

As the footsteps entered the kitchen, Crass looked round and beheld a very tall, obese figure, with a large, fleshy, coarse-featured, clean-shaven face, and a great double chin, the complexion being of the colour and appearance of the fat of uncooked bacon. A very large fleshy nose and weak-looking pale blue eyes, the slightly inflamed lids being almost destitute of eye-lashes. He had large fat feet cased in soft calfskin boots, with drab-coloured spats. His overcoat, heavily trimmed with sealskin, reached just below the knees, and although the trousers were very wide they were filled by the fat legs within, the shape of the calves being distinctly perceptible. Even as the feet seemed about to burst the uppers of the boots, so the legs appeared to threaten the trousers with disruption. This man was so large that his

figure completely filled up the doorway, and as he came in he stooped slightly to avoid damaging the glittering silk hat on his head. One gloved hand was thrust into the pocket of the overcoat and in the other he carried a small Gladstone bag.

When Crass beheld this being, he touched his cap respectfully.

'Good morning, sir!'

'Good morning. They told me upstairs that I should find the foreman here. Are you the foreman?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I see you're getting on with the work here.'

'Ho yes sir, we're beginning to make a bit hov a show now, sir,' replied Crass, speaking as if he had a hot potato in his mouth.

'Mr Rushton isn't here yet, I suppose?'

'No, sir: 'e don't horfun come hon the job hin the mornin, sir; 'e generally comes hafternoons, sir, but Mr 'Unter's halmost sure to be 'ere presently, sir.'

'It's Mr Rushton I want to see: I arranged to meet him here at ten o'clock; but'--looking at his watch--'I'm rather before my time.'

'He'll be here presently, I suppose,' added Mr Sweater. 'I'll just take a look round till he comes.'

'Yes, sir,' responded Crass, walking behind him obsequiously as he went out of the room.

Hoping that the gentleman might give him a shilling, Crass followed him into the front hall and began explaining what progress had so far been made with the work, but as Mr Sweater answered only by monosyllables and grunts, Crass presently concluded that his conversation was not appreciated and returned to the kitchen.

Meantime, upstairs, Philpot had gone into Newman's room and was discussing with him the possibility of extracting from Mr Sweater the price of a little light refreshment.

'I think,' he remarked, 'that we oughter see-ise this 'ere tuneropperty to touch 'im for an allowance.'

'We won't git nothin' out of 'IM, mate,' returned Newman. "'E's a red-'ot teetotaller.'

'That don't matter. 'Ow's 'e to know that we buys beer with it? We might 'ave tea, or ginger ale, or lime-juice and glycerine for all 'e knows!'

Mr Sweater now began ponderously re-ascending the stairs and presently came into the room where Philpot was. The latter greeted him with respectful cordiality:

'Good morning, sir.'

'Good morning. You've begun painting up here, then.'

'Yes, sir, we've made a start on it,' replied Philpot, affably.

'Is this door wet?' asked Sweater, glancing apprehensively at the sleeve of his coat.

'Yes, sir,' answered Philpot, and added, as he looked meaningly at the great man, 'the paint is wet, sir, but the PAINTERS is dry.'

'Confound it!' exclaimed Sweater, ignoring, or not hearing the latter part of Philpot's reply. 'I've got some of the beastly stuff on my coat sleeve.'

'Oh, that's nothing, sir,' cried Philpot, secretly delighted. 'I'll get that orf for yer in no time. You wait just 'arf a mo!'

He had a piece of clean rag in his tool bag, and there was a can of turps in the room. Moistening the rag slightly with turps he carefully removed the paint from Sweater's sleeve.

'It's all orf not, sir,' he remarked, as he rubbed the place with a dry part of the rag. 'The smell of the turps will go away in about a hour's time.'

'Thanks,' said Sweater.

Philpot looked at him wistfully, but Sweater evidently did not understand, and began looking about the room.

'I see they've put a new piece of skirting here,' he observed.

'Yes, sir,' said Newman, who came into the room just then to get the turps. 'The old piece was all to bits with dry-rot.'

'I feel as if I 'ad a touch of the dry-rot meself, don't you?' said Philpot to Newman, who smiled feebly and cast a sidelong glance at Sweater, who did not appear to notice the significance of the remark, but walked out of the room and began climbing up to the next floor, where Harlow and Sawkins were working.

'Well, there's a bleeder for yer!' said Philpot with indignation.

'After all the trouble I took to clean 'is coat! Not a bloody stiver!

Well, it takes the cake, don't it?'

'I told you 'ow it would be, didn't I?' replied Newman.

'P'raps I didn't make it plain enough,' said Philpot, thoughtfully. 'We

must try to get some of our own back somehow, you know.'

Going out on the landing he called softly upstairs.

'I say, Harlow.'

'Hallo,' said that individual, looking over the banisters.

'Ow are yer getting on up there?'

'Oh, all right, you know.'

'Pretty dry job, ain't it?' Philpot continued, raising his voice a little and winking at Harlow.

'Yes, it is, rather,' replied Harlow with a grin.

'I think this would be a very good time to take up the collection, don't you?'

'Yes, it wouldn't be a bad idear.'

'Well, I'll put me cap on the stairs,' said Philpot, suiting the action to the word. 'You never knows yer luck. Things is gettin' a bit serious on this floor, you know; my mate's fainted away once already!'

Philpot now went back to his room to await developments: but as Sweater

made no sign, he returned to the landing and again hailed Harlow.

'I always reckon a man can work all the better after 'e's 'ad a drink: you can seem to get over more of it, like.'

'Oh, that's true enough,' responded Harlow. 'I've often noticed it meself.'

Sweater came out of the front bedroom and passed into one of the back rooms without any notice of either of the men.

'I'm afraid it's a frost, mate,' Harlow whispered, and Philpot, shaking his head sadly, returned to work; but in a little while he came out again and once more accosted Harlow.

'I knowed a case once,' he said in a melancholy tone, 'where a chap died--of thirst--on a job just like this; and at the inquest the doctor said as 'arf a pint would 'a saved 'im!'

'It must 'ave been a norrible death,' remarked Harlow.

'Orrible ain't the work for it, mate,' replied Philpot, mournfully.

'It was something chronic!'

After this final heartrending appeal to Sweater's humanity they returned to work, satisfied that, whatever the result of their efforts, they had done their best. They had placed the matter fully and fairly

before him: nothing more could be said: the issue now rested entirely with him.

But it was all in vain. Sweater either did not or would not understand, and when he came downstairs he took no notice whatever of the cap which Philpot had placed so conspicuously in the centre of the landing floor.