

Chapter 9

Who is to Pay?

Sweater reached the hall almost at the same moment that Rushton entered by the front door. They greeted each other in a friendly way and after a few remarks concerning the work that was being done, they went into the drawing-room where Owen and Easton were and Rushton said:

'What about this room? Have you made up your mind what you're going to have done to it?'

'Yes,' replied Sweater; 'but I'll tell you about that afterwards. What I'm anxious about is the drains. Have you brought the plans?'

'Yes.'

'What's it going to cost?'

'Just wait a minute,' said Rushton, with a slight gesture calling Sweater's attention to the presence of the two workmen. Sweater understood.

'You might leave that for a few minutes, will you?' Rushton continued, addressing Owen and Easton. 'Go and get on with something else for a little while.'

When they were alone, Rushton closed the door and remarked: 'It's always as well not to let these fellows know more than is necessary.'

Sweater agreed.

'Now this 'ere drain work is really two separate jobs,' said Rushton. 'First, the drains of the house: that is, the part of the work that actually on your ground. When that's done, there will 'ave to be a pipe carried right along under this private road to the main road to connect the drains of the house with the town main. You follow me?'

'Perfectly. What's it going to cost for the lot?'

'For the drains of the house, £25.0.0. and for the connecting pipe £30.0.0. £55.0.0. for the lot.'

'Um! That the lower you can do it for, eh?'

'That's the lowest. I've figured it out most carefully, the time and materials, and that's practically all I'm charging you.'

The truth of the matter was that Rushton had had nothing whatever to do with estimating the cost of this work: he had not the necessary knowledge to do so. Hunter had drawn the plans, calculated the cost and prepared the estimate.

'I've been thinking over this business lately,' said Sweater, looking at Rushton with a cunning leer. 'I don't see why I should have to pay for the connecting pipe. The Corporation ought to pay for that. What do you say?'

Rushton laughed. 'I don't see why not,' he replied.

'I think we could arrange it all right, don't you?' Sweater went on.

'Anyhow, the work will have to be done, so you'd better let 'em get on with it. £55.0.0. covers both jobs, you say?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, all right, you get on with it and we'll see what can be done with the Corporation later on.'

'I don't suppose we'll find 'em very difficult to deal with,' said Rushton with a grin, and Sweater smiled agreement.

As they were passing through the hall they met Hunter, who had just arrived. He was rather surprised to see them, as he knew nothing of their appointment. He wished them 'Good morning' in an awkward hesitating undertone as if he were doubtful how his greeting would be received. Sweater nodded slightly, but Rushton ignored him altogether and Nimrod passed on looking and feeling like a disreputable cur that had just been kicked.

As Sweater and Rushton walked together about the house, Hunter hovered about them at a respectable distance, hoping that presently some notice might be taken of him. His dismal countenance became even longer than usual when he observed that they were about to leave the house without appearing even to know that he was there. However, just as they were going out, Rushton paused on the threshold and called him:

'Mr Hunter!'

'Yes, sir.'

Nimrod ran to him like a dog taken notice of by his master: if he had possessed a tail, it is probable that he would have wagged it. Rushton gave him the plans with an intimation that the work was to be proceeded with.

For some time after they were gone, Hunter crawled silently about the house, in and out of the rooms, up and down the corridors and the staircases. After a while he went into the room where Newman was and stood quietly watching him for about ten minutes as he worked. The man was painting the skirting, and just then he came to a part that was split in several places, so he took his knife and began to fill the cracks with putty. He was so nervous under Hunter's scrutiny that his hand trembled to such an extent that it took him about twice as long as it should have done, and Hunter told him so with brutal directness.

'Never mind about puttying up such little cracks as them!' he shouted.

'Fill 'em up with the paint. We can't afford to pay you for messing about like that!'

Newman made no reply.

Misery found no excuse for bullying anyone else, because they were all tearing into it for all they were worth. As he wandered up and down the house like an evil spirit, he was followed by the furtively unfriendly glances of the men, who cursed him in their hearts as he passed.

He sneaked into the drawing-room and after standing with a malignant expression, silently watching Owen and Easton, he came out again without having uttered a word.

Although he frequently acted in this manner, yet somehow today the circumstance worried Owen considerably. He wondered uneasily what it meant, and began to feel vaguely apprehensive. Hunter's silence seemed more menacing than his speech.