

## Chapter 10

### The Long Hill

Bert arrived at the shop and with as little delay as possible loaded up the handcart with all the things he had been sent for and start on the return journey. He got on all right in the town, because the roads were level and smooth, being paved with wood blocks. If it had only been like that all the way it would have been easy enough, although he was a small boy for such a large truck, and such a heavy load. While the wood road lasted the principal trouble he experienced was the difficulty of seeing where he was going, the handcart being so high and himself so short. The pair of steps on the cart of course made it all the worse in that respect. However, by taking great care he managed to get through the town all right, although he narrowly escaped colliding with several vehicles, including two or three motor cars and an electric tram, besides nearly knocking over an old woman who was carrying a large bundle of washing. From time to time he saw other small boys of his acquaintance, some of them former schoolmates. Some of these passed by carrying heavy loads of groceries in baskets, and others with wooden trays full of joints of meat.

Unfortunately, the wood paving ceased at the very place where the ground began to rise. Bert now found himself at the beginning of a long stretch of macadamized road which rose slightly and persistently throughout its whole length. Bert had pushed a cart up this road many

times before and consequently knew the best method of tackling it. Experience had taught him that a full frontal attack on this hill was liable to failure, so on this occasion he followed his usual plan of making diagonal movements, crossing the road repeatedly from right to left and left to right, after the fashion of a sailing ship tacking against the wind, and halting about every twenty yards to rest and take breath. The distance he was to go was regulated, not so much by his powers of endurance as by the various objects by the wayside--the lamp-posts, for instance. During each rest he used to look ahead and select a certain lamp-post or street corner as the next stopping-place, and when he start again he used to make the most strenuous and desperate efforts to reach it.

Generally the goal he selected was too distant, for he usually overestimated his strength, and whenever he was forced to give in he ran the truck against the kerb and stood there panting for breath and feeling profoundly disappointed at his failure.

On the present occasion, during one of these rests, it flashed upon him that he was being a very long time: he would have to buck up or he would get into a row: he was not even half-way up the road yet!

Selecting a distant lamp-post, he determined to reach it before resting again.

The cart had a single shaft with a cross-piece at the end, forming the handle: he gripped this fiercely with both hands and, placing his chest

against it, with a mighty effort he pushed the cart before him.

It seemed to get heavier and heavier every foot of the way. His whole body, but especially the thighs and calves of his legs, pained terribly, but still he strained and struggled and said to himself that he would not give in until he reached the lamp-post.

Finding that the handle hurt his chest, he lowered it to his waist, but that being even more painful he raised it again to his chest, and struggled savagely on, panting for breath and with his heart beating wildly.

The cart became heavier and heavier. After a while it seemed to the boy as if there were someone at the front of it trying to push him back down the hill. This was such a funny idea that for a moment he felt inclined to laugh, but the inclination went almost as soon as it came and was replaced by the dread that he would not be able to hold out long enough to reach the lamp-post, after all. Clenching his teeth, he made a tremendous effort and staggered forward two or three more steps and then--the cart stopped. He struggled with it despairingly for a few seconds, but all the strength had suddenly gone out of him: his legs felt so weak that he nearly collapsed on to the ground, and the cart began to move backwards down the hill. He was just able to stick to it and guide it so that it ran into and rested against the kerb, and then he stood holding it in a half-dazed way, very pale, saturated with perspiration, and trembling. His legs in particular shook so much that he felt that unless he could sit down for a little, he would FALL down.

He lowered the handle very carefully so as not to spill the whitewash out of the pail which was hanging from a hook under the cart, then, sitting down on the kerbstone, he leaned wearily against the wheel.

A little way down the road was a church with a clock in the tower. It was five minutes to ten by this clock. Bert said to himself that when it was ten he would make another start.

Whilst he was resting he thought of many things. Just behind that church was a field with several ponds in it where he used to go with other boys to catch effets. It if were not for the cart he would go across now, to see whether there were any there still. He remembered that he had been very eager to leave school and go to work, but they used to be fine old times after all.

Then he thought of the day when his mother took him to Mr Rushton's office to 'bind' him. He remembered that day very vividly: it was almost a year ago. How nervous he had been! His hand had trembled so that he was scarcely able to hold the pen. And even when it was all over, they had both felt very miserable, somehow. His mother had been very nervous in the office also, and when they got home she cried a lot and called him her poor little fatherless boy, and said she hoped he would be good and try to learn. And then he cried as well, and promised her that he would do his best. He reflected with pride that he was keeping his promise about being a good boy and trying to learn: in fact, he knew a great deal about the trade already--he could paint

back doors as well as anybody! and railings as well. Owen had taught him lots of things and had promised to do some patterns of graining for him so that he might practise copying them at home in the evenings. Owen was a fine chap. Bert resolved that he would tell him what Crass had been saying to Easton. Just fancy, the cheek of a rotter like Crass, trying to get Owen the sack! It would be more like it if Crass was to be sacked himself, so that Owen could be the foreman.

One minute to ten.

With a heavy heart Bert watched the clock. His legs were still aching very badly. He could not see the hands of the clock moving, but they were creeping on all the same. Now, the minute hand was over the edge of the number, and he began to deliberate whether he might not rest for another five minutes? But he had been such a long time already on his errand that he dismissed the thought. The minute hand was now upright and it was time to go on.

Just as he was about to get up a harsh voice behind him said:

'How much longer are you going to sit there?'

Bert started up guiltily, and found himself confronted by Mr Rushton, who was regarding him with an angry frown, whilst close by towered the colossal figure of the obese Sweater, the expression on his greasy countenance betokening the pain he experienced on beholding such an appalling example of juvenile depravity.

'What do you mean by sich conduct?' demanded Rushton, indignantly. 'The idear of sitting there like that when most likely the men are waiting for them things?'

Crimson with shame and confusion, the boy made no reply.

'You've been there a long time,' continued Rushton, 'I've been watchin' you all the time I've been comin' down the road.'

Bert tried to speak to explain why he had been resting, but his mouth and his tongue had become quite parched from terror and he was unable to articulate a single word.

'You know, that's not the way to get on in life, my boy,' observed Sweater lifting his forefinger and shaking his fat head reproachfully.

'Get along with you at once!' Rushton said, roughly. 'I'm surprised at yer! The idear! Sitting down in my time!'

This was quite true. Rushton was not merely angry, but astonished at the audacity of the boy. That anyone in his employment should dare to have the impertinence to sit down in his time was incredible.

The boy lifted the handle of the cart and once more began to push it up the hill. It seemed heavier now than ever, but he managed to get on somehow. He kept glancing back after Rushton and Sweater, who

presently turned a corner and were lost to view: then he ran the cart to the kerb again to have a breathe. He couldn't have kept up much further without a spell even if they had still been watching him, but he didn't rest for more than about half a minute this time, because he was afraid they might be peeping round the corner at him.

After this he gave up the lamp-post system and halted for a minute or so at regular short intervals. In this way, he at length reached the top of the hill, and with a sigh of relief congratulated himself that the journey was practically over.

Just before he arrived at the gate of the house, he saw Hunter sneak out and mount his bicycle and ride away. Bert wheeled his cart up to the front door and began carrying in the things. Whilst thus engaged he noticed Philpot peeping cautiously over the banisters of the staircase, and called out to him:

'Give us a hand with this bucket of whitewash, will yer, Joe?'

'Certainly, me son, with the greatest of hagony,' replied Philpot as he hurried down the stairs.

As they were carrying it in Philpot winked at Bert and whispered:

'Did yer see Pontius Pilate anywheres outside?'

'E went away on 'is bike just as I come in at the gate.'

'Did 'e? Thank Gord for that! I don't wish 'im no 'arm,' said Philpot, fervently, 'but I 'opes 'e gets runned over with a motor.'

In this wish Bert entirely concurred, and similar charitable sentiments were expressed by all the others as soon as they heard that Misery was gone.

Just before four o'clock that afternoon Bert began to load up the truck with the venetian blinds, which had been taken down some days previously.

'I wonder who'll have the job of paintin' 'em?' remarked Philpot to Newman.

'P'raps's they'll take a couple of us away from ere.'

'I shouldn't think so. We're short-'anded 'ere already. Most likely they'll put on a couple of fresh 'ands. There's a 'ell of a lot of work in all them blinds, you know: I reckon they'll 'ave to 'ave there or four coats, the state they're in.'

'Yes. No doubt that's what will be done,' replied Newman, and added with a mirthless laugh:

'I don't suppose they'll have much difficulty in getting a couple of chaps.'

'No, you're right, mate. There's plenty of 'em walkin' about as a week's work would be a Gordsend to.'

'Come to think of it,' continued Newman after a pause, 'I believe the firm used to give all their blind work to old Latham, the venetian blind maker. Prap's they'll give 'im this lot to do.'

'Very likely,' replied Philpot, 'I should think 'e can do 'em cheaper even than us chaps, and that's all the firm cares about.'

How far their conjectures were fulfilled will appear later.

Shortly after Bert was gone it became so dark that it was necessary to light the candles, and Philpot remarked that although he hated working under such conditions, yet he was always glad when lighting up time came, because then knocking off time was not very far behind.

About five minutes to five, just as they were all putting their things away for the night, Nimrod suddenly appeared in the house. He had come hoping to find some of them ready dressed to go home before the proper time. Having failed in this laudable enterprise, he stood silently by himself for some seconds in the drawing-room. This was a spacious and lofty apartment with a large semicircular bay window. Round the ceiling was a deep cornice. In the semi-darkness the room appeared to be of even greater proportions than it really was. After standing thinking in this room for a little while, Hunter turned and strode out to the

kitchen, where the men were preparing to go home. Owen was taking off his blouse and apron as the other entered. Hunter addressed him with a malevolent snarl:

'You can call at the office tonight as you go home.'

Owen's heart seemed to stop beating. All the petty annoyances he had endured from Hunter rushed into his memory, together with what Easton had told him that morning. He stood, still and speechless, holding his apron in his hand and staring at the manager.

'What for?' he ejaculated at length. 'What's the matter?'

'You'll find out what you're wanted for when you get there,' returned Hunter as he went out of the room and away from the house.

When he was gone a dead silence prevailed. The hands ceased their preparations for departure and looked at each other and at Owen in astonishment. To stand a man off like that--when the job was not half finished--and for no apparent reason: and of a Monday, too. It was unheard of. There was a general chorus of indignation. Harlow and Philpot especially were very wroth.

'If it comes to that,' Harlow shouted, 'they've got no bloody right to do it! We're entitled to an hour's notice.'

'Of course we are!' cried Philpot, his goggle eyes rolling wildly with

wrath. 'And I should 'ave it too, if it was me. You take my tip,  
Frank: CHARGE UP TO SIX O'CLOCK on yer time sheet and get some of your  
own back.'

Everyone joined in the outburst of indignant protest. Everyone, that  
is, except Crass and Slyme. But then they were not exactly in the  
kitchen: they were out in the scullery putting their things away, and  
so it happened that they said nothing, although they exchanged  
significant looks.

Owen had by this time recovered his self-possession. He collected all  
his tools and put them with his apron and blouse into his tool-bag with  
the purpose of taking them with him that night, but on reflection he  
resolved not to do so. After all, it was not absolutely certain that  
he was going to be 'stood off': possibly they were going to send him on  
some other job.

They kept all together--some walking on the pavement and some in the  
road--until they got down town, and then separated. Crass, Sawkins,  
Bundy and Philpot adjourned to the 'Cricketers' for a drink, Newman  
went on by himself, Slyme accompanied Easton who had arranged with him  
to come that night to see the bedroom, and Owen went in the direction  
of the office.