Chapter 11

Hands and Brains

Rushton & Co.'s premises were situated in one of the principal streets of Mugsborough and consisted of a double-fronted shop with plate glass windows. The shop extended right through to the narrow back street which ran behind it. The front part of the shop was stocked with wall-hangings, mouldings, stands showing patterns of embossed wall and ceiling decorations, cases of brushes, tins of varnish and enamel, and similar things.

The office was at the rear and was separated from the rest of the shop by a partition, glazed with muranese obscured glass. This office had two doors, one in the partition, giving access to the front shop, and the other by the side of the window and opening on to the back street. The glass of the lower sash of the back window consisted of one large pane on which was painted 'Rushton & Co.' in black letters on a white ground.

Owen stood outside this window for two or three seconds before knocking. There was a bright light in the office. Then he knocked at the door, which was at once opened from the inside by Hunter, and Owen went in.

Rushton was seated in an armchair at his desk, smoking a cigar and

reading one of several letters that were lying before him. At the back was a large unframed photograph of the size known as half-plate of the interior of some building. At another desk, or rather table, at the other side of the office, a young woman was sitting writing in a large ledger. There was a typewriting machine on the table at her side.

Rushton glanced up carelessly as Owen came in, but took no further notice of him.

'Just wait a minute,' Hunter said to Owen, and then, after conversing in a low tone with Rushton for a few minutes, the foreman put on his hat and went out of the office through the partition door which led into the front shop.

Owen stood waiting for Rushton to speak. He wondered why Hunter had sneaked off and felt inclined to open the door and call him back. One thing he was determined about: he meant to have some explanation: he would not submit tamely to be dismissed without any just reason.

When he had finished reading the letter, Rushton looked up, and, leaning comfortably back in his chair, he blew a cloud of smoke from his cigar, and said in an affable, indulgent tone, such as one might use to a child:

'You're a bit of a hartist, ain't yer?'

Owen was so surprised at this reception that he was for the moment

unable to reply.

'You know what I mean,' continued Rushton; 'decorating work, something like them samples of yours what's hanging up there.'

He noticed the embarrassment of Owen's manner, and was gratified. He thought the man was confused at being spoken to by such a superior person as himself.

Mr Rushton was about thirty-five years of age, with light grey eyes, fair hair and moustache, and his complexion was a whitey drab. He was tall--about five feet ten inches--and rather clumsily built; not corpulent, but fat--in good condition. He appeared to be very well fed and well cared for generally. His clothes were well made, of good quality and fitted him perfectly. He was dressed in a grey Norfolk suit, dark brown boots and knitted woollen stockings reaching to the knee.

He was a man who took himself very seriously. There was an air of pomposity and arrogant importance about him which--considering who and what he was--would have been entertaining to any observer gifted with a sense of humour.

'Yes,' replied Owen at last. 'I can do a little of that sort of work, although of course I don't profess to be able to do it as well or as quickly as a man who does nothing else.'

'Oh, no, of course not, but I think you could manage this all right. It's that drawing-room at the 'Cave'. Mr Sweater's been speaking to me about it. It seems that when he was over in Paris some time since he saw a room that took his fancy. The walls and ceiling was not papered, but painted: you know what I mean; sort of panelled out, and decorated with stencils and hand painting. This 'ere's a photer of it: it's done in a sort of JAPANESE fashion.'

He handed the photograph to Owen as he spoke. It represented a room, the walls and ceiling of which were decorated in a Moorish style.

'At first Mr Sweater thought of getting a firm from London to do it, but 'e gave up the idear on account of the expense; but if you can do it so that it doesn't cost too much, I think I can persuade 'im to go in for it. But if it's goin' to cost a lot it won't come off at all. 'E'll just 'ave a frieze put up and 'ave the room papered in the ordinary way.'

This was not true: Rushton said it in case Owen might want to be paid extra wages while doing the work. The truth was that Sweater was going to have the room decorated in any case, and intended to get a London firm to do it. He had consented rather unwillingly to let Rushton & Co. submit him an estimate, because he thought they would not be able to do the work satisfactorily.

Owen examined the photograph closely.

'Could you do anything like that in that room?'

'Yes, I think so,' replied Owen.

'Well, you know, I don't want you to start on the job and not be able to finish it. Can you do it or not?'

Rushton felt sure that Owen could do it, and was very desirous that he should undertake it, but he did not want him to know that. He wished to convey the impression that he was almost indifferent whether Owen did the work or not. In fact, he wished to seem to be conferring a favour upon him by procuring him such a nice job as this.

'I'll tell you what I CAN do,' Owen replied. 'I can make you a watercolour sketch--a design--and if you think it good enough, of course, I can reproduce it on the ceiling and the walls, and I can let you know, within a little, how long it will take.'

Rushton appeared to reflect. Owen stood examining the photograph and began to feel an intense desire to do the work.

Rushton shook his head dubiously.

'If I let you spend a lot of time over the sketches and then Mr Sweater does not approve of your design, where do I come in?'

'Well, suppose we put it like this: I'll draw the design at home in the

evenings--in my own time. If it's accepted, I'll charge you for the time I've spent upon it. If it's not suitable, I won't charge the time at all.'

Rushton brightened up considerably. 'All right. You can do so,' he said with an affectation of good nature, 'but you mustn't pile it on too thick, in any case, you know, because, as I said before, 'e don't want to spend too much money on it. In fact, if it's going to cost a great deal 'e simply won't 'ave it done at all.'

Rushton knew Owen well enough to be sure that no consideration of time or pains would prevent him from putting the very best that was in him into this work. He knew that if the man did the room at all there was no likelihood of his scamping it for the sake of getting it done quickly; and for that matter Rushton did not wish him to hurry over it. All that he wanted to do was to impress upon Owen from the very first that he must not charge too much time. Any profit that it was possible to make out of the work, Rushton meant to secure for himself. He was a smart man, this Rushton, he possessed the ideal character: the kind of character that is necessary for any man who wishes to succeed in business--to get on in life. In other words, his disposition was very similar to that of a pig--he was intensely selfish.

No one had any right to condemn him for this, because all who live under the present system practise selfishness, more or less. We must be selfish: the System demands it. We must be selfish or we shall be hungry and ragged and finally die in the gutter. The more selfish we

are the better off we shall be. In the 'Battle of Life' only the selfish and cunning are able to survive: all others are beaten down and trampled under foot. No one can justly be blamed for acting selfishly--it is a matter of self-preservation--we must either injure or be injured. It is the system that deserves to be blamed. What those who wish to perpetuate the system deserve is another question.

'When do you think you'll have the drawings ready?' inquired Rushton. 'Can you get them done tonight?'

'I'm afraid not,' replied Owen, feeling inclined to laugh at the absurdity of the question. 'It will need a little thinking about.'

'When can you have them ready then? This is Monday. Wednesday morning?'

Owen hesitated.

'We don't want to keep 'im waiting too long, you know, or 'e may give up the idear altogether.'

'Well, sat Friday morning, then,' said Owen, resolving that he would stay up all night if necessary to get it done.

Rushton shook his head.

'Can't you get it done before that? I'm afraid that if we keeps 'im

waiting all that time we may lose the job altogether.'

'I can't get them done any quicker in my spare time,' returned Owen, flushing. 'If you like to let me stay home tomorrow and charge the time the same as if I had gone to work at the house, I could go to my ordinary work on Wednesday and let you have the drawings on Thursday morning.'

'Oh, all right,' said Rushton as he returned to the perusal of his letters.

That night, long after his wife and Frankie were asleep, Owen worked in the sitting-room, searching through old numbers of the Decorators' Journal and through the illustrations in other books of designs for examples of Moorish work, and making rough sketches in pencil.

He did not attempt to finish anything yet: it was necessary to think first; but he roughed out the general plan, and when at last he did go to bed he could not sleep for a long time. He almost fancied he was in the drawing-room at the 'Cave'. First of all it would be necessary to take down the ugly plaster centre flower with its crevices all filled up with old whitewash. The cornice was all right; it was fortunately a very simple one, with a deep cove and without many enrichments. Then, when the walls and the ceiling had been properly prepared, the ornamentation would be proceeded with. The walls, divided into panels and arches containing painted designs and lattice-work; the panels of the door decorated in a similar manner. The mouldings of the door and

window frames picked out with colours and gold so as to be in character with the other work; the cove of the cornice, a dull yellow with a bold ornament in colour--gold was not advisable in the hollow because of the unequal distribution of the light, but some of the smaller mouldings of the cornice should be gold. On the ceiling there would be one large panel covered with an appropriate design in gold and colours and surrounded by a wide margin or border. To separate this margin from the centre panel there would be a narrow border, and another border--but wider--round the outer edge of the margin, where the ceiling met the cornice. Both these borders and the margin would be covered with ornamentation in colour and gold. Great care would be necessary when deciding what parts were to be gilded because--whilst large masses of gilding are apt to look garish and in bad taste--a lot of fine gold lines are ineffective, especially on a flat surface, where they do not always catch the light. Process by process he traced the work, and saw it advancing stage by stage until, finally, the large apartment was transformed and glorified. And then in the midst of the pleasure he experienced in the planning of the work there came the fear that perhaps they would not have it done at all.

The question, what personal advantage would he gain never once occurred to Owen. He simply wanted to do the work; and he saw so fully occupied with thinking and planning how it was to be done that the question of profit was crowded out.

But although this question of what profit could be made out of the work never occurred to Owen, it would in due course by fully considered by

Mr Rushton. In fact, it was the only thing about the work that Mr Rushton would think of at all: how much money could be made out of it. This is what is meant by the oft-quoted saying, 'The men work with their hands--the master works with his brains.'