

Chapter 13

Penal Servitude and Death

On Tuesday--the day after his interview with Rushton--Owen remained at home working at the drawings. He did not get them finished, but they were so far advanced that he thought he would be able to complete them after tea on Wednesday evening. He did not go to work until after breakfast on Wednesday and his continued absence served to confirm the opinion of the other workmen that he had been discharged. This belief was further strengthened by the fact that a new hand had been sent to the house by Hunter, who came himself also at about a quarter past seven and very nearly caught Philpot in the act of smoking.

During breakfast, Philpot, addressing Crass and referring to Hunter, inquired anxiously:

"Ow's 'is temper this mornin', Bob?"

'As mild as milk,' replied Crass. 'You'd think butter wouldn't melt in 'is mouth.'

'Seemed quite pleased with 'isself, didn't 'e?' said Harlow.

'Yes,' remarked Newman. 'E said good morning to me!'

'So 'e did to me!' said Easton. "'E come inter the drorin'-room an' 'e ses, "Oh, you're in 'ere are yer, Easton," 'e ses--just like that, quite affable like. So I ses, "Yes, sir." "Well," 'e ses, "get it slobbered over as quick as you can," 'e ses, "'cos we ain't got much for this job: don't spend a lot of time puttying up. Just smear it over an' let it go!"'

"'E certinly seemed very pleased about something,' said Harlow. 'I thought prap's there was a undertaking job in: one o' them generally puts 'im in a good humour.'

'I believe that nothing would please 'im so much as to see a epidemic break out,' remarked Philpot. 'Small-pox, Hinfluenza, Cholery morbus, or anything like that.'

'Yes: don't you remember 'ow good-tempered 'e was last summer when there was such a lot of Scarlet Fever about?' observed Harlow.

'Yes,' said Crass with a chuckle. 'I recollect we 'ad six children's funerals to do in one week. Ole Misery was as pleased as Punch, because of course as a rule there ain't many boxin'-up jobs in the summer. It's in winter as hundertakers reaps their 'arvest.'

'We ain't 'ad very many this winter, though, so far,' said Harlow.

'Not so many as usual,' admitted Crass, 'but still, we can't grumble: we've 'ad one nearly every week since the beginning of October. That's

not so bad, you know.'

Crass took a lively interest in the undertaking department of Rushton & Co.'s business. He always had the job of polishing or varnishing the coffin and assisting to take it home and to 'lift in' the corpse, besides acting as one of the bearers at the funeral. This work was more highly paid for than painting.

'But I don't think there's no funeral job in,' added Crass after a pause. 'I think it's because 'e's glad to see the end of Owen, if yeh ask me.'

'Praps that 'as got something to do with it,' said Harlow. 'But all the same I don't call that a proper way to treat anyone--givin' a man the push in that way just because 'e 'appened to 'ave a spite against 'im.'

'It's wot I call a bl--dy shame!' cried Philpot. 'Owen's a chap wots always ready to do a good turn to anybody, and 'e knows 'is work, although 'e is a bit of a nuisance sometimes, I must admit, when 'e gets on about Socialism.'

'I suppose Misery didn't say nothin' about 'im this mornin'?' inquired Easton.

'No,' replied Crass, and added: 'I only 'ope Owen don't think as I never said anything against 'im. 'E looked at me very funny that night

after Nimrod went away. Owen needn't think nothing like that about ME, because I'm a chap like this--if I couldn't do nobody no good, I wouldn't never do 'em no 'arm!

At this some of the others furtively exchanged significant glances, and Harlow began to smile, but no one said anything.

Philpot, noticing that the newcomer had not helped himself to any tea, called Bert's attention to the fact and the boy filled Owen's cup and passed it over to the new hand.

Their conjectures regarding the cause of Hunter's good humour were all wrong. As the reader knows, Owen had not been discharged at all, and there was nobody dead. The real reason was that, having decided to take on another man, Hunter had experienced no difficulty in getting one at the same reduced rate as that which Newman was working for, there being such numbers of men out of employment. Hitherto the usual rate of pay in Mugsborough had been sevenpence an hour for skilled painters. The reader will remember that Newman consented to accept a job at sixpence halfpenny. So far none of the other workmen knew that Newman was working under price: he had told no one, not feeling sure whether he was the only one or not. The man whom Hunter had taken on that morning also decided in his mind that he would keep his own counsel concerning what pay he was to receive, until he found out what the others were getting.

Just before half past eight Owen arrived and was immediately assailed

with questions as to what had transpired at the office. Crass listened with ill-concealed chagrin to Owen's account, but most of the others were genuinely pleased.

'But what a way to speak to anybody!' observed Harlow, referring to Hunter's manner on the previous Monday night.

'You know, I reckon if ole Misery 'ad four legs, 'e'd make a very good pig,' said Philpot, solemnly, 'and you can't expect nothin' from a pig but a grunt.'

During the morning, as Easton and Owen were working together in the drawing-room, the former remarked:

'Did I tell you I had a room I wanted to let, Frank?'

'Yes, I think you did.'

'Well, I've let it to Slyme. I think he seems a very decent sort of chap, don't you?'

'Yes, I suppose he is,' replied Owen, hesitatingly. 'I know nothing against him.'

'Of course, we'd rather 'ave the 'ouse to ourselves if we could afford it, but work is so scarce lately. I've been figuring out exactly what my money has averaged for the last twelve months and how much a week do

you think it comes to?'

'God only knows,' said Owen. 'How much?'

'About eighteen bob.'

'So you see we had to do something,' continued Easton; 'and I reckon we're lucky to get a respectable sort of chap like Slyme, religious and teetotal and all that, you know. Don't you think so?'

'Yes, I suppose you are,' said Owen, who, although he intensely disliked Slyme, knew nothing definite against him.

They worked in silence for some time, and then Owen said:

'At the present time there are thousands of people so badly off that, compared with them, WE are RICH. Their sufferings are so great that compared with them, we may be said to be living in luxury. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes, that's true enough, mate. We really ought to be very thankful: we ought to consider ourselves lucky to 'ave a inside job like this when there's such a lot of chaps walkin' about doin' nothing.'

'Yes,' said Owen: 'we're lucky! Although we're in a condition of abject, miserable poverty we must consider ourselves lucky that we're not actually starving.'

Owen was painting the door; Easton was doing the skirting. This work caused no noise, so they were able to converse without difficulty.

'Do you think it's right for us to tamely make up our minds to live for the rest of our lives under such conditions as that?'

'No; certainly not,' replied Easton; 'but things are sure to get better presently. Trade hasn't always been as bad as it is now. Why, you can remember as well as I can a few years ago there was so much work that we was putting in fourteen and sixteen hours a day. I used to be so done up by the end of the week that I used to stay in bed nearly all day on Sunday.'

'But don't you think it's worth while trying to find out whether it's possible to so arrange things that we may be able to live like civilized human beings without being alternately worked to death or starved?'

'I don't see how we're goin' to alter things,' answered Easton. 'At the present time, from what I hear, work is scarce everywhere. WE can't MAKE work, can we?'

'Do you think, then, that the affairs of the world are something like the wind or the weather--altogether beyond our control? And that if they're bad we can do nothing but just sit down and wait for them to get better?'

'Well, I don't see 'ow we can odds it. If the people wot's got the money won't spend it, the likes of me and you can't make 'em, can we?'

Owen looked curiously at Easton.

'I suppose you're about twenty-six now,' he said. 'That means that you have about another thirty years to live. Of course, if you had proper food and clothes and hadn't to work more than a reasonable number of hours every day, there is no natural reason why you should not live for another fifty or sixty years: but we'll say thirty. Do you mean to say that you are able to contemplate with indifference the prospect of living for another thirty years under such conditions as those we endure at present?'

Easton made no reply.

'If you were to commit some serious breach of the law, and were sentenced next week to ten years' penal servitude, you'd probably think your fate a very pitiable one: yet you appear to submit quite cheerfully to this other sentence, which is--that you shall die a premature death after you have done another thirty years' hard labour.'

Easton continued painting the skirting.

'When there's no work,' Owen went on, taking another dip of paint as he spoke and starting on one of the lower panels of the door, 'when

there's no work, you will either starve or get into debt. When--as at present--there is a little work, you will live in a state of semi-starvation. When times are what you call "good", you will work for twelve or fourteen hours a day and--if you're VERY lucky--occasionally all night. The extra money you then earn will go to pay your debts so that you may be able to get credit again when there's no work.'

Easton put some putty in a crack in the skirting.

'In consequence of living in this manner, you will die at least twenty years sooner than is natural, or, should you have an unusually strong constitution and live after you cease to be able to work, you will be put into a kind of jail and treated like a criminal for the remainder of your life.'

Having faced up the cracks, Easton resumed the painting of the skirting.

'If it were proposed to make a law that all working men and women were to be put to death--smothered, or hung, or poisoned, or put into a lethal chamber--as soon as they reached the age of fifty years, there is not the slightest doubt that you would join in the uproar of protest that would ensue. Yet you submit tamely to have your life shortened by slow starvation, overwork, lack of proper boots and clothing, and though having often to turn out and go to work when you are so ill that you ought to be in bed receiving medical care.'

Easton made no reply: he knew that all this was true, but he was not without a large share of the false pride which prompts us to hide our poverty and to pretend that we are much better off than we really are. He was at that moment wearing the pair of second-hand boots that Ruth had bought for him, but he had told Harlow--who had passed some remark about them--that he had had them for years, wearing them only for best. He felt very resentful as he listened to the other's talk, and Owen perceived it, but nevertheless he continued:

'Unless the present system is altered, that is all we have to look forward to; and yet you're one of the upholders of the present system--you help to perpetuate it!'

'Ow do I help to perpetuate it?' demanded Easton.

'By not trying to find out how to end it--by not helping those who are trying to bring a better state of things into existence. Even if you are indifferent to your own fate--as you seem to be--you have no right to be indifferent to that of the child for whose existence in this world you are responsible. Every man who is not helping to bring about a better state of affairs for the future is helping to perpetuate the present misery, and is therefore the enemy of his own children. There is no such thing as being natural: we must either help or hinder.'

As Owen opened the door to paint its edge, Bert came along the passage.

'Look out!' he cried, 'Misery's comin' up the road. 'E'll be 'ere in a

minit.'

It was not often that Easton was glad to hear of the approach of Nimrod, but on this occasion he heard Bert's message with a sigh of relief.

'I say,' added the boy in a whisper to Owen, 'if it comes orf--I mean if you gets the job to do this room--will you ask to 'ave me along of you?'

'Yes, all right, sonny,' replied Owen, and Bert went off to warn the others.

'Unaware that he had been observed, Nimrod sneaked stealthily into the house and began softly crawling about from room to room, peeping around corners and squinting through the cracks of doors, and looking through keyholes. He was almost pleased to see that everybody was very hard at work, but on going into Newman's room Misery was not satisfied with the progress made since his last visit. The fact was that Newman had been forgetting himself again this morning. He had been taking a little pains with the work, doing it something like properly, instead of scamping and rushing it in the usual way. The result was that he had not done enough.

'You know, Newman, this kind of thing won't do!' Nimrod howled. 'You must get over a bit more than this or you won't suit me! If you can't move yourself a bit quicker I shall 'ave to get someone else. You've

been in this room since seven o'clock this morning and it's dam near time you was out of it!

Newman muttered something about being nearly finished now, and Hunter ascended to the next landing--the attics, where the cheap man--Sawkins, the labourer--was at work. Harlow had been taken away from the attics to go on with some of the better work, so Sawkins was now working alone. He had been slogging into it like a Trojan and had done quite a lot. He had painted not only the sashes of the window, but also a large part of the glass, and when doing the skirting he had included part of the floor, sometimes an inch, sometimes half an inch.

The paint was of a dark drab colour and the surface of the newly painted doors bore a strong resemblance to corduroy cloth, and from the bottom corners of nearly every panel there was trickling down a large tear, as if the doors were weeping for the degenerate condition of the decorative arts. But these tears caused to throb of pity in the bosom of Misery: neither did the corduroy-like surface of the work grate upon his feelings. He perceived them not. He saw only that there was a Lot of Work done and his soul was filled with rapture as he reflected that the man who had accomplished all this was paid only fivepence an hour. At the same time it would never do to let Sawkins know that he was satisfied with the progress made, so he said:

'I don't want you to stand too much over this up 'ere, you know, Sawkins. Just mop it over anyhow, and get away from it as quick as you can.'

'All right, sir,' replied Sawkins, wiping the sweat from his brow as Misery began crawling downstairs again.

'Where's Harlow go to, then?' he demanded of Philpot. 'E wasn't 'ere just now, when I came up.'

'E's gorn downstairs, sir, out the back,' replied Joe, jerking his thumb over his shoulder and winking at Hunter. 'E'll be back in 'arf a mo.' And indeed at that moment Harlow was just coming upstairs again.

'Ere, we can't allow this kind of thing in workin' hours, you know.' Hunter bellowed. 'There's plenty of time for that in the dinner hour!'

Nimrod now went down to the drawing-room, which Easton and Owen had been painting. He stood here deep in thought for some time, mentally comparing the quantity of work done by the two men in this room with that done by Sawkins in the attics. Misery was not a painter himself: he was a carpenter, and he thought but little of the difference in the quality of the work: to him it was all about the same: just plain painting.

'I believe it would pay us a great deal better,' he thought to himself, 'if we could get hold of a few more lightweights like Sawkins.' And with his mind filled with this reflection he shortly afterwards sneaked stealthily from the house.