Chapter 15

The Undeserving Persons and the Upper and Nether Millstones

Hunter had take on three more painters that morning. Bundy and two labourers had commenced the work of putting in the new drains; the carpenters were back again doing some extra work, and there was also a plumber working on the house; so there was quite a little crowd in the kitchen at dinner-time. Crass had been waiting for a suitable opportunity to produce the newspaper cutting which it will be remembered he showed to Easton on Monday morning, but he had waited in vain, for there had been scarcely any 'political' talk at meal-times all the week, and it was now Thursday. As far as Owen was concerned, his thoughts were so occupied with the designs for the drawing-room that he had no time for anything else, and most of the others were only too willing to avoid a subject which frequently led to unpleasantness. As a rule Crass himself had no liking for such discussion, but he was so confident of being able to 'flatten out' Owen with the cutting from the Obscurer that he had several times tried to lead the conversation into the desired channel, but so far without success.

During dinner--as they called it--various subjects were discussed. Harlow mentioned that he had found traces of bugs in one of the bedrooms upstairs and this called forth a number of anecdotes of those vermin and of houses infested by them. Philpot remembered working in a house over at Windley; the people who lived in it were very dirty and

had very little furniture; no bedsteads, the beds consisting of dilapidated mattresses and rags on the floor. He declared that these ragged mattresses used to wander about the rooms by themselves. The house was so full of fleas that if one placed a sheet of newspaper on the floor one could hear and see them jumping on it. In fact, directly one went into that house one was covered from head to foot with fleas! During the few days he worked at that place, he lost several pounds in weight, and of evenings as he walked homewards the children and people in the streets, observing his ravaged countenance, thought he was suffering from some disease and used to get out of his way when they saw him coming.

There were several other of these narratives, four or five men talking at the top of their voices at the same time, each one telling a different story. At first each story-teller addressed himself to the company generally, but after a while, finding it impossible to make himself heard, he would select some particular individual who seemed disposed to listen and tell him the story. It sometimes happened that in the middle of the tale the man to whom it was being told would remember a somewhat similar adventure of his own, which he would immediately proceed to relate without waiting for the other to finish, and each of them was generally so interested in the gruesome details of his own story that he was unconscious of the fact that the other was telling one at all. In a contest of this kind the victory usually went to the man with the loudest voice, but sometimes a man who had a weak voice, scored by repeating the same tale several times until someone heard it.

Barrington, who seldom spoke and was an ideal listener, was appropriated by several men in succession, who each told him a different yarn. There was one man sitting on an up-ended pail in the far corner of the room and it was evident from the movements of his lips that he also was relating a story, although nobody knew what it was about or heard a single word of it, for no one took the slightest notice of him...

When the uproar had subsided Harlow remembered the case of a family whose house got into such a condition that the landlord had given them notice and the father had committed suicide because the painters had come to turn 'em out of house and home. There were a man, his wife and daughter--a girl about seventeen--living in the house, and all three of 'em used to drink like hell. As for the woman, she COULD shift it and no mistake! Several times a day she used to send the girl with a jug to the pub at the corner. When the old man was out, one could have anything one liked to ask for from either of 'em for half a pint of beer, but for his part, said Harlow, he could never fancy it. They were both too ugly.

The finale of this tale was received with a burst of incredulous laughter by those who heard it.

'Do you 'ear what Harlow says, Bob?' Easton shouted to Crass.

'No. What was it?'

''E ses 'e once 'ad a chance to 'ave something but 'e wouldn't take it on because it was too ugly!'

'If it 'ad bin me, I should 'ave shut me bl--y eyes,' cried Sawkins. 'I wouldn't pass it for a trifle like that.'

'No,' said Crass amid laughter, 'and you can bet your life 'e didn't lose it neither, although 'e tries to make 'imself out to be so innocent.'

'I always though old Harlow was a bl--y liar,' remarked Bundy, 'but now we knows 'e is.'

Although everyone pretended to disbelieve him, Harlow stuck to his version of the story.

'It's not their face you want, you know,' added Bundy as he helped himself to some more tea.

'I know it wasn't my old woman's face that I was after last night,' observed Crass; and then he proceeded amid roars of laughter to give a minutely detailed account of what had taken place between himself and his wife after they had retired for the night.

This story reminded the man on the pail of a very strange dream he had had a few weeks previously: 'I dreamt I was walkin' along the top of a

'igh cliff or some sich place, and all of a sudden the ground give way under me feet and I began to slip down and down and to save meself from going over I made a grab at a tuft of grass as was growin' just within reach of me 'and. And then I thought that some feller was 'ittin me on the 'ead with a bl--y great stick, and tryin' to make me let go of the tuft of grass. And then I woke up to find my old woman shouting out and punchin' me with 'er fists. She said I was pullin' 'er 'air!'

While the room was in an uproar with the merriment induced by these stories, Crass rose from his seat and crossed over to where his overcoat was hanging on a nail in the wall, and took from the pocket a piece of card about eight inches by about four inches. One side of it was covered with printing, and as he returned to his seat Crass called upon the others to listen while he read it aloud. He said it was one of the best things he had ever seen: it had been given to him by a bloke in the Cricketers the other night.

Crass was not a very good reader, but he was able to read this all right because he had read it so often that he almost knew it by heart. It was entitled 'The Art of Flatulence', and it consisted of a number of rules and definitions. Shouts of laughter greeted the reading of each paragraph, and when he had ended, the piece of dirty card was handed round for the benefit of those who wished to read it for themselves. Several of the men, however, when it was offered to them, refused to take it, and with evident disgust suggested that it should be put into the fire. This view did not commend itself to Crass, who, after the others had finished with it, put it back in the pocket of his

coat.

Meanwhile, Bundy stood up to help himself to some more tea. The cup he was drinking from had a large piece broken out of one side and did not hold much, so he usually had to have three or four helpings.

'Anyone else want any' he asked.

Several cups and jars were passed to him. These vessels had been standing on the floor, and the floor was very dirty and covered with dust, so before dipping them into the pail, Bundy--who had been working at the drains all morning--wiped the bottoms of the jars upon his trousers, on the same place where he was in the habit of wiping his hands when he happened to get some dirt on them. He filled the jars so full that as he held them by the rims and passed them to their owners part of the contents slopped over and trickled through his fingers. By the time he had finished the floor was covered with little pools of tea.

'They say that Gord made everything for some useful purpose,' remarked Harlow, reverting to the original subject, 'but I should like to know what the hell's the use of sich things as bugs and fleas and the like.'

'To teach people to keep theirselves clean, of course,' said Slyme.

'That's a funny subject, ain't it?' continued Harlow, ignoring Slyme's answer. 'They say as all diseases is caused by little insects. If Gord 'adn't made no cancer germs or consumption microbes there wouldn't

be no cancer or consumption.'

'That's one of the proofs that there ISN'T an individual God,' said Owen. 'If we were to believe that the universe and everything that lives was deliberately designed and created by God, then we must also believe that He made his disease germs you are speaking of for the purpose of torturing His other creatures.'

'You can't tell me a bloody yarn like that,' interposed Crass, roughly. 'There's a Ruler over us, mate, and so you're likely to find out.'

'If Gord didn't create the world, 'ow did it come 'ere?' demanded Slyme.

'I know no more about that than you do,' replied Owen. 'That is--I know nothing. The only difference between us is that you THINK you know. You think you know that God made the universe; how long it took Him to do it; why He made it; how long it's been in existence and how it will finally pass away. You also imagine you know that we shall live after we're dead; where we shall go, and the kind of existence we shall have. In fact, in the excess of your "humility", you think you know all about it. But really you know no more of these things than any other human being does; that is, you know NOTHING.'

'That's only YOUR opinion,' said Slyme.

'If we care to take the trouble to learn,' Owen went on, 'we can know a little of how the universe has grown and changed; but of the beginning

we know nothing.'

'That's just my opinion, matey,' observed Philpot. 'It's just a bloody mystery, and that's all about it.'

'I don't pretend to 'ave no 'ead knowledge,' said Slyme, 'but 'ead knowledge won't save a man's soul: it's 'EART knowledge as does that. I knows in my 'eart as my sins is all hunder the Blood, and it's knowin' that, wot's given 'appiness and the peace which passes all understanding to me ever since I've been a Christian.'

'Glory, glory, hallelujah!' shouted Bundy, and nearly everyone laughed.

'"Christian" is right,' sneered Owen. 'You've got some title to call yourself a Christian, haven't you? As for the happiness that passes all understanding, it certainly passes MY understanding how you can be happy when you believe that millions of people are being tortured in Hell; and it also passes my understanding why you are not ashamed of yourself for being happy under such circumstances.'

'Ah, well, you'll find it all out when you come to die, mate,' replied Slyme in a threatening tone. 'You'll think and talk different then!'

'That's just wot gets over ME,' observed Harlow. 'It don't seem right that after living in misery and poverty all our bloody lives, workin' and slavin' all the hours that Gord A'mighty sends, that we're to be bloody well set fire and burned in 'ell for all eternity! It don't

seem feasible to me, you know.'

'It's my belief,' said Philpot, profoundly, 'that when you're dead, you're done for. That's the end of you.'

'That's what I say,' remarked Easton. 'As for all this religious business, it's just a money-making dodge. It's the parson's trade, just the same as painting is ours, only there's no work attached to it and the pay's a bloody sight better than ours is.'

'It's their livin', and a bloody good livin' too, if you ask me,' said Bundy.

'Yes,' said Harlow; 'they lives on the fat o' the land, and wears the best of everything, and they does nothing for it but talk a lot of twaddle two or three times a week. The rest of the time they spend cadgin' money orf silly old women who thinks it's a sorter fire insurance.'

'It's an old sayin' and a true one,' chimed in the man on the upturned pail. 'Parsons and publicans is the worst enemies the workin' man ever 'ad. There may be SOME good 'uns, but they're few and far between.'

'If I could only get a job like the Harchbishop of Canterbury,' said Philpot, solemnly, 'I'd leave this firm.'

'So would I,' said Harlow, 'if I was the Harchbishop of Canterbury, I'd

take my pot and brushes down the office and shy 'em through the bloody winder and tell ole Misery to go to 'ell.'

'Religion is a thing that don't trouble ME much,' remarked Newman; 'and as for what happens to you after death, it's a thing I believe in leavin' till you comes to it--there's no sense in meetin' trouble 'arfway. All the things they tells us may be true or they may not, but it takes me all my time to look after THIS world. I don't believe I've been to church more than arf a dozen times since I've been married--that's over fifteen years ago now--and then it's been when the kids 'ave been christened. The old woman goes sometimes and of course the young 'uns goes; you've got to tell 'em something or other, and they might as well learn what they teaches at the Sunday School as anything else.'

A general murmur of approval greeted this. It seemed to be the almost unanimous opinion, that, whether it were true or not, 'religion' was a nice thing to teach children.

'I've not been even once since I was married,' said Harlow, 'and I sometimes wish to Christ I 'adn't gorn then.'

'I don't see as it matters a dam wot a man believes,' said Philpot, 'as long as you don't do no 'arm to nobody. If you see a poor b--r wot's down on 'is luck, give 'im a 'elpin' 'and. Even if you ain't got no money you can say a kind word. If a man does 'is work and looks arter 'is 'ome and 'is young 'uns, and does a good turn to a fellow creature

when 'e can, I reckon 'e stands as much chance of getting into 'eaven--if there IS sich a place--as some of there 'ere Bible-busters, whether 'e ever goes to church or chapel or not.'

These sentiments were echoed by everyone with the solitary exception of Slyme, who said that Philpot would find out his mistake after he was dead, when he would have to stand before the Great White Throne for judgement!

'And at the Last Day, when yer sees the moon turned inter Blood, you'll be cryin' hout for the mountings and the rocks to fall on yer and 'ide yer from the wrath of the Lamb!'

The others laughed derisively.

'I'm a Bush Baptist meself,' remarked the man on the upturned pail. This individual, Dick Wantley by name, was of what is usually termed a 'rugged' cast of countenance. He reminded one strongly of an ancient gargoyle, or a dragon.

Most of the hands had by now lit their pipes, but there were a few who preferred chewing their tobacco. As they smoked or chewed they expectorated upon the floor or into the fire. Wantley was one of those who preferred chewing and he had been spitting upon the floor to such an extent that he was by this time partly surrounded by a kind of semicircular moat of dark brown spittle.

'I'm a Bush Baptist!' he shouted across the moat, 'and you all knows wot that is.'

This confession of faith caused a fresh outburst of hilarity, because of course everyone knew what a Bush Baptist was.

'If 'evven's goin' to be full of sich b--r's as Hunter,' observed Eaton, 'I think I'd rather go to the other place.'

'If ever ole Misery DOES get into 'eaven,' said Philpot, ''e won't stop there very long. I reckon 'e'll be chucked out of it before 'e's been there a week, because 'e's sure to start pinchin' the jewels out of the other saints' crowns.'

'Well, if they won't 'ave 'im in 'eaven, I'm sure I don't know wot's to become of 'im,' said Harlow with pretended concern, 'because I don't believe 'e'd be allowed into 'ell, now.'

'Why not?' demanded Bundy. 'I should think it's just the bloody place for sich b--r's as 'im.'

'So it used to be at one time o' day, but they've changed all that now. They've 'ad a revolution down there: deposed the Devil, elected a parson as President, and started puttin' the fire out.'

'From what I hears of it,' continued Harlow when the laughter had ceased, ''ell is a bloody fine place to live in just now. There's

underground railways and 'lectric trams, and at the corner of nearly every street there's a sort of pub where you can buy ice-cream, lemon squash, four ale, and American cold drinks; and you're allowed to sit in a refrigerator for two hours for a tanner.'

Although they laughed and made fun of these things the reader must not think that they really doubted the truth of the Christian religion, because--although they had all been brought up by 'Christian' parents and had been 'educated' in 'Christian' schools--none of them knew enough about Christianity to either really believe it or disbelieve it. The imposters who obtain a comfortable living by pretending to be the ministers and disciples of the Workman of Nazareth are too cunning to encourage their dupes to acquire anything approaching an intelligent understanding of the subject. They do not want people to know or understand anything: they want them to have Faith--to believe without knowledge, understanding, or evidence. For years Harlow and his mates--when children--had been 'taught' 'Christianity' in day school, Sunday School and in church or chapel, and now they knew practically nothing about it! But they were 'Christians' all the same. They believed that the Bible was the word of God, but they didn't know where it came from, how long it had been in existence, who wrote it, who translated it or how many different versions there were. Most of them were almost totally unacquainted with the contents of the book itself. But all the same, they believed it--after a fashion.

'But puttin' all jokes aside,' said Philpot, 'I can't believe there's sich a place as 'ell. There may be some kind of punishment, but I

don't believe it's a real fire.'

'Nor nobody else, what's got any sense,' replied Harlow, contemptuously.

'I believe as THIS world is 'ell,' said Crass, looking around with a philosophic expression. This opinion was echoed by most of the others, although Slyme remained silent and Owen laughed.

'Wot the bloody 'ell are YOU laughin' at?' Crass demanded in an indignant tone.

'I was laughing because you said you think this world is hell.'

'Well, I don't see nothing to laugh at in that,' said Crass.

'So it IS a 'ell,' said Easton. 'There can't be anywheres much worse than this.'

''Ear, 'ear,' said the man behind the moat.

'What I was laughing at is this,' said Owen. 'The present system of managing the affairs of the world is so bad and has produced such dreadful results that you are of the opinion that the earth is a hell: and yet you are a Conservative! You wish to preserve the present system--the system which has made the world into a hell!'

'I thought we shouldn't get through the dinner hour without politics if

Owen was 'ere,' growled Bundy. 'Bloody sickenin' I call it.'

'Don't be 'ard on 'im,' said Philpot. ''E's been very quiet for the last few days.'

'We'll 'ave to go through it today, though,' remarked Harlow despairingly. 'I can see it comin'.'

'I'M not goin' through it,' said Bundy, 'I'm orf!' And he accordingly drank the remainder of his tea, closed his empty dinner basket and, having placed it on the mantelshelf, made for the door.

'I'll leave you to it,' he said as he went out. The others laughed.

Crass, remembering the cutting from the Obscurer that he had in his pocket, was secretly very pleased at the turn the conversation was taking. He turned roughly on Owen:

'The other day, when we was talkin' about the cause of poverty, you contradicted everybody. Everyone else was wrong! But you yourself couldn't tell us what's the cause of poverty, could you?'

'I think I could.'

'Oh, of course, you think you know,' sneered Crass, 'and of course you think your opinion's right and everybody else's is wrong.'

'Yes,' replied Owen.

Several men expressed their abhorrence of this intolerant attitude of Owen's, but the latter rejoined:

'Of course I think that my opinions are right and that everyone who differs from me is wrong. If I didn't think their opinions were wrong I wouldn't differ from them. If I didn't think my own opinions right I wouldn't hold them.'

'But there's no need to keep on arguin' about it day after day,' said Crass. 'You've got your opinion and I've got mine. Let everyone enjoy his own opinion, I say.'

A murmur of approbation from the crowd greeted these sentiments; but Owen rejoined:

'But we can't both be right; if your opinions are right and mine are not, how am I to find out the truth if we never talk about them?'

'Well, wot do you reckon is the cause of poverty, then?' demanded Easton.

'The present system--competition--capitalism.'

'It's all very well to talk like that,' snarled Crass, to whom this statement conveyed no meaning whatever. 'But 'ow do you make it out?'

'Well, I put it like that for the sake of shortness,' replied Owen. 'Suppose some people were living in a house--'

'More supposin'!' sneered Crass.

'And suppose they were always ill, and suppose that the house was badly built, the walls so constructed that they drew and retained moisture, the roof broken and leaky, the drains defective, the doors and windows ill-fitting and the rooms badly shaped and draughty. If you were asked to name, in a word, the cause of the ill-health of the people who lived there you would say--the house. All the tinkering in the world would not make that house fit to live in; the only thing to do with it would be to pull it down and build another. Well, we're all living in a house called the Money System; and as a result most of us are suffering from a disease called poverty. There's so much the matter with the present system that it's no good tinkering at it. Everything about it is wrong and there's nothing about it that's right. There's only one thing to be done with it and that is to smash it up and have a different system altogether. We must get out of it.'

'It seems to me that that's just what you're trying to do,' remanded Harlow, sarcastically. 'You seem to be tryin' to get out of answering the question what Easton asked you.'

'Yes!' cried Crass, fiercely. 'Why don't you answer the bloody question? Wot's the cause of poverty?'

'What the 'ell's the matter with the present system?' demanded Sawkins.

'Ow's it goin' to be altered?' said Newman.

'Wot the bloody 'ell sort of a system do YOU think we ought to 'ave?' shouted the man behind the moat.

'It can't never be altered,' said Philpot. 'Human nature's human nature and you can't get away from it.'

'Never mind about human nature,' shouted Crass. 'Stick to the point. Wot's the cause of poverty?'

'Oh, b--r the cause of poverty!' said one of the new hands. 'I've 'ad enough of this bloody row.' And he stood up and prepared to go out of the room.

This individual had two patches on the seat of his trousers and the bottoms of the legs of that garment were frayed and ragged. He had been out of work for about six weeks previous to having been taken on by Rushton & Co. During most of that time he and his family had been existing in a condition of semi-starvation on the earnings of his wife as a charwoman and on the scraps of food she brought home from the houses where she worked. But all the same, the question of what is the cause of poverty had no interest for him.

'There are many causes,' answered Owen, 'but they are all part of and inseparable from the system. In order to do away with poverty we must destroy the causes: to do away with the causes we must destroy the whole system.'

'What are the causes, then?'

'Well, money, for one thing.'

This extraordinary assertion was greeted with a roar of merriment, in the midst of which Philpot was heard to say that to listen to Owen was as good as going to a circus. Money was the cause of poverty!

'I always thought it was the want of it!' said the man with the patches on the seat of his trousers as he passed out of the door.

'Other things,' continued Owen, 'are private ownership of land, private ownership of railways, tramways, gasworks, waterworks, private ownership of factories, and the other means of producing the necessaries and comforts of life. Competition in business--'

'But 'ow do you make it out?' demanded Crass, impatiently.

Owen hesitated. To his mind the thing appeared very clear and simple. The causes of poverty were so glaringly evident that he marvelled that any rational being should fail to perceive them; but at the same time he found it very difficult to define them himself. He could not think

of words that would convey his thoughts clearly to these others who seemed so hostile and unwilling to understand, and who appeared to have made up their minds to oppose and reject whatever he said. They did not know what were the causes of poverty and apparently they did not WANT to know.

'Well, I'll try to show you one of the causes,' he said nervously at last.

He picked up a piece of charred wood that had fallen from the fire and knelt down and began to draw upon the floor. Most of the others regarded him, with looks in which an indulgent, contemptuous kind of interest mingled with an air of superiority and patronage. There was no doubt, they thought, that Owen was a clever sort of chap: his work proved that: but he was certainly a little bit mad.

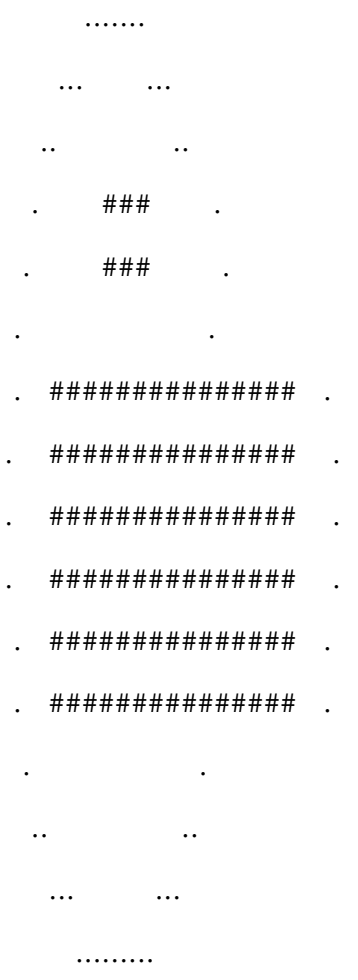
By this time Owen had drawn a circle about two feet in diameter. Inside he had drawn two squares, one much larger than the other. These two squares he filled in solid black with the charcoal.

'Wot's it all about?' asked Crass with a sneer.

'Why, can't you see?' said Philpot with a wink. ''E's goin' to do some conjurin'! In a minit 'e'll make something pass out o' one o' them squares into the other and no one won't see 'ow it's done.'

When he had finished drawing, Owen remained for a few minutes awkwardly

silent, oppressed by the anticipation of ridicule and a sense of his inability to put his thoughts into plain language. He began to wish that he had not undertaken this task. At last, with an effort, he began to speak in a halting, nervous way:



'This circle--or rather the space inside the circle--is supposed to represent England.'

'Well, I never knowed it was round before,' jeered Crass. 'I've heard as the WORLD is round--'

'I never said it was the shape--I said it was supposed to REPRESENT England.'

'Oh, I see. I thought we'd very soon begin supposin'.'

'The two black squares,' continued Owen, 'represent the people who live in the country. The small square represents a few thousand people. The large square stands for the remainder--about forty millions--that is, the majority.'

'We ain't sich bloody fools as to think that the largest number is the minority,' interrupted Crass.

'The greater number of the people represented by the large black square work for their living: and in return for their labour they receive money: some more, some less than others.'

'You don't think they'd be sich bloody fools as to work for nothing, do you?' said Newman.

'I suppose you think they ought all to get the same wages!' cried Harlow. 'Do you think it's right that a scavenger should get as much as a painter?'

'I'm not speaking about that at all,' replied Owen. 'I'm trying to

show you what I think is one of the causes of poverty.'

'Shut up, can't you, Harlow,' remonstrated Philpot, who began to feel interested. 'We can't all talk at once.'

'I know we can't,' replied Harlow in an aggrieved tone: 'but 'e takes sich a 'ell of a time to say wot 'e's got to say. Nobody else can't get a word in edgeways.'

'In order that these people may live,' continued Owen, pointing to the large black square, 'it is first necessary that they shall have a PLACE to live in--'

'Well! I should never a thought it!' exclaimed the man on the pail, pretending to be much impressed. The others laughed, and two or three of them went out of the room, contemptuously remarking to each other in an audible undertone as they went:

'Bloody rot!'

'Wonder wot the bloody 'ell 'e thinks 'e is? A sort of schoolmaster?'

Owen's nervousness increased as he continued:

'Now, they can't live in the air or in the sea. These people are land animals, therefore they must live on the land.'

'Wot do yer mean by animals?' demanded Slyme.

'A human bean ain't a animal!' said Crass indignantly.

'Yes, we are!' cried Harlow. 'Go into any chemist's shop you like and ask the bloke, and 'e'll tell you--'

'Oh, blow that!' interrupted Philpot. 'Let's 'ear wot Owen's sayin'.'

'They must live on the land: and that's the beginning of the trouble; because--under the present system--the majority of the people have really no right to be in the country at all! Under the present system the country belongs to a few--those who are here represented by this small black square. If it would pay them to do so, and if they felt so disposed, these few people have a perfect right--under the present system--to order everyone else to clear out!

'But they don't do that, they allow the majority to remain in the land on one condition--that is, they must pay rent to the few for the privilege of being permitted to live in the land of their birth. The amount of rent demanded by those who own this country is so large that, in order to pay it, the greater number of the majority have often to deprive themselves and their children, not only of the comforts, but even the necessaries of life. In the case of the working classes the rent absorbs at the lowest possible estimate, about one-third of their total earnings, for it must be remembered that the rent is an expense that goes on all the time, whether they are employed or not. If they

get into arrears when out of work, they have to pay double when they get employment again.

'The majority work hard and live in poverty in order that the minority may live in luxury without working at all, and as the majority are mostly fools, they not only agree to pass their lives in incessant slavery and want, in order to pay this rent to those who own the country, but they say it is quite right that they should have to do so, and are very grateful to the little minority for allowing them to remain in the country at all.'

Owen paused, and immediately there arose a great clamour from his listeners.

'So it IS right, ain't it?' shouted Crass. 'If you 'ad a 'ouse and let it to someone, you'd want your rent, wouldn't yer?'

'I suppose,' said Slyme with resentment, for he had some shares in a local building society, 'after a man's been careful, and scraping and saving and going without things he ought to 'ave 'ad all 'is life, and managed to buy a few 'ouses to support 'im in 'is old age--they ought all to be took away from 'im? Some people,' he added, 'ain't got common honesty.'

Nearly everyone had something to say in reprobation of the views suggested by Owen. Harlow, in a brief but powerful speech, bristling with numerous sanguinary references to the bottomless pit, protested

against any interference with the sacred rights of property. Easton listened with a puzzled expression, and Philpot's goggle eyes rolled horribly as he glared silently at the circle and the two squares.

'By far the greatest part of the land,' said Owen when the row had ceased, 'is held by people who have absolutely no moral right to it. Possession of much of it was obtained by means of murder and theft perpetrated by the ancestors of the present holders. In other cases, when some king or prince wanted to get rid of a mistress of whom he had grown weary, he presented a tract of our country to some 'nobleman' on condition that he would marry the female. Vast estates were also bestowed upon the remote ancestors of the present holders in return for real or alleged services. Listen to this,' he continued as he took a small newspaper cutting from his pocket-book.

Crass looked at the piece of paper dolefully. It reminded him of the one he had in his own pocket, which he was beginning to fear that he would not have an opportunity of producing today after all.

'Ballcartridge Rent Dat.

'The hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Ballcartridge occurred yesterday and in accordance with custom the Duke of Ballcartridge handed to the authorities the little flag which he annually presents to the State in virtue of his tenure of the vast tract of this country which was presented to one of his ancestors--the first Duke--in addition to his salary, for his services at the battle of Ballcartridge.

'The flag--which is the only rent the Duke has to pay for the great estate which brings him in several hundreds of thousands of pounds per annum--is a small tricoloured one with a staff surmounted by an eagle.

'The Duke of Blankmind also presents the State with a little coloured silk flag every year in return for being allowed to retain possession of that part of England which was presented--in addition to his salary--to one of His Grace's very remote ancestors, for his services at the battle of Commissariat--in the Netherlands.

'The Duke of Southward is another instance,' continued Owen. 'He "owns" miles of the country we speak of as "ours". Much of his part consists of confiscated monastery lands which were stolen from the owners by King Henry VIII and presented to the ancestors of the present Duke.

'Whether it was right or wrong that these parts of our country should ever have been given to those people--the question whether those ancestor persons were really deserving cases or not--is a thing we need not trouble ourselves about now. But the present holders are certainly not deserving people. They do not even take the trouble to pretend they are. They have done nothing and they do nothing to justify their possession of these "estates" as they call them. And in my opinion no man who is in his right mind can really think it's just that these people should be allowed to prey upon their fellow men as they are doing now. Or that it is right that their children should be allowed

to continue to prey upon our children for ever! The thousands of people on those estates work and live in poverty in order that these three men and their families may enjoy leisure and luxury. Just think of the absurdity of it!' continued Owen, pointing to the drawings. 'All those people allowing themselves to be overworked and bullied and starved and robbed by this little crowd here!'

Observing signs of a renewal of the storm of protests, Owen hurriedly concluded:

'Whether it's right or wrong, you can't deny that the fact that this small minority possesses nearly all the land of the country is one of the principal causes of the poverty of the majority.'

'Well, that seems true enough,' said Easton, slowly. 'The rent's the biggest item a workin' man's got to pay. When you're out of work and you can't afford other things, you goes without 'em, but the rent 'as to be paid whether you're workin' or not.'

'Yes, that's enough,' said Harlow impatiently; 'but you gets value for yer money: you can't expect to get a 'ouse for nothing.'

'Suppose we admits as it's wrong, just for the sake of argyment,' said Crass in a jeering tone. 'Wot then? Wot about it? 'Ow's it agoin' to be altered.'

'Yes!' cried Harlow triumphantly. 'That's the bloody question! 'Ow's

it goin' to be altered? It can't be done!'

There was a general murmur of satisfaction. Nearly everyone seemed very pleased to think that the existing state of things could not possibly be altered.

'Whether it can be altered or not, whether it's right or wrong, landlordism is one of the causes of poverty,' Owen repeated. 'Poverty is not caused by men and women getting married; it's not caused by machinery; it's not caused by "over-production"; it's not caused by drink or laziness; and it's not caused by "over-population". It's caused by Private Monopoly. That is the present system. They have monopolized everything that it is possible to monopolize; they have got the whole earth, the minerals in the earth and the streams that water the earth. The only reason they have not monopolized the daylight and the air is that it is not possible to do it. If it were possible to construct huge gasometers and to draw together and compress within them the whole of the atmosphere, it would have been done long ago, and we should have been compelled to work for them in order to get money to buy air to breathe. And if that seemingly impossible thing were accomplished tomorrow, you would see thousands of people dying for want of air--or of the money to buy it--even as now thousands are dying for want of the other necessities of life. You would see people going about gasping for breath, and telling each other that the likes of them could not expect to have air to breathe unless they had the money to pay for it. Most of you here, for instance, would think and say so. Even as you think at present that it's right for so few people to own the

Earth, the Minerals and the Water, which are all just as necessary as is the air. In exactly the same spirit as you now say: "It's Their Land," "It's Their Water," "It's Their Coal," "It's Their Iron," so you would say "It's Their Air," "These are their gasometers, and what right have the likes of us to expect them to allow us to breathe for nothing?" And even while he is doing this the air monopolist will be preaching sermons on the Brotherhood of Man; he will be dispensing advice on "Christian Duty" in the Sunday magazines; he will give utterance to numerous more or less moral maxims for the guidance of the young. And meantime, all around, people will be dying for want of some of the air that he will have bottled up in his gasometers. And when you are all dragging out a miserable existence, gasping for breath or dying for want of air, if one of your number suggests smashing a hole in the side of one of the gasometers, you will all fall upon him in the name of law and order, and after doing your best to tear him limb from limb, you'll drag him, covered with blood, in triumph to the nearest Police Station and deliver him up to "justice" in the hope of being given a few half-pounds of air for your trouble.'

'I suppose you think the landlords ought to let people live in their 'ouses for nothing?' said Crass, breaking the silence that followed.

'Certainly,' remarked Harlow, pretending to be suddenly converted to Owen's views, 'I reckon the landlord ought to pay the rent to the tenant!'

'Of course, Landlordism is not the only cause,' said Owen, ignoring

these remarks. 'The wonderful system fosters a great many others. Employers of labour, for instance, are as great a cause of poverty as landlords are.'

This extraordinary statement was received with astonished silence.

'Do you mean to say that if I'm out of work and a master gives me a job, that 'e's doin' me a injury?' said Crass at length.

'No, of course not,' replied Owen.

'Well, what the bloody 'ell DO yer mean, then?'

'I mean this: supposing that the owner of a house wishes to have it repainted. What does he usually do?'

'As a rule, 'e goes to three or four master painters and asks 'em to give 'im a price for the job.'

'Yes; and those master painters are so eager to get the work that they cut the price down to what they think is the lowest possible point,' answered Owen, 'and the lowest usually gets the job. The successful tenderer has usually cut the price so fine that to make it pay he has to scamp the work, pay low wages, and drive and sweat the men whom he employs. He wants them to do two days' work for one day's pay. The result is that a job which--if it were done properly--would employ say twenty men for two months, is rushed and scamped in half that time with

half that number of men.

'This means that--in one such case as this--ten men are deprived of one month's employment; and ten other men are deprived of two months' employment; and all because the employers have been cutting each other's throats to get the work.'

'And we can't 'elp ourselves, you nor me either,' said Harlow. 'Supposing one of us on this job was to make up 'is mind not to tear into it like we do, but just keep on steady and do a fair day's work: wot would 'appen?'

No one answered; but the same thought was in everyone's mind. Such a one would be quickly marked by Hunter; and even if the latter failed to notice it would not be long before Crass reported his conduct.

'We can't 'elp ourselves,' said Easton, gloomily. 'If one man won't do it there's twenty others ready to take 'is place.'

'We could help ourselves to a certain extent if we would stand by each other. If, for instance, we all belonged to the Society,' said Owen.

'I don't believe in the Society,' observed Crass. 'I can't see as it's right that a inferior man should 'ave the same wages as me.'

'They're a drunken lot of beer-swillers,' remarked Slyme. 'That's why they always 'as their meetings in public 'ouses.'

Harlow made no comment on this question. He had at one time belonged to the Union and he was rather ashamed of having fallen away from it.

'Wot good 'as the Society ever done 'ere?' said Easton. 'None that I ever 'eard of.'

'It might be able to do some good if most of us belonged to it; but after all, that's another matter. Whether we could help ourselves or not, the fact remains that we don't. But you must admit that this competition of the employers is one of the causes of unemployment and poverty, because it's not only in our line--exactly the same thing happens in every other trade and industry. Competing employers are the upper and nether millstones which grind the workers between them.'

'I suppose you think there oughtn't to be no employers at all?' sneered Crass. 'Or p'raps you think the masters ought to do all the bloody work theirselves, and give us the money?'

'I don't see 'ow its goin' to be altered,' remarked Harlow. 'There MUST be masters, and SOMEONE 'as to take charge of the work and do the thinkin'.'

'Whether it can be altered or not,' said Owen, 'Landlordism and Competing Employers are two of the causes of poverty. But of course they're only a small part of the system which produces luxury, refinement and culture for a few, and condemns the majority to a

lifelong struggle with adversity, and many thousands to degradation, hunger and rags. This is the system you all uphold and defend, although you don't mind admitting that it has made the world into a hell.'

Crass slowly drew the Obscurer cutting from his waistcoat pocket, but after a moment's thought he replaced it, deciding to defer its production till a more suitable occasion.

'But you 'aven't told us yet 'ow you makes out that money causes poverty,' cried Harlow, winking at the others. 'That's what I'M anxious to 'ear about!'

'So am I,' remarked the man behind the moat. 'I was just wondering whether I 'adn't better tell ole Misery that I don't want no wages this week.'

'I think I'll tell 'im on Saterday to keep MY money and get 'imself a few drinks with it,' said Philpot. 'It might cheer 'im up a bit and make 'im a little more sociable and friendly like.'

'Money IS the principal cause of poverty,' said Owen.

''Ow do yer make it out?' cried Sawkins.

But their curiosity had to remain unsatisfied for the time being because Crass announced that it was 'just on it'.