

## Chapter 16

### True Freedom

About three o'clock that afternoon, Rushton suddenly appeared and began walking silently about the house, and listening outside the doors of rooms where the hands were working. He did not succeed in catching anyone idling or smoking or talking. The nearest approach to what the men called 'a capture' that he made was, as he stood outside the door of one of the upper rooms in which Philpot and Harlow were working, he heard them singing one of Sankey's hymns--'Work! for the night is coming'. He listened to two verses and several repetitions of the chorus. Being a 'Christian', he could scarcely object to this, especially as by peeping through the partly open door he could see that they were suiting the action to the word. When he went into the room they glanced around to see who it was, and stopped singing. Rushton did not speak, but stood in the middle of the floor, silently watching them as they worked, for about a quarter of an hour. Then, without having uttered a syllable, he turned and went out.

They heard him softly descend the stairs, and Harlow, turning to Philpot said in a hoarse whisper:

'What do you think of the b--r, standing there watchin' us like that, as if we was a couple of bloody convicts? If it wasn't that I've got someone else beside myself to think of, I would 'ave sloshed the bloody

sod in the mouth with this pound brush!

'Yes; it does make yer feel like that, mate,' replied Philpot, 'but of course we mustn't give way to it.'

'Several times,' continued Harlow, who was livid with anger, 'I was on the point of turnin' round and sayin' to 'im, "What the bloody 'ell do you mean by standin' there and watchin' me, you bloody, psalm-singin' swine?" It took me all my time to keep it in, I can tell you.'

Meanwhile, Rushton was still going about the house, occasionally standing and watching the other men in the same manner as he had watched Philpot and Harlow.

None of the men looked round from their work or spoke either to Rushton or to each other. The only sounds heard were the noises made by the saws and hammers of the carpenters who were fixing the frieze rails and dado rails or repairing parts of the woodwork in some of the rooms.

Crass placed himself in Rushton's way several times with the hope of being spoken to, but beyond curtly acknowledging the 'foreman's' servile 'Good hafternoon, sir,' the master took no notice of him.

After about an hour spent in this manner Rushton went away, but as no one say him go, it was not until some considerable time after his departure that they knew that he was gone.

Owen was secretly very disappointed. 'I thought he had come to tell me about the drawing-room,' he said to himself, 'but I suppose it's not decided yet.'

Just as the 'hands' were beginning to breathe freely again, Misery arrived, carrying some rolled-up papers in his hand. He also flitted silently from one room to another, peering round corners and listening at doors in the hope of seeing or hearing something which would give him an excuse for making an example of someone. Disappointed in this, he presently crawled upstairs to the room where Owen was working and, handing to him the roll of papers he had been carrying, said:

'Mr Sweater had decided to 'ave this work done, so you can start on it as soon as you like.'

It is impossible to describe, without appearing to exaggerate, the emotions experienced by Owen as he heard this announcement. For one thing it meant that the work at this house would last longer than it would otherwise have done; and it also meant that he would be paid for the extra time he had spent on the drawings, besides having his wages increased--for he was always paid an extra penny an hour when engaged on special work, such as graining or sign-writing or work of the present kind. But these considerations did not occur to him at the moment at all, for to him it meant much more. Since his first conversation on the subject with Rushton he had thought of little else than this work.

In a sense he had been DOING it ever since. He had thought and planned and altered the details of the work repeatedly. The colours for the different parts had been selected and rejected and re-selected over and over again. A keen desire to do the work had grown within him, but he had scarcely allowed himself to hope that it would be done at all. His face flushed slightly as he took the drawings from Hunter.

'You can make a start on it tomorrow morning,' continued that gentleman. 'I'll tell Crass to send someone else up 'ere to finish this room.'

'I shan't be able to commence tomorrow, because the ceiling and walls will have to be painted first.'

'Yes: I know. You and Easton can do that. One coat tomorrow, another on Friday and the third on Saturday--that is, unless you can make it do with two coats. Even if it has to be the three, you will be able to go on with your decoratin' on Monday.'

'I won't be able to start on Monday, because I shall have to make some working drawings first.'

'Workin' drorins!' ejaculated Misery with a puzzled expression. 'Wot workin' drorins? You've got them, ain't yer?' pointing to the roll of papers.

'Yes: but as the same ornaments are repeated several times, I shall

have to make a number of full-sized drawings, with perforated outlines, to transfer the design to the walls,' said Owen, and he proceeded to laboriously explain the processes.

Nimrod looked at him suspiciously. 'Is all that really necessary?' he asked. 'Couldn't you just copy it on the wall, free-hand?'

'No; that wouldn't do. It would take much longer that way.'

This consideration appealed to Misery.

'Ah, well,' he sighed. 'I s'pose you'll 'ave to do it the way you said; but for goodness sake don't spend too much time over it, because we've took it very cheap. We only took it on so as you could 'ave a job, not that we expect to make any profit out of it.'

'And I shall have to cut some stencils, so I shall need several sheets of cartridge paper.'

Upon hearing of this addition expense, Misery's long visage appeared to become several inches longer; but after a moment's thought he brightened up.

'I'll tell you what!' he exclaimed with a cunning leer, 'there's lots of odd rolls of wallpaper down at the shop. Couldn't you manage with some of that?'

'I'm afraid it wouldn't do,' replied Owen doubtfully, 'but I'll have a look at it and if possible I'll use it.'

'Yes, do!' said Misery, pleased at the thought of saving something.

'Call at the shop on your way home tonight, and we'll see what we can find. 'Ow long do you think it'll take you to make the drorins and the stencils?'

'Well, today's Thursday. If you let someone else help Easton to get the room ready, I think I can get them done in time to bring them with me on Monday morning.'

'Wot do yer mean, "bring them with you"?' demanded Nimrod.

'I shall have to do them at home, you know.'

'Do 'em at 'ome! Why can't you do 'em 'ere?'

'Well, there's no table, for one thing.'

'Oh, but we can soon fit you out with a table. You can 'ave a pair of paperhanger's tressels and boards for that matter.'

'I have a lot of sketches and things at home that I couldn't very well bring here,' said Owen.

Misery argued about it for a long time, insisting that the drawings

should be made either on the 'job' or at the paint-shop down at the yard. How, he asked, was he to know at what hour Owen commenced or left off working, if the latter did them at home?

'I shan't charge any more time than I really work,' replied Owen. 'I can't possibly do them here or at the paint-shop. I know I should only make a mess of them under such conditions.'

'Well, I s'pose you'll 'ave to 'ave your own way,' said Misery, dolefully. 'I'll let Harlow help Easton paint the room out, so as you can get your stencils and things ready. But for Gord's sake get 'em done as quick as you can. If you could manage to get done by Friday and come down and help Easton on Saturday, it would be so much the better. And when you do get a start on the decoratin', I shouldn't take too much care over it, you know, if I was you, because we 'ad to take the job for next to nothing or Mr Sweater would never 'ave 'ad it done at all!'

Nimrod now began to crawl about the house, snarling and grumbling at everyone.

'Now then, you chaps. Rouse yourselves!' he bellowed, 'you seem to think this is a 'orspital. If some of you don't make a better show than this, I'll 'ave to 'ave a Alteration! There's plenty of chaps walkin' about doin' nothin' who'll be only too glad of a job!'

He went into the scullery, where Crass was mixing some colour.

'Look 'ere, Crass!' he said. 'I'm not at all satisfied with the way you're gettin' on with the work. You must push the chaps a bit more than you're doin'. There's not enough being done, by a long way. We shall lose money over this job before we're finished!'

Crass--whose fat face had turned a ghastly green with fright--mumbled something about getting on with it as fast as he could.

'Well, you'll 'ave to make 'em move a bit quicker than this!' Misery howled, 'or there'll 'ave to be a ALTERATION!'

By an 'alteration' Crass understood that he might get the sack, or that someone else might be put in charge of the job, and that would of course reduce him to the ranks and do away with his chance of being kept on longer than the others. He determined to try to ingratiate himself with Hunter and appease his wrath by sacrificing someone else. He glanced cautiously into the kitchen and up the passage and then, lowering his voice, he said:

'They all shapes pretty well, except Newman. I would 'ave told you about 'im before, but I thought I'd give 'im a fair chance. I've spoke to 'im several times myself about not doin' enough, but it don't seem to make no difference.'

'I've 'ad me eye on 'im meself for some time,' replied Nimrod in the same tone. 'Anybody would think the work was goin' to be sent to a

Exhibition, the way 'e messes about with it, rubbing it with glasspaper and stopping up every little crack! I can't understand where 'e gets all the glasspaper FROM.'

'E brings it 'isself!' said Crass hoarsely. 'I know for a fact that 'e bought two 'a'penny sheets of it, last week out of 'is own money!'

'Oh, 'e did, did 'e?' snarled Misery. 'I'll give 'im glasspaper! I'll 'ave a Alteration!'

He went into the hall, where he remained alone for a considerable time, brooding. At last, with the manner of one who has resolved on a certain course of action, he turned and entered the room where Philpot and Harlow were working.

'You both get sevenpence an hour, don't you?' he said.

They both replied to the affirmative.

'I've never worked under price yet,' added Harlow.

'Nor me neither,' observed Philpot.

'Well, of course you can please yourselves,' Hunter continued, 'but after this week we've decided not to pay more than six and a half. Things is cut so fine nowadays that we can't afford to go on payin' sevenpence any longer. You can work up till tomorrow night on the old

terms, but if you're not willin' to accept six and a half you needn't come on Saturday morning. Please yourselves. Take it or leave it.'

Harlow and Philpot were both too much astonished to say anything in reply to this cheerful announcement, and Hunter, with the final remark, 'You can think it over,' left them and went to deliver the same ultimatum to all the other full-price men, who took it in the same way as Philpot and Harlow had done. Crass and Owen were the only two whose wages were not reduced.

It will be remembered that Newman was one of those who were already working for the reduced rate. Misery found him alone in one of the upper rooms, to which he was giving the final coat. He was at his old tricks. The woodwork of the cupboard he was doing was in a rather damaged condition, and he was facing up the dents with white-lead putty before painting it. He knew quite well that Hunter objected to any but very large holes or cracks being stopped, and yet somehow or other he could not scamp the work to the extent that he was ordered to; and so, almost by stealth, he was in the habit of doing it--not properly but as well as he dared. He even went to the length of occasionally buying a few sheets of glasspaper with his own money, as Crass had told Hunter. When the latter came into the room he stood with a sneer on his face, watching Newman for about five minutes before he spoke. The workman became very nervous and awkward under this scrutiny.

'You can make out yer time-sheet and come to the office for yer money at five o'clock,' said Nimrod at last. 'We shan't require your

valuable services no more after tonight.'

Newman went white.

'Why, what's wrong?' said he. 'What have I done?'

'Oh, it's not wot you've DONE,' replied Misery. 'It's wot you've not done. That's wot's wrong! You've not done enough, that's all!' And without further parley he turned and went out.

Newman stood in the darkening room feeling as if his heart had turned to lead. There rose before his mind the picture of his home and family. He could see them as they were at this very moment, the wife probably just beginning to prepare the evening meal, and the children setting the cups and saucers and other things on the kitchen table--a noisy work, enlivened with many a frolic and childish dispute. Even the two-year-old baby insisted on helping, although she always put everything in the wrong place and made all sorts of funny mistakes. They had all been so happy lately because they knew that he had work that would last till nearly Christmas--if not longer. And now this had happened--to plunge them back into the abyss of wretchedness from which they had so recently escaped. They still owed several weeks' rent, and were already so much in debt to the baker and the grocer that it was hopeless to expect any further credit.

'My God!' said Newman, realizing the almost utter hopelessness of the chance of obtaining another 'job' and unconsciously speaking aloud. 'My

God! How can I tell them? What WILL become of us?'

Having accomplished the objects of his visit, Hunter shortly afterwards departed, possibly congratulating himself that he had not been hiding his light under a bushel, but that he had set it upon a candlestick and given light unto all that were within that house.

As soon as they knew that he was gone, the men began to gather into little groups, but in a little while they nearly all found themselves in the kitchen, discussing the reduction. Sawkins and the other 'lightweights' remained at their work. Some of them got only fourpence halfpenny--Sawkins was paid fivepence--so none of these were affected by the change. The other two fresh hands--the journeymen--joined the crowd in the kitchen, being anxious to conceal the fact that they had agreed to accept the reduced rate before being 'taken on'. Owen also was there, having heard the news hem Philpot.

There was a lot of furious talk. At first several of them spoke of 'chucking up', at once; but others were more prudent, for they knew that if they did leave there were dozens of others who would be eager to take their places.

'After all, you know,' said Slyme, who had--stowed away somewhere at the back of his head--an idea of presently starting business on his own account: he was only waiting until he had saved enough money, 'after all, there's something in what 'Unter says. It's very 'ard to get a fair price for work nowadays. Things IS cut very fine.'

'Yes! We know all about that!' shouted Harlow. 'And who the bloody 'ell is it cuts 'em? Why, sich b--rs as 'Unter and Rushton! If this firm 'adn't cut this job so fine, some other firm would 'ave 'ad it for more money. Rushton's cuttin' it fine didn't MAKE this job, did it? It would 'ave been done just the same if they 'adn't tendered for it at all! The only difference is that we should 'ave been workin' for some other master.'

'I don't believe the bloody job's cut fine at all!' said Philpot.

'Rushton is a pal of Sweater's and they're both members of the Town Council.'

'That may be,' replied Slyme; 'but all the same I believe Sweater got several other prices besides Rushton's--friend or no friend; and you can't blame 'im: it's only business. But pr'aps Rushton got the preference--Sweater may 'ave told 'im the others' prices.'

'Yes, and a bloody fine lot of prices they was, too, if the truth was known!' said Bundy. 'There was six other firms after this job to my knowledge--Pushem and Sloggem, Bluffum and Doemdown, Dodger and Scampit, Snatcham and Graball, Smeeriton and Leavit, Makehaste and Sloggitt, and Gord only knows 'ow many more.'

At this moment Newman came into the room. He looked so white and upset that the others involuntarily paused in their conversation.

'Well, what do YOU think of it?' asked Harlow.

'Think of what?' said Newman.

'Why, didn't 'Unter tell you?' cried several voices, whose owners looked suspiciously at him. They thought--if Hunter had not spoken to Newman, it must be because he was already working under price. There had been a rumour going about the last few days to that effect.

'Didn't Misery tell you? They're not goin' to pay more than six and a half after this week.'

'That's not what 'e said to me. 'E just told me to knock off. Said I didn't do enough for 'em.'

'Jesus Christ!' exclaimed Crass, pretending to be overcome with surprise.

Newman's account of what had transpired was listened to in gloomy silence. 'Those who--a few minutes previously--had been talking loudly of chucking up the job became filled with apprehension that they might be served in the same manner as he had been. Crass was one of the loudest in his expression of astonishment and indignation, but he rather overdid it and only succeeded in confirming the secret suspicion of the others that he had had something to do with Hunter's action.

The result of the discussion was that they decided to submit to Misery's terms for the time being, until they could see a chance of getting work elsewhere.

As Owen had to go to the office to see the wallpaper spoken of by Hunter, he accompanied Newman when the latter went to get his wages. Nimrod was waiting for them, and had the money ready in an envelope, which he handed to Newman, who took it without speaking and went away.

Misery had been rummaging amongst the old wallpapers, and had got out a great heap of odd rolls, which he now submitted to Owen, but after examining them the latter said that they were unsuitable for the purpose, so after some argument Misery was compelled to sign an order for some proper cartridge paper, which Owen obtained at a stationer's on his way home.

The next morning, when Misery went to the 'Cave', he was in a fearful rage, and he kicked up a terrible row with Crass. He said that Mr Rushton had been complaining of the lack of discipline on the job, and he told Crass to tell all the hands that for the future singing in working hours was strictly forbidden, and anyone caught breaking this rule would be instantly dismissed.

Several times during the following days Nimrod called at Owen's flat to see how the work was progressing and to impress upon him the necessity of not taking too much trouble over it.