

## Chapter 18

### The Lodger

In accordance with his arrangement with Hunter, Owen commenced the work in the drawing-room on the Monday morning. Harlow and Easton were distempering some of the ceilings, and about ten o'clock they went down to the scullery to get some more whitewash. Crass was there as usual, pretending to be very busy mixing colours.

'Well, wot do you think of it?' he said as he served them with what they required.

'Think of what?' asked Easton.

'Why, hour speshul hartist,' replied Crass with a sneer. 'Do you think 'e's goin' to get through with it?'

'Shouldn't like to say,' replied Easton guardedly.

'You know it's one thing to draw on a bit of paper and colour it with a penny box of paints, and quite another thing to do it on a wall or ceiling,' continued Crass. 'Ain't it?'

'Yes; that's true enough,' said Harlow.

'Do you believe they're 'is own designs?' Crass went on.

'Be rather 'ard to tell,' remarked Easton, embarrassed.

Neither Harlow nor Easton shared Crass's sentiments in this matter, but at the same time they could not afford to offend him by sticking up for Owen.

'If you was to ast me, quietly,' Crass added, 'I should be more inclined to say as 'e copied it all out of some book.'

'That's just about the size of it, mate,' agreed Harlow.

'It would be a bit of all right if 'e was to make a bloody mess of it, wouldn't it?' Crass continued with a malignant leer.

'Not arf!' said Harlow.

When the two men regained the upper landing on which they were working they exchanged significant glances and laughed quietly. Hearing these half-suppressed sounds of merriment, Philpot, who was working alone in a room close by, put his head out of the doorway.

'Wot's the game?' he inquired in a low voice.

'Ole Crass ain't arf wild about Owen doin' that room,' replied Harlow, and repeated the substance of Crass's remarks.

'It is a bit of a take-down for the bleeder, ain't it, 'avin' to play second fiddle,' said Philpot with a delighted grin.

'E's opin' Owen'll make a mess of it,' Easton whispered.

'Well, 'e'll be disappointed, mate,' answered Philpot. 'I was workin' along of Owen for Pushem and Sloggem about two year ago, and I seen 'im do a job down at the Royal 'Otel--the smokin'-room ceilin' it was--and I can tell you it looked a bloody treat!'

'I've heard tell of it,' said Harlow.

'There's no doubt Owen knows 'is work,' remarked Easton, 'although 'e is a bit orf is onion about Socialism.'

'I don't know so much about that, mate,' returned Philpot. 'I agree with a lot that 'e ses. I've often thought the same things meself, but I can't talk like 'im, 'cause I ain't got no 'ead for it.'

'I agree with some of it too,' said Harlow with a laugh, 'but all the same 'e does say some bloody silly things, you must admit. For instance, that stuff about money bein' the cause of poverty.'

'Yes. I can't exactly see that meself,' agreed Philpot.

'We must tackle 'im about that at dinner-time,' said Harlow. 'I should

rather like to 'ear 'ow 'e makes it out.'

'For Gord's sake don't go startin' no arguments at dinner-time,' said Easton. 'Leave 'im alone when 'e is quiet.'

'Yes; let's 'ave our dinner in peace, if possible,' said Philpot.

'Sh!!' he added, hoarsely, suddenly holding up his hand warningly. They listened intently. It was evident from the creaking of the stairs that someone was crawling up them. Philpot instantly disappeared. Harlow lifted up the pail of whitewash and set it down again noisily.

'I think we'd better 'ave the steps and the plank over this side, Easton,' he said in a loud voice.

'Yes. I think that'll be the best way,' replied Easton.

While they were arranging their scaffold to do the ceiling Crass arrived on the landing. He made no remark at first, but walked into the room to see how many ceilings they had done.

'You'd better look alive, you chaps, he said as he went downstairs again. 'If we don't get these ceilings finished by dinner-time, Nimrod's sure to ramp.'

'All right,' said Harlow, gruffly. 'We'll bloody soon slosh 'em over.'

'Slosh' was a very suitable word; very descriptive of the manner in

which the work was done. The cornices of the staircase ceilings were enriched with plaster ornaments. These ceilings were supposed to have been washed off, but as the men who were put to do that work had not been allowed sufficient time to do it properly, the crevices of the ornaments were still filled up with old whitewash, and by the time Harlow and Easton had 'sloshed' a lot more whitewash on to them they were mere formless unsightly lumps of plaster. The 'hands' who did the 'washing off' were not to blame. They had been hunted away from the work before it was half done.

While Harlow and Easton were distempering these ceiling, Philpot and the other hands were proceeding with the painting in different parts of the inside of the house, and Owen, assisted by Bert, was getting on with the work in the drawing-room, striking chalk lines and measuring and setting out the different panels.

There were no 'political' arguments that day at dinner-time, to the disappointment of Crass, who was still waiting for an opportunity to produce the Obscurer cutting. After dinner, when the others had all gone back to their work, Philpot unobtrusively returned to the kitchen and gathered up the discarded paper wrappers in which some of the men had brought their food. Spreading one of these open, he shook the crumbs from the others upon it. In this way and by picking up particles of bread from the floor, he collected a little pile of crumbs and crusts. To these he added some fragments that he had left from his own dinner. He then took the parcel upstairs and opening one of the windows threw the crumbs on to the roof of the portico. He had

scarcely closed the window when two starlings fluttered down and began to eat. Philpot watching them furtively from behind the shutter. The afternoon passed uneventfully. From one till five seemed a very long time to most of the hands, but to Owen and his mate, who was doing something in which they were able to feel some interest and pleasure, the time passed so rapidly that they both regretted the approach of evening.

'Other days,' remarked Bert, 'I always keeps on wishin' it was time to go 'ome, but today seems to 'ave gorn like lightnin'!

After leaving off that night, all the men kept together till they arrived down town, and then separated. Owen went by himself: Easton, Philpot, Crass and Bundy adjourned to the 'Cricketers Arms' to have a drink together before going home, and Slyme, who was a teetotaler, went by himself, although he was now lodging with Easton.

'Don't wait for me,' said the latter as he went off with Crass and the others. 'I shall most likely catch you up before you get there.'

'All right,' replied Slyme.

This evening Slyme did not take the direct road home. He turned into the main street, and, pausing before the window of a toy shop, examined the articles displayed therein attentively. After some minutes he appeared to have come to a decision, and entering the shop he purchased a baby's rattle for fourpence halfpenny. It was a pretty toy made of

white bone and coloured wool, with a number of little bells hanging upon it, and a ring of white bone at the end of the handle.

When he came out of the shop Slyme set out for home, this time walking rapidly. When he entered the house Ruth was sitting by the fire with the baby on her lap. She looked up with an expression of disappointment as she perceived that he was alone.

'Where's Will got to again?' she asked.

'He's gone to 'ave a drink with some of the chaps. He said he wouldn't be long,' replied Slyme as he put his food basket on the dresser and went upstairs to his room to wash and to change his clothes.

When he came down again, Easton had not yet arrived.

'Everything's ready, except just to make the tea,' said Ruth, who was evidently annoyed at the continued absence of Easton, 'so you may as well have yours now.'

'I'm in no hurry. I'll wait a little and see if he comes. He's sure to be here soon.'

'If you're sure you don't mind, I shall be glad if you will wait,' said Ruth, 'because it will save me making two lots of tea.'

They waited for about half an hour, talking at intervals in a

constrained, awkward way about trivial subjects. Then as Easton did not come, Ruth decided to serve Slyme without waiting any longer. With this intention she laid the baby in its cot, but the child resented this arrangement and began to cry, so she had to hold him under her left arm while she made the tea. Seeing her in this predicament, Slyme exclaimed, holding out his hands:

'Here, let me hold him while you do that.'

'Will you?' said Ruth, who, in spite of her instinctive dislike of the man, could not help feeling gratified with this attention. 'Well, mind you don't let him fall.'

But the instant Slyme took hold of the child it began to cry even louder than it did when it was put into the cradle.

'He's always like that with strangers,' apologized Ruth as she took him back again.

'Wait a minute,' said Slyme, 'I've got something upstairs in my pocket that will keep him quiet. I'd forgotten all about it.'

He went up to his room and presently returned with the rattle. When the baby saw the bright colours and heard the tinkling of the bells he crowed with delight, and reached out his hands eagerly towards it and allowed Slyme to take him without a murmur of protest. Before Ruth had finished making and serving the tea the man and child were on the very



best of terms with each other, so much so indeed that when Ruth had finished and went to take him again, the baby seemed reluctant to part from Slyme, who had been dancing him in the air and tickling him in the most delightful way.

Ruth, too, began to have a better opinion of Slyme, and felt inclined to reproach herself for having taken such an unreasonable dislike of him at first. He was evidently a very good sort of fellow after all.

The baby had by this time discovered the use of the bone ring at the end of the handle of the toy and was biting it energetically.

'It's a very beautiful rattle,' said Ruth. 'Thank you very much for it. It's just the very thing he wanted.'

'I heard you say the other day that he wanted something of the kind to bite on to help his teeth through,' answered Slyme, 'and when I happened to notice that in the shop I remembered what you said and thought I'd bring it home.'

The baby took the ring out of its mouth and shaking the rattle frantically in the air laughed and crowed merrily, looking at Slyme.

'Dad! Dad! Dad!' he cried, holding out his arms.

Slyme and Ruth burst out laughing.

'That's not your Dad, you silly boy,' she said, kissing the child as she spoke. 'Your dad ought to be ashamed of himself for staying out like this. We'll give him dad, dad, dad, when he does come home, won't we?'

But the baby only shook the rattle and rang the bells and laughed and crowed and laughed again, louder than ever.