

Chapter 19

The Filling of the Tank

Viewed from outside, the 'Cricketers Arms' was a pretentious-looking building with plate-glass windows and a profusion of gilding. The pilasters were painted in imitation of different marbles and the doors grained to represent costly woods. There were panels containing painted advertisements of wines and spirits and beer, written in gold, and ornamented with gaudy colours. On the lintel over the principal entrance was inscribed in small white letters:

'A. Harpy. Licensed to sell wines, spirits and malt liquor by retail to be consumed either on or off the premises.'

The bar was arranged in the usual way, being divided into several compartments. First there was the 'Saloon Bar': on the glass of the door leading into this was fixed a printed bill: 'No four ale served in this bar.' Next to the saloon bar was the jug and bottle department, much appreciated by ladies who wished to indulge in a drop of gin on the quiet. There were also two small 'private' bars, only capable of holding two or three persons, where nothing less than fourpennyworth of spirits or glasses of ale at threepence were served. Finally, the public bar, the largest compartment of all. At each end, separating it from the other departments, was a wooden partition, painted and varnished.

Wooden forms fixed across the partitions and against the walls under the windows provided seating accommodation for the customers. A large automatic musical instrument--a 'penny in the slot' polyphone--resembling a grandfather's clock in shape--stood against one of the partitions and close up to the counter, so that those behind the bar could reach to wind it up. Hanging on the partition near the polyphone was a board about fifteen inches square, over the surface of which were distributed a number of small hooks, numbered. At the bottom of the board was a net made of fine twine, extended by means of a semi-circular piece of wire. In this net several india-rubber rings about three inches in diameter were lying. There was no table in the place but jutting out from the other partition was a hinged flap about three feet long by twenty inches wide, which could be folded down when not in use. This was the shove-ha'penny board. The coins--old French pennies--used in playing this game were kept behind the bar and might be borrowed on application. On the partition, just above the shove-ha'penny board was a neatly printed notice, framed and glazed:

NOTICE

Gentlemen using this house are requested to
refrain from using obscene language.

Alongside this notice were a number of gaudily-coloured bills advertising the local theatre and the music-hall, and another of a travelling circus and menagerie, then visiting the town and encamped on

a piece of waste ground about half-way on the road to Windley. The fittings behind the bar, and the counter, were of polished mahogany, with silvered plate glass at the back of the shelves. On the shelves were rows of bottles and cut-glass decanters, gin, whisky, brandy and wines and liqueurs of different kinds.

When Crass, Philpot, Easton and Bundy entered, the landlord, a well-fed, prosperous-looking individual in white shirt-sleeves, and a bright maroon fancy waistcoat with a massive gold watch-chain and a diamond ring, was conversing in an affable, friendly way with one of his regular customers, who was sitting on the end of the seat close to the counter, a shabbily dressed, bleary-eyed, degraded, beer-sodden, trembling wretch, who spent the greater part of every day, and all his money, in this bar. He was a miserable-looking wreck of a man about thirty years of age, supposed to be a carpenter, although he never worked at that trade now. It was commonly said that some years previously he had married a woman considerably his senior, the landlady of a third-rate lodging-house. This business was evidently sufficiently prosperous to enable him to exist without working and to maintain himself in a condition of perpetual semi-intoxication. This besotted wretch practically lived at the 'Cricketers'. He came regularly every morning and sometimes earned a pint of beer by assisting the barman to sweep up the sawdust or clean the windows. He usually remained in the bar until closing time every night. He was a very good customer; not only did he spend whatever money he could get hold of himself, but he was the cause of others spending money, for he was acquainted with most of the other regular customers, who, knowing his

impecunious condition, often stood him a drink 'for the good of the house'.

The only other occupant of the public bar--previous to the entrance of Crass and his mates--was a semi-drunken man, who appeared to be a house-painter, sitting on the form near the shove-ha'penny board. He was wearing a battered bowler hat and the usual shabby clothes. This individual had a very thin, pale face, with a large, high-bridged nose, and bore a striking resemblance to the portraits of the first Duke of Wellington. He was not a regular customer here, having dropped in casually about two o'clock and had remained ever since. He was beginning to show the effects of the drink he had taken during that time.

As Crass and the others came in they were hailed with enthusiasm by the landlord and the Besotted Wretch, while the semi-drunk workman regarded them with fishy eyes and stupid curiosity.

'Wot cheer, Bob?' said the landlord, affably, addressing Crass, and nodding familiarly to the others. 'Ow goes it?'

'All reet me ole dear!' replied Crass, jovially. 'Ow's yerself?'

'A.1,' replied the 'Old Dear', getting up from his chair in readiness to execute their orders.

'Well, wot's it to be?' inquired Philpot of the others generally.

'Mine's a pint o' beer,' said Crass.

'Half for me,' said Bundy.

'Half o' beer for me too,' replied Easton.

'That's one pint, two 'arves, and a pint o' porter for meself,' said Philpot, turning and addressing the Old Dear.

While the landlord was serving these drinks the Besotted Wretch finished his beer and set the empty glass down on the counter, and Philpot observing this, said to him:

"Ave one along o' me?"

'I don't mind if I do,' replied the other.

When the drinks were served, Philpot, instead of paying for them, winked significantly at the landlord, who nodded silently and unobtrusively made an entry in an account book that was lying on one of the shelves. Although it was only Monday and he had been at work all the previous week, Philpot was already stony broke. This was accounted for by the fact that on Saturday he had paid his landlady something on account of the arrears of board and lodging money that had accumulated while he was out of work; and he had also paid the Old Dear four shillings for drinks obtained on tick during the last week.

'Well, 'ere's the skin orf yer nose,' said Crass, nodding to Philpot, and taking a long pull at the pint glass which the latter had handed to him.

Similar appropriate and friendly sentiments were expressed by the others and suitably acknowledged by Philpot, the founder of the feast.

The Old Dear now put a penny in the slot of the polyphone, and winding it up started it playing. It was some unfamiliar tune, but when the Semi-drunk Painter heard it he rose unsteadily to his feet and began shuffling and dancing about, singing:

'Oh, we'll inwite you to the wedding,
An' we'll 'ave a glorious time!
Where the boys an' girls is a-dancing,
An' we'll all get drunk on wine.'

"Ere! that's quite enough o' that!" cried the landlord, roughly. 'We don't want that row 'ere.'

The Semi-drunk stopped, and looking stupidly at the Old Dear, sank abashed on to the seat again.

'Well, we may as well sit as stand--for a few minutes,' remarked Crass, suiting the action to the word. The others followed his example.

At frequent intervals the bar was entered by fresh customers, most of them working men on their way home, who ordered and drank their pint or half-pint of ale or porter and left at once. Bundy began reading the advertisement of the circus and menageries and a conversation ensued concerning the wonderful performances of the trained animals. The Old Dear said that some of them had as much sense as human beings, and the manner with which he made this statement implied that he thought it was a testimonial to the sagacity of the brutes. He further said that he had heard--a little earlier in the evening--a rumour that one of the wild animals, a bear or something, had broken loose and was at present at large. This was what he had heard--he didn't know if it were true or not. For his own part he didn't believe it, and his hearers agreed that it was highly improbable. Nobody ever knew how these silly yarns got about.

Presently the Besotted Wretch got up and, taking the india-rubber rings out of the net with a trembling hand, began throwing them one at a time at the hooks on the board. The rest of the company watched him with much interest, laughing when he made a very bad shot and applauding when he scored.

'E's a bit orf tonight,' remarked Philpot aside to Easton, 'but as a rule 'e's a fair knockout at it. Throws a splendid ring.'

The Semidrunken regarded the proceedings of the Besotted Wretch with an expression of profound contempt.

'You can't play for nuts,' he said scornfully.

'Can't I? I can play you, anyway.'

'Right you are! I'll play you for drinks round!' cried the Semi-drunk.

For a moment the Besotted Wretch hesitated. He had not money enough to pay for drinks round. However, feeling confident of winning, he replied:

'Come on then. What's it to be? Fifty up?'

'Anything you like! Fifty or a 'undred or a bloody million!'

'Better make it fifty for a start.'

'All right!'

'You play first if you like.'

'All right,' agreed the Semi-drunk, anxious to distinguish himself. Holding the six rings in his left hand, the man stood in the middle of the floor at a distance of about three yards from the board, with his right foot advanced. Taking one of the rings between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand, and closing his left eye, he carefully 'sighted' the centre hook, No. 13; then he slowly extended his arm to its full length in the direction of the board: then bending his elbow,

he brought his hand back again until it nearly touched his chin, and slowly extended his arm again. He repeated these movements several times, whilst the others watched with bated breath. Getting it right at last he suddenly shot the ring at the board, but it did not go on No. 13; it went over the partition into the private bar.

This feat was greeted with a roar of laughter. The player stared at the board in a dazed way, wondering what had become of the ring. When someone in the next bar threw it over the partition again, he realized what had happened and, turning to the company with a sickly smile, remarked:

'I ain't got properly used to this board yet: that's the reason of it.'

He now began throwing the other rings at the board rather wildly, without troubling to take aim. One struck the partition to the right of the board: one to the left: one underneath: one went over the counter, one on the floor, the other--the last--hit the board, and amid a shout of applause, caught on the centre hook No. 13, the highest number it was possible to scare with a single throw.

'I shall be all right now that I've got the range,' observed the Semi-drunk as he made way for his opponent.

'You'll see something now,' whispered Philpot to Easton. 'This bloke is a dandy!'

The Besotted Wretch took up his position and with an affectation of carelessness began throwing the rings. It was really a remarkable exhibition, for notwithstanding the fact that his hand trembled like the proverbial aspen leaf, he succeeded in striking the board almost in the centre every time; but somehow or other most of them failed to catch on the hooks and fell into the net. When he finished his innings, he had only scored 4, two of the rings having caught on the No. 2 hook.

'Ard lines,' remarked Bundy as he finished his beer and put the glass down on the counter.

'Drink up and 'ave another,' said Easton as he drained his own glass.

'I don't mind if I do,' replied Crass, pouring what remained of the pint down his throat.

Philpot's glass had been empty for some time.

'Same again,' said Easton, addressing the Old Dear and putting six pennies on the counter.

By this time the Semi-drunk had again opened fire on the board, but he seemed to have lost the range, for none of the rings scored.

They flew all over the place, and he finished his innings without increasing his total.

The Besotted Wretch now sailed in and speedily piled up 37. Then the Semi-drunk had another go, and succeeded in getting 8. His case appeared hopeless, but his opponent in his next innings seemed to go all to pieces. Twice he missed the board altogether, and when he did hit it he failed to score, until the very last throw, when he made 1. Then the Semi-drunk went in again and got 10.

The scores were now:

Besotted Wretch	42
Semi-drunk	31

So far it was impossible to foresee the end. It was anybody's game. Crass became so excited that he absentmindedly opened his mouth and shot his second pint down into his stomach with a single gulp, and Bundy also drained his glass and called upon Philpot and Easton to drink up and have another, which they accordingly did.

While the Semi-drunk was having his next innings, the Besotted Wretch placed a penny on the counter and called for a half a pint, which he drank in the hope of steadying his nerves for a great effort. His opponent meanwhile threw the rings at the board and missed it every time, but all the same he scored, for one ring, after striking the partition about a foot above the board, fell down and caught on the hook.

The other man now began his innings, playing very carefully, and nearly every ring scored. As he played, the others uttered exclamations of admiration and called out the result of every throw.

'One!

'One again!

'Miss! No! Got 'im! Two!

'Miss!

'Miss!

'Four!

The Semi-drunk accepted his defeat with a good grace, and after explaining that he was a bit out of practice, placed a shilling on the counter and invited the company to give their orders. Everyone asked for 'the same again,' but the landlord served Easton, Bundy and the Besotted Wretch with pints instead of half-pints as before, so there was no change out of the shilling.

'You know, there's a great deal in not bein' used to the board,' said the Semi-drunk.

'There's no disgrace in bein' beat by a man like 'im, mate,' said

Philpot. 'E's a champion!

'Yes, there's no mistake about it. 'E throws a splendid ring!' said Bundy.

This was the general verdict. The Semi-drunk, though beaten, was not disgraced: and he was so affected by the good feeling manifested by the company that he presently produced a sixpence and insisted on paying for another half-pint all round.

Crass had gone outside during this conversation, but he returned in a few minutes. 'I feel a bit easier now,' he remarked with a laugh as he took the half-pint glass that the Semi-drunk passed to him with a shaking hand. One after the other, within a few minutes, the rest followed Crass's example, going outside and returning almost immediately: and as Bundy, who was the last to return, came back he exclaimed:

'Let's 'ave a game of shove-'a'penny.'

'All right,' said Easton, who was beginning to feel reckless. 'But drink up first, and let's 'ave another.'

He had only sevenpence left, just enough to pay for another pint for Crass and half a pint for everyone else.

The shove-ha'penny table was a planed mahogany board with a number of

parallel lines scored across it. The game is played by placing the coin at the end of the board--the rim slightly overhanging the edge--and striking it with the back part of the palm of the hand, regulating the force of the blow according to the distance it is desired to drive the coin.

'What's become of Alf tonight?' inquired Philpot of the landlord whilst Easton and Bundy were playing. Alf was the barman.

'E's doing a bit of a job down in the cellar; some of the valves gone a bit wrong. But the missus is comin' down to lend me a hand presently. 'Ere she is now.'

The landlady--who at this moment entered through the door at the back of the bar--was a large woman with a highly-coloured countenance and a tremendous bust, incased in a black dress with a shot silk blouse. She had several jewelled gold rings on the fingers of each fat white hand, and a long gold watch guard hung round her fat neck. She greeted Crass and Philpot with condescension, smiling affably upon them.

Meantime the game of shove-ha'penny proceeded merrily, the Semi-drunk taking a great interest in it and tendering advice to both players impartially. Bundy was badly beaten, and then Easton suggested that it was time to think of going home. This proposal--slightly modified--met with general approval, the modification being suggested by Philpot, who insisted on standing one final round of drinks before they went.

While they were pouring this down their throats, Crass took a penny from his waistcoat pocket and put it in the slot of the polyphone. The landlord put a fresh disc into it and wound it up and it began to play 'The Boys of the Bulldog Breed.' The Semi-drunk happened to know the words of the chorus of this song, and when he heard the music he started unsteadily to his feet and with many fierce looks and gestures began to roar at the top of his voice:

'They may build their ships, my lads,
And try to play the game,
But they can't build the boys of the Bulldog breed,
Wot made ole Hingland's--'

"Ere! Stop that, will yer?" cried the Old Dear, fiercely. 'I told you once before that I don't allow that sort of thing in my 'ouse!'

The Semi-drunk stopped in confusion.

'I don't mean no 'arm,' he said unsteadily, appealing to the company.

'I don't want no chin from you!' said the Old Dear with a ferocious scowl. 'If you want to make that row you can go somewheres else, and the sooner you goes the better. You've been 'ere long enough.'

This was true. The man had been there long enough to spend every penny he had been possessed of when he first came: he had no money left now, a fact that the observant and experienced landlord had divined some

time ago. He therefore wished to get rid of the fellow before the drink affected him further and made him helplessly drunk. The Semi-drunk listened with indignation and wrath to the landlord's insulting words.

'I shall go when the bloody 'ell I like!' he shouted. 'I shan't ask you nor nobody else! Who the bloody 'ell are you? You're nobody! See? Nobody! It's orf the likes of me that you gets your bloody livin'! I shall stop 'ere as long as I bloody well like, and if you don't like it you can go to 'ell!'

'Oh! Yer will, will yer?' said the Old Dear. 'We'll soon see about that.' And, opening the door at the back of the bar, he roared out:

'Alf!'

'Yes, sir,' replied a voice, evidently from the basement.

'Just come up 'ere.'

'All right,' replied the voice, and footsteps were heard ascending some stairs.

'You'll see some fun in a minute,' gleefully remarked Crass to Easton.

The polyphone continued to play 'The Boys of the Bulldog Breed.'

Philpot crossed over to the Semi-drunk. 'Look 'ere, old man,' he whispered, 'take my tip and go 'ome quietly. You'll only git the worse of it, you know.'

'Not me, mate,' replied the other, shaking his head doggedly. "'Ere I am, and 'ere I'm goin' to bloody well stop.'

'No, you ain't,' replied Philpot coaxingly. "Look 'ere. I'll tell you wot we'll do. You 'ave just one more 'arf-pint along of me, and then we'll both go 'ome together. I'll see you safe 'ome.'

'See me safe 'ome! Wotcher mean?' indignantly demanded the other. 'Do you think I'm drunk or wot?'

'No. Certainly not,' replied Philpot, hastily. 'You're all right, as right as I am myself. But you know wot I mean. Let's go 'ome. You don't want to stop 'ere all night, do you?'

By this time Alf had arrived at the door of the back of the bar. He was a burly young man about twenty-two or twenty-three years of age.

'Put it outside,' growled the landlord, indicating the culprit.

The barman instantly vaulted over the counter, and, having opened wide the door leading into the street, he turned to the half-drunken man and, jerking his thumb in the direction of the door, said:

'Are yer goin'?'

'I'm goin' to 'ave 'arf a pint along of this genelman first--'

'Yes. It's all right,' said Philpot to the landlord. 'Let's 'ave two 'arf-pints, and say no more about it.'

'You mind your own business,' shouted the landlord, turning savagely on him. 'E'll get no more 'ere! I don't want no drunken men in my 'ouse. Who asked you to interfere?'

'Now then!' exclaimed the barman to the cause of the trouble, 'Outside!'

'Not me!' said the Semi-drunk firmly. 'Not before I've 'ad my 'arf--'

But before he could conclude, the barman had clutched him by the collar, dragged him violently to the door and shot him into the middle of the road, where he fell in a heap almost under the wheels of a brewer's dray that happened to be passing. This accomplished, Alf shut the door and retired behind the counter again.

'Serve 'im bloody well right,' said Crass.

'I couldn't 'elp laughin' when I seen 'im go flyin' through the bloody door,' said Bundy.

'You oughter 'ave more sense than to go interferin' like that,' said

Crass to Philpot. 'It was nothing to do with you.'

Philpot made no reply. He was standing with his back to the others, peeping out into the street over the top of the window casing. Then he opened the door and went out into the street. Crass and the others--through the window--watched him assist the Semi-drunk to his feet and rub some of the dirt off his clothes, and presently after some argument they saw the two go away together arm in arm.

Crass and the others laughed, and returned to their half-finished drinks.

'Why, old Joe ain't drunk 'ardly 'arf of 'is!' cried Easton, seeing Philpot's porter on the counter. 'Fancy going away like that!'

'More fool 'im,' growled Crass. 'There was no need for it: the man's all right.'

The Besotted Wretch gulped his beer down as quickly as he could, with his eyes fixed greedily on Philpot's glass. He had just finished his own and was about to suggest that it was a pity to waste the porter when Philpot unexpectedly reappeared.

'Hullo! What 'ave you done with 'im?' inquired Crass.

'I think 'e'll be all right,' replied Philpot. 'He wouldn't let me go no further with 'im: said if I didn't go away, 'e'd go for me! But I

believe 'e'll be all right. I think the fall sobered 'im a bit.'

'Oh, 'e's all right,' said Crass offhandedly. 'There's nothing the matter with 'im.'

Philpot now drank his porter, and bidding 'good night' to the Old Dear, the landlady and the Besotted Wretch, they all set out for home. As they went along the dark and lonely thoroughfare that led over the hill to Windley, they heard from time to time the weird roaring of the wild animals in the menagerie that was encamped in the adjacent field. Just as they reached a very gloomy and deserted part, they suddenly observed a dark object in the middle of the road some distance in front of them. It seemed to be a large animal of some kind and was coming slowly and stealthily towards them.

They stopped, peering in a half-frightened way through the darkness. The animal continued to approach. Bundy stooped down to the ground, groping about in search of a stone, and--with the exception of Crass, who was too frightened to move--the others followed his example. They found several large stones and stood waiting for the creature--whatever it was--to come a little nearer so as to get a fair shot at it. They were about to let fly when the creature fell over on its side and moaned as if in pain. Observing this, the four men advanced cautiously towards it. Bundy struck a match and held it over the prostrate figure. It was the Semi-drunk.

After parting from Philpot, the poor wretch had managed to walk all

right for some distance. As Philpot had remarked, the fall had to some extent sobered him; but he had not gone very far before the drink he had taken began to affect him again and he had fallen down. Finding it impossible to get up, he began crawling along on his hands and knees, unconscious of the fact that he was travelling in the wrong direction. Even this mode of progression failed him at last, and he would probably have been run over if they had not found him. They raised him up, and Philpot, exhorting him to 'pull himself together' inquired where he lived. The man had sense enough left to be able to tell them his address, which was fortunately at Windley, where they all resided.

Bundy and Philpot took him home, separating from Crass and Easton at the corner of the street where both the latter lived.

Crass felt very full and satisfied with himself. He had had six and a half pints of beer, and had listened to two selections on the polyphone at a total cost of one penny.

Easton had but a few yards to go before reaching his own house after parting from Crass, but he paused directly he heard the latter's door close, and leaning against a street lamp yielded to the feeling of giddiness and nausea that he had been fighting against all the way home. All the inanimate objects around him seemed to be in motion. The lights of the distant street lamps appeared to be floating about the pavement and the roadway rose and fell like the surface of a troubled sea. He searched his pockets for his handkerchief and having found it wiped his mouth, inwardly congratulating himself that Crass was not

there to see him. Resuming his walk, after a few minutes he reached his own home. As he passed through, the gate closed of itself after him, clanging loudly. He went rather unsteadily up the narrow path that led to his front door and entered.

The baby was asleep in the cradle. Slyme had gone up to his own room, and Ruth was sitting sewing by the fireside. The table was still set for two persons, for she had not yet taken her tea.

Easton lurched in noisily. "Ello, old girl!" he cried, throwing his dinner basket carelessly on the floor with an affectation of joviality and resting his hands on the table to support himself. 'I've come at last, you see.'

Ruth left off sewing, and, letting her hands fall into her lap, sat looking at him. She had never seen him like this before. His face was ghastly pale, the eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed, the lips tremulous and moist, and the ends of the hair of his fair moustache, stuck together with saliva and stained with beer, hung untidily round his mouth in damp clusters.

Perceiving that she did not speak or smile, Easton concluded that she was angry and became grave himself.

'I've come at last, you see, my dear; better late than never.'

He found it very difficult to speak plainly, for his lips trembled and

refused to form the words.

'I don't know so much about that,' said Ruth, inclined to cry and trying not to let him see the pity she could not help feeling for him. 'A nice state you're in. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

Easton shook his head and laughed foolishly. 'Don't be angry, Ruth. It's no good, you know.'

He walked clumsily towards her, still leaning on the table to steady himself.

'Don't be angry,' he mumbled as he stooped over her, putting his arm round her neck and his face close to hers. 'It's no good being angry, you know, dear.'

She shrank away, shuddering with involuntary disgust as he pressed his wet lips and filthy moustache upon her mouth. His fetid breath, foul with the smell of tobacco and beer, and the odour of the stale tobacco smoke that exuded from his clothes filled her with loathing. He kissed her repeatedly and when at last he released her she hastily wiped her face with her handkerchief and shivered.

Easton said he did not want any tea, and went upstairs to bed almost immediately. Ruth did not want any tea either now, although she had been very hungry before he came home. She sat up very late, sewing, and when at length she did go upstairs she found him lying on his back,

partly undressed on the outside of the bedclothes, with his mouth wide open, breathing stertorously.