

Chapter 23

The 'Open-air'

During the last few weeks ever since he had been engaged on the decoration of the drawing-room, Owen had been so absorbed in his work that he had no time for other things. Of course, all he was paid for was the time he actually worked, but really every waking moment of his time was given to the task. Now that it was finished he felt something like one aroused from a dream to the stern realities and terrors of life. By the end of next week, the inside of the house and part of the outside would be finished, and as far as he knew the firm had nothing else to do at present. Most of the other employers in the town were in the same plight, and it would be of no use to apply even to such of them as had something to do, for they were not likely to take on a fresh man while some of their regular hands were idle.

For the last month he had forgotten that he was ill; he had forgotten that when the work at 'The Cave' was finished he would have to stand off with the rest of the hands. In brief, he had forgotten for the time being that, like the majority of his fellow workmen, he was on the brink of destitution, and that a few weeks of unemployment or idleness meant starvation. As far as illness was concerned, he was even worse off than most others, for the greater number of them were members of some sick benefit club, but Owen's ill-health rendered him ineligible for membership of such societies.

As he walked homewards after being paid, feeling unutterably depressed and weary, he began once more to think of the future; and the more he thought of it the more dreadful it appeared. Even looking at it in the best possible light--supposing he did not fall too ill to work, or lose his employment from some other cause--what was there to live for? He had been working all this week. These few coins that he held in his hand were the result, and he laughed bitterly as he thought of all they had to try to do with this money, and of all that would have to be left undone.

As he turned the corner of Kerk Street he saw Frankie coming to meet him, and the boy catching sight of him at the same moment began running and leapt into his arms with a joyous whoop.

'Mother told me to tell you to buy something for dinner before you come home, because there's nothing in the house.'

'Did she tell you what I was to get?'

She did tell me something, but I forget what it was. But I know she said to get anything you like if you couldn't get what she told me to tell you.'

'Well, we'll go and see what we can find,' said Owen.

'If I were you, I'd get a tin of salmon or some eggs and bacon,'

suggested Frankie as he skipped along holding his father's hand. 'We don't want anything that's a lot of trouble to cook, you know, because Mum's not very well today.'

'Is she up?'

She's been up all the morning, but she's lying down now. We've done all the work, though. While she was making the beds I started washing up the cups and saucers without telling her, but when she came in and saw what a mess I'd made on the floor, she had to stop me doing it, and she had to change nearly all my clothes as well, because I was almost wet through; but I managed the wiping up all right when she did the washing, and I swept the passage and put all my things tidy and made the cat's bed. And that just reminds me: will you please give me my penny now? I promised the cat that I'd bring him back some meat.'

Owen complied with the boy's request, and while the latter went to the butcher's for the meat, Owen went into the grocer's to get something for dinner, it being arranged that they were to meet again at the corner of the street. Owen was at the appointed place first and after waiting some time and seeing no sign of the boy he decided to go towards the butcher's to meet him. When he came in sight of the shop he saw the boy standing outside in earnest conversation with the butcher, a jolly-looking stoutly built man, with a very red face. Owen perceived at once that the child was trying to explain something, because Frankie had a habit of holding his head sideways and supplementing his speech by spreading out his fingers and making quaint

gestures with his hands whenever he found it difficult to make himself understood. The boy was doing this now, waving one hand about with the fingers and thumb extended wide, and with the other flourishing a paper parcel which evidently contained the pieces of meat. Presently the man laughed heartily and after shaking hands with Frankie went into the shop to attend to a customer, and Frankie rejoined his father.

'That butcher's a very decent sort of chap, you know, Dad,' he said.

'He wouldn't take a penny for the meat.'

'Is that what you were talking to him about?'

No; we were talking about Socialism. You see, this is the second time he wouldn't take the money, and the first time he did it I thought he must be a Socialist, but I didn't ask him then. But when he did it again this time I asked him if he was. So he said, No. He said he wasn't quite mad yet. So I said, "If you think that Socialists are all mad, you're very much mistaken, because I'm a Socialist myself, and I'm quite sure I'M not mad." So he said he knew I was all right, but he didn't understand anything about Socialism himself--only that it meant sharing out all the money so that everyone could have the same. So then I told him that's not Socialism at all! And when I explained it to him properly and advised him to be one, he said he'd think about it. So I said if he'd only do that he'd be sure to change over to our side; and then he laughed and promised to let me know next time he sees me, and I promised to lend him some literature. You won't mind, will you, Dad?'

'Of course not; when we get home we'll have a look through what we've got and you can take him some of them.'

'I know!' cried Frankie eagerly. 'The two very best of all. Happy Britain and England for the English.'

He knew that these were 'two of the best' because he had often heard his father and mother say so, and he had noticed that whenever a Socialist friend came to visit them, he was also of the same opinion.

As a rule on Saturday evenings they all three went out together to do the marketing, but on this occasion, in consequence of Nora being unwell, Owen and Frankie went by themselves. The frequent recurrence of his wife's illness served to increase Owen's pessimism with regard to the future, and the fact that he was unable to procure for her the comforts she needed was not calculated to dispel the depression that filled his mind as he reflected that there was no hope of better times.

In the majority of cases, for a workman there is no hope of advancement. After he has learnt his trade and become a 'journeyman' all progress ceases. He is at the goal. After he has been working ten or twenty years he commands no more than he did at first--a bare living wage--sufficient money to purchase fuel to keep the human machine working. As he grows older he will have to be content with even less;

and all the time he holds his employment at the caprice and by the favour of his masters, who regard him merely as a piece of mechanism that enables them to accumulate money--a thing which they are justified in casting aside as soon as it becomes unprofitable. And the workman must not only be an efficient money-producing machine, but he must also be the servile subject of his masters. If he is not abjectly civil and humble, if he will not submit tamely to insult, indignity, and every form of contemptuous treatment that occasion makes possible, he can be dismissed, and replaced in a moment by one of the crowd of unemployed who are always waiting for his job. This is the status of the majority of the 'Heirs of all the ages' under the present system.

As he walked through the crowded streets holding Frankie by the hand, Owen thought that to voluntarily continue to live such a life as this betokened a degraded mind. To allow one's child to grow up to suffer it in turn was an act of callous, criminal cruelty.

In this matter he held different opinions from most of his fellow workmen. The greater number of them were quite willing and content that their children should be made into beasts of burden for the benefit of other people. As he looked down upon the little, frail figure trotting along by his side, Owen thought for the thousandth time that it would be far better for the child to die now: he would never be fit to be a soldier in the ferocious Christian Battle of Life.

Then he remembered Nora. Although she was always brave, and never complained, he knew that her life was one of almost incessant physical

suffering; and as for himself he was tired and sick of it all. He had been working like a slave all his life and there was nothing to show for it--there never would be anything to show for it. He thought of the man who had killed his wife and children. The jury had returned the usual verdict, 'Temporary Insanity'. It never seemed to occur to these people that the truth was that to continue to suffer hopelessly like this was evidence of permanent insanity.

But supposing that bodily death was not the end. Suppose there was some kind of a God? If there were, it wasn't unreasonable to think that the Being who was capable of creating such a world as this and who seemed so callously indifferent to the unhappiness of His creatures, would also be capable of devising and creating the other Hell that most people believed in.

Although it was December the evening was mild and clear. The full moon deluged the town with silvery light, and the cloudless sky was jewelled with myriads of glittering stars.

Looking out into the unfathomable infinity of space, Owen wondered what manner of Being or Power it was that had originated and sustained all this? Considered as an explanation of the existence of the universe, the orthodox Christian religion was too absurd to merit a second thought. But then, every other conceivable hypothesis was also--ultimately--unsatisfactory and even ridiculous. To believe that the universe as it is now has existed from all eternity without any Cause is surely ridiculous. But to say that it was created by a Being

who existed without a Cause from all eternity is equally ridiculous. In fact, it was only postponing the difficulty one stage. Evolution was not more satisfactory, because although it was undoubtedly true as far as it went, it only went part of the way, leaving the great question still unanswered by assuming the existence--in the beginning--of the elements of matter, without a cause! The question remained unanswered because it was unanswerable. Regarding this problem man was but--

'An infant crying in the night,
An infant crying for the light
And with no language but a cry.'

All the same, it did not follow, because one could not explain the mystery oneself, that it was right to try to believe an unreasonable explanation offered by someone else.

But although he reasoned like this, Owen could not help longing for something to believe, for some hope for the future; something to compensate for the unhappiness of the present. In one sense, he thought, how good it would be if Christianity were true, and after all the sorrow there was to be an eternity of happiness such as it had never entered into the heart of man to conceive? If only that were true, nothing else would matter. How contemptible and insignificant the very worst that could happen here would be if one knew that this life was only a short journey that was to terminate at the beginning of an eternity of joy? But no one really believed this; and as for those who

pretended to do so--their lives showed that they did not believe it at all. Their greed and inhumanity--their ferocious determination to secure for themselves the good things of THIS world--were conclusive proofs of their hypocrisy and infidelity.

'Dad,' said Frankie, suddenly, 'let's go over and hear what that man's saying.' He pointed across the way to where--a little distance back from the main road, just round the corner of a side street--a group of people were standing encircling a large lantern fixed on the top of a pole about seven feet high, which was being held by one of the men. A bright light was burning inside this lantern and on the pane of white, obscured glass which formed the sides, visible from where Owen and Frankie were standing, was written in bold plain letters that were readable even at that distance, the text:

'Be not deceived: God is not mocked!'

The man whose voice had attracted Frankie's attention was reading out a verse of a hymn:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Behold, I freely give,
The living water, thirsty one,
Stoop down and drink, and live.
I came to Jesus and I drank
Of that life giving stream,
My thirst was quenched,

My soul revived,
And now I live in Him.'

The individual who gave out this hymn was a tall, thin man whose clothes hung loosely on the angles of his round-shouldered, bony form. His long, thin legs--about which the baggy trousers hung in ungraceful folds--were slightly knock-kneed, and terminated in large, fiat feet. His arms were very long even for such a tall man, and the huge, bony hands were gnarled and knotted. Regardless of the season, he had removed his bowler hat, revealing his forehead, which was high, flat and narrow. His nose was a large, fleshy, hawklike beak, and from the side of each nostril a deep indentation extended downwards until it disappeared in the drooping moustache that concealed his mouth when he was not speaking, but the vast extent of which was perceptible now as he opened it to call out the words of the hymn. His chin was large and extraordinarily long: the eyes were pale blue, very small and close together, surmounted by spare, light-coloured, almost invisible eyebrows with a deep vertical cleft between them over the nose. His head--covered with thick, coarse brown hair--was very large, especially at the back; the ears were small and laid close to the head. If one were to make a full-face drawing of his cadaverous visage, it would be found that the outline resembled that of the lid of a coffin.

As Owen and Frankie drew near, the boy tugged at his father's hand and whispered: 'Dad! that's the teacher at the Sunday School where I went that day with Charley and Elsie.'

Owen looked quickly and saw that it was Hunter.

As Hunter ceased reading out the words of the hymn, the little company of evangelists began to sing, accompanied by the strains of a small but peculiarly sweet-toned organ. A few persons in the crowd joined in, the words being familiar to them. During the singing their faces were a study, they all looked so profoundly solemn and miserable, as if they were a gang of condemned criminals waiting to be led forth to execution. The great number of the people standing around appeared to be listening more out of idle curiosity than anything else, and two well-dressed young men--evidently strangers and visitors to the town--amused themselves by making audible remarks about the texts on the lantern. There was also a shabbily dressed, semi-drunken man in a battered bowler hat who stood on the inner edge of the crowd, almost in the ring itself, with folded arms and an expression of scorn. He had a very thin, pale face with a large, high-bridged nose, and bore a striking resemblance to the First Duke of Wellington.

As the singing proceeded, the scornful expression faded from the visage of the Semi-drunken, and he not only joined in, but unfolded his arms and began waving them about as if he were conducting the music.

By the time the singing was over a considerable crowd had gathered, and then one of the evangelists, the same man who had given out the hymn, stepped into the middle of the ring. He had evidently been offended by the unseemly conduct of the two well-dressed young men, for after a preliminary glance round upon the crowd, he fixed his gaze upon the

pair, and immediately launched out upon a long tirade against what he called 'Infidelity'. Then, having heartily denounced all those who--as he put it--'refused' to believe, he proceeded to ridicule those half-and-half believers, who, while professing to believe the Bible, rejected the doctrine of Hell. That the existence of a place of eternal torture is taught in the Bible, he tried to prove by a long succession of texts. As he proceeded he became very excited, and the contemptuous laughter of the two unbelievers seemed to make him worse. He shouted and raved, literally foaming at the mouth and glaring in a frenzied manner around upon the faces of the crowd.

'There is a Hell!' he shouted. 'And understand this clearly--"The wicked shall be turned into hell"--"He that believeth not shall be damned."'

'Well, then, you'll stand a very good chance of being damned also,' exclaimed one of the two young men.

'Ow do you make it out?' demanded the preacher, wiping the froth from his lips and the perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief.

'Why, because you don't believe the Bible yourselves.'

Nimrod and the other evangelists laughed, and looked pityingly at the young man.

'Ah, my dear brother,' said Misery. 'That's your delusion. I thank

God I do believe it, every word!

'Amen,' fervently ejaculated Slyme and several of the other disciples.

'Oh no, you don't,' replied the other. 'And I can prove you don't.'

'Prove it, then,' said Nimrod.

'Read out the 17th and 18th verses of the XVIth chapter of Mark,' said the disturber of the meeting. The crowd began to close in on the centre, the better to hear the dispute. Misery, standing close to the lantern, found the verse mentioned and read aloud as follows:

'And these signs shall follow them that believe. In my name shall they cast out devils: they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them: they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.'

'Well, you can't heal the sick, neither can you speak new languages or cast out devils: but perhaps you can drink deadly things without suffering harm.' The speaker here suddenly drew from his waistcoat pocket a small glass bottle and held it out towards Misery, who shrank from it with horror as he continued: 'I have here a most deadly poison. There is in this bottle sufficient strychnine to kill a dozen unbelievers. Drink it! And if it doesn't harm you, we'll know that you really are a believer and that what you believe is the truth!'

"Ear, 'ear!" said the Semi-drunk, who had listened to the progress of the argument with great interest. "Ear, 'ear! That's fair enough. Git it acrost yer chest."

Some of the people in the crowd began to laugh, and voices were heard from several quarters calling upon Misery to drink the strychnine.

'Now, if you'll allow me, I'll explain to you what that there verse means,' said Hunter. 'If you read it carefully--WITH the context--'

'I don't want you to tell me what it means,' interrupted the other. 'I am able to read for myself. Whatever you may say, or pretend to think it means, I know what it says.'

'Hear, Hear,' shouted several voices, and angry cries of 'Why don't you drink the poison?' began to be heard from the outskirts of the crowd.

'Are you going to drink it or not?' demanded the man with the bottle.

'No! I'm not such a fool!' retorted Misery, fiercely, and a loud shout of laughter broke from the crowd.'

'P'haps some of the other "believers" would like to,' said the young man sneeringly, looking round upon the disciples. As no one seemed desirous of availing himself of this offer, the man returned the bottle regretfully to his pocket.

'I suppose,' said Misery, regarding the owner of the strychnine with a sneer, 'I suppose you're one of them there hired critics wot's goin' about the country doin' the Devil's work?'

'Wot I wants to know is this 'ere,' said the Semi-drunk, suddenly advancing into the middle of the ring and speaking in a loud voice. 'Where did Cain get 'is wife from?'

'Don't answer 'im, Brother 'Unter,' said Mr Didlum, one of the disciples. This was rather an unnecessary piece of advice, because Misery did not know the answer.

An individual in a long black garment--the 'minister'--now whispered something to Miss Didlum, who was seated at the organ, whereupon she began to play, and the 'believers' began to sing, as loud as they could so as to drown the voices of the disturbers of the meeting, a song called 'Oh, that will be Glory for me!'

After this hymn the 'minister' invited a shabbily dressed 'brother'--a working-man member of the PSA, to say a 'few words', and the latter accordingly stepped into the centre of the ring and held forth as follows:

'My dear frens, I thank Gord tonight that I can stand 'ere tonight, hout in the hopen hair and tell hall you dear people tonight of hall wot's been done for ME. Ho my dear frens hi ham so glad tonight as I can stand 'ere tonight and say as hall my sins is hunder the blood

tonight and wot 'E's done for me 'E can do for you tonight. If you'll honly do as I done and just acknowledge yourself a lost sinner--'

'Yes! that's the honly way!' shouted Nimrod.

'Amen,' cried all the other believers.

'--If you'll honly come to 'im tonight in the same way as I done you'll see wot 'E's done for me 'E can do for you. Ho my dear frens, don't go puttin' it orf from day to day like a door turnin' on its 'inges, don't put orf to some more convenient time because you may never 'ave another chance. 'Im that bein' orfen reproved 'ardeneth 'is neck shall be suddenly cut orf and that without remedy. Ho come to 'im tonight, for 'Is name's sake and to 'Im we'll give hall the glory. Amen.'

'Amen,' said the believers, fervently, and then the man who was dressed in the long garment entreated all those who were not yet true believers--and doers--of the word to join earnestly and MEANINGLY in the singing of the closing hymn, which he was about to read out to them.

The Semi-drunk obligingly conducted as before, and the crowd faded away with the last notes of the music.