

Chapter 24

Ruth

As has already been stated, hitherto Slyme had passed the greater number of his evenings at home, but during the following three weeks a change took place in his habits in this respect. He now went out nearly every night and did not return until after ten o'clock. On meeting nights he always changed his attire, dressing himself as on Sundays, but on the other occasions he went out in his week-day clothes. Ruth often wondered where he went on those nights, but he never volunteered the information and she never asked him.

Easton had chummed up with a lot of the regular customers at the 'Cricketers', where he now spent most of his spare time, drinking beer, telling yarns or playing shove-ha'penny or hooks and rings. When he had no cash the Old Dear gave him credit until Saturday. At first, the place had not had much attraction for him, and he really went there only for the purpose of 'keeping in' with Crass: but after a time he found it a very congenial way of passing his evenings...

One evening, Ruth saw Slyme meet Crass as if by appointment and as the two men went away together she returned to her housework wondering what it meant.

Meantime, Crass and Slyme proceeded on their way down town. It was

about half past six o'clock: the shops and streets were brilliantly lighted, and as they went along they saw numerous groups of men talking together in a listless way. Most of them were artisans and labourers out of employment and evidently in no great hurry to go home. Some of them had neither tea nor fire to go to, and stayed away from home as long as possible so as not to be compelled to look upon the misery of those who were waiting for them there. Others hung about hoping against all probability that they might even yet--although it was so late--hear of some job to be started somewhere or other.

As they passed one of these groups they recognized and nodded to Newman and old Jack Linden, and the former left the others and came up to Crass and Slyme, who did not pause, so Newman walked along with them.

'Anything fresh in, Bob?' he asked.

'No; we ain't got 'ardly anything,' replied Crass. 'I reckon we shall finish up at "The Cave" next week, and then I suppose we shall all be stood orf. We've got several plumbers on, and I believe there's a little gas-fitting work in, but next to nothing in our line.'

'I suppose you don't know of any other firm what's got anything?'

'No, I don't, mate. Between you and me, I don't think any of 'em has; they're all in about the same fix.'

'I've not done anything since I left, you know,' said Newman, 'and

we've just about got as far as we can get, at home.'

Slyme and Crass said nothing in reply to this. They wished that Newman would take himself off, because they did not want him to know where they were going.

However, Newman continued to accompany them and an awkward silence succeeded. He seemed to wish to say something more, and they both guessed what it was. So they walked along as rapidly as possible in order not to give him any encouragement. At last Newman blurted out:

'I suppose--you don't happen--either of you--to have a tanner you could lend me? I'll let you have it back--when I get a job.'

'I ain't mate,' replied Crass. 'I'm sorry; if I 'ad one on me, you should 'ave it, with pleasure.'

Slyme also expressed his regret that he had no money with him, and at the corner of the next street Newman--ashamed of having asked--wished them 'good night' and went away.

Slyme and Crass hurried along and presently arrived at Rushton & Co.'s shop. The windows were lit up with electric light, displaying an assortment of wallpapers, gas and electric light fittings, glass shades, globes, tins of enamel, paint and varnish. Several framed show-cards--'Estimates Free', 'First class work only, at moderate charges', 'Only First Class Workmen Employed' and several others of the

same type. On one side wall of the window was a large shield-shaped board covered with black velvet on which a number of brass fittings for coffins were arranged. The shield was on an oak mount with the inscription: 'Funerals conducted on modern principles'.

Slyme waited outside while Crass went in. Mr Budd, the shopman, was down at the far end near the glazed partition which separated Mr Rushton's office from the front shop. As Crass entered, Budd--who was a pale-faced, unhealthy-looking, undersized youth about twenty years of age--looked round and, with a grimace, motioned him to walk softly. Crass paused, wondering what the other meant; but the shopman beckoned him to advance, grinning and winking and jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the office. Crass hesitated, fearing that possibly the miserable Budd had gone--or been driven--out of his mind; but as the latter continued to beckon and grin and point towards the office Crass screwed up his courage and followed him behind one of the showcases, and applying his eye to a crack in the woodwork of the partition indicated by Budd, he could see Mr Rushton in the act of kissing and embracing Miss Wade, the young lady clerk. Crass watched them for some time and then whispered to Budd to call Slyme, and when the latter came they all three took turns at peeping through the crack in the partition.

When they had looked their fill they came out from behind the showcase, almost bursting with suppressed merriment. Budd reached down a key from where it was hanging on a hook on the wall and gave it to Crass and the two resumed their interrupted journey. But before they had

proceeded a dozen yards from the shop, they were accosted by a short, elderly man with grey hair and a beard. This man looked about sixty-five years of age, and was very shabbily dressed. The ends of the sleeves of his coat were frayed and ragged, and the elbows were worn threadbare. His boots were patched, broken, and down at heel, and the knees and bottoms of the legs of his trousers were in the same condition as the sleeves of his coat. This man's name was Latham; he was a venetian blind maker and repairer. With his son, he was supposed to be 'in business' on his own account, but as most of their work was done for 'the trade', that is, for such firms as Rushton & Co., they would be more correctly described as men who did piecework at home.

He had been 'in business'--as he called it--for about forty years working, working, always working; and ever since his son became old enough to labour he had helped his father in the philanthropic task of manufacturing profits for the sweaters who employed them. They had been so busy running after work, and working for the benefit of others, that they had overlooked the fact that they were only earning a bare living for themselves and now, after forty years' hard labour, the old man was clothed in rags and on the verge of destitution.

'Is Rushton there?' he asked.

'Yes, I think so,' replied Crass, attempting to pass on; but the old man detained him.

'He promised to let us know about them blinds for "The Cave". We gave

'im a price for 'em about a month ago. In fact, we gave 'im two prices, because he said the first was too high. Five and six a set I asked 'im! take 'em right through the 'ole 'ouse! one with another--big and little. Two coats of paint, and new tapes and cords. That wasn't too much, was it?'

'No,' said Crass, walking on; 'that was cheap enough!'

HE said it was too much,' continued Latham. 'Said as 'e could get 'em done cheaper! But I say as no one can't do it and make a living.'

As he walked along, talking, between Crass and Slyme, the old man became very excited.

'But we 'adn't nothing to do to speak of, so my son told 'im we'd do 'em for five bob a set, and 'e said 'e'd let us know, but we ain't 'eard nothing from 'im yet, so I thought I'd try and see 'im tonight.'

Well, you'll find 'im in there now,' said Slyme with a peculiar look, and walking faster. 'Good night.'

'I won't take 'em on for no less!' cried the old man as he turned back. I've got my livin' to get, and my son's got 'is wife and little 'uns to keep. We can't work for nothing!'

'Certainly not,' said Crass, glad to get away at last. 'Good night, and good luck to you.'

As soon as they were out of hearing, they both burst out laughing at the old man's vehemence.

'Seemed quite upset about it,' said Slyme; and they laughed again.

They now left the main road and pursued their way through a number of badly lighted, mean-looking streets, and finally turning down a kind of alley, arrived at their destination. On one side of this street was a row of small houses; facing these were a number of buildings of a miscellaneous description--sheds and stables; and beyond these a plot of waste ground on which could be seen, looming weirdly through the dusk, a number of empty carts and waggons with their shafts resting on the ground or reared up into the air. Threading their way carefully through these and avoiding as much as possible the mud, pools of water, and rubbish which covered the ground, they arrived at a large gate fastened with a padlock. Applying the key, Crass swung back the gate and they found themselves in a large yard filled with building materials and plant, ladders, huge tressels, planks and beams of wood, hand-carts, and wheelbarrows, heaps of sand and mortar and innumerable other things that assumed strange fantastic shapes in the semi-darkness. Crates and packing cases, lengths of iron guttering and rain-pipes, old door-frames and other woodwork that had been taken from buildings where alterations had been made. And over all these things, a gloomy, indistinct and shapeless mass, rose the buildings and sheds that comprised Rushton & Co.'s workshop.

Crass struck a match, and Slyme, stooping down, drew a key from a crevice in the wall near one of the doors, which he unlocked, and they entered. Crass struck another match and lit the gas at the jointed bracket fixed to the wall. This was the paint-shop. At one end was a fireplace without a grate but with an iron bar fixed across the blackened chimney for the purpose of suspending pails or pots over the fire, which was usually made of wood on the hearthstone. All round the walls of the shop--which had once been whitewashed, but were now covered with smears of paint of every colour where the men had 'rubbed out' their brushes--were rows of shelves with kegs of paint upon them. In front of the window was a long bench covered with an untidy litter of dirty paint-pots, including several earthenware mixing vessels or mortars, the sides of these being thickly coated with dried paint. Scattered about the stone floor were a number of dirty pails, either empty or containing stale whitewash; and standing on a sort of low platform or shelf at one end of the shop were four large round tanks fitted with taps and labelled 'Boiled Oil', 'Turps', 'Linseed Oil', 'Turps Substitute'. The lower parts of the walls were discoloured with moisture. The atmosphere was cold and damp and foul with the sickening odours of the poisonous materials.

It was in this place that Bert--the apprentice--spent most of his time, cleaning out pots and pails, during slack periods when there were no jobs going on outside.

In the middle of the shop, under a two-armed gas pendant, was another table or bench, also thickly coated with old, dried paint, and by the

side of this were two large stands on which were hanging up to dry some of the lathes of the venetian blinds belonging to 'The Cave', which Crass and Slyme were painting--piecework--in their spare time. The remainder of the lathes were leaning against the walls or piled in stacks on the table.

Crass shivered with cold as he lit the two gas-jets. 'Make a bit of a fire, Alf, he said, 'while I gets the colour ready.'

Slyme went outside and presently returned with his arms full of old wood, which he smashed up and threw into the fireplace; then he took an empty paint-pot and filled it with turpentine from the big tank and emptied it over the wood. Amongst the pots on the mixing bench he found one full of old paint, and he threw this over the wood also, and in a few minutes he had made a roaring fire.

Meantime, Crass had prepared the paint and brushes and taken down the lathes from the drying frames. The two men now proceeded with the painting of the blinds, working rapidly, each lathe being hung on the wires of the drying frame after being painted. They talked freely as they worked, having no fear of being overheard by Rushton or Nimrod. This job was piecework, so it didn't matter whether they talked or not. They waxed hilarious over Old Latham's discomfiture and wondered what he would say if he could see them now. Then the conversation drifted to the subject of the private characters of the other men who were employed by Rushton & Co., and an impartial listener--had there been one there--would have been forced to come to the same conclusion as

Crass and Slyme did: namely, that they themselves were the only two decent fellows on the firm. There was something wrong or shady about everybody else. That bloke Barrington, for instance--it was a very funny business, you know, for a chap like 'im to be workin' as a labourer, it looked very suspicious. Nobody knowed exactly who 'e was or where 'e come from, but anyone could tell 'e'd been a toff. It was very certain 'e'd never bin brought up to work for 'is livin'. The most probable explanation was that 'e'd committed some crime and bin disowned by 'is family--pinched some money, or forged a cheque or something like that. Then there was that Sawkins. He was no class whatever. It was a well-known fact that he used to go round to Misery's house nearly every night to tell him every little thing that had happened on the job during the day! As for Payne, the foreman carpenter, the man was a perfect fool: he'd find out the difference if ever he got the sack from Rushton's and went to work for some other firm! He didn't understand his trade, and he couldn't make a coffin properly to save 'is life! Then there was that rotter Owen; there was a bright specimen for yer! An Atheist! didn't believe in no God or Devil or nothing else. A pretty state of things there would be if these Socialists could have their own way: for one thing, nobody would be allowed to work overtime!

Crass and Slyme worked and talked in this manner till ten o'clock, and then they extinguished the fire by throwing some water on it--put out the gas and locked up the shop and the yard, dropping the key of the latter into the letter-box at Rushton's office on their way home.

In this way they worked at the blinds nearly every night for three weeks.

When Saturday arrived the men working at 'The Cave' were again surprised that nobody was sacked, and they were divided in opinion as to the reason, some thinking that Nimrod was determined to keep them all on till the job was finished, so as to get it done as quickly as possible; and others boldly asserting the truth of a rumour that had been going about for several days that the firm had another big job in. Mr Sweater had bought another house; Rushton had to do it up, and they were all to be kept on to start this other work as soon as 'The Cave' was finished. Crass knew no more than anyone else and he maintained a discreet silence, but the fact that he did not contradict the rumour served to strengthen it. The only foundation that existed for this report was that Rushton and Misery had been seen looking over the garden gate of a large empty house near 'The Cave'. But although it had such an insignificant beginning, the rumour had grown and increased in detail and importance day by day. That very morning at breakfast-time, the man on the pail had announced that he had heard on the very best authority that Mr Sweater had sold all his interest in the great business that bore his name and was about to retire into private life, and that he intended to buy up all the house property in the neighbourhood of 'The Cave'. Another individual--one of the new hands--said that he had heard someone else--in a public house--say that Rushton was about to marry one of Sweater's daughters, and that Sweater

intended to give the couple a house to live in, as a wedding present: but the fact that Rushton was already married and the father of four children, rather knocked the bottom out of this story, so it was regretfully dismissed. Whatever the reason, the fact remained that nobody had been discharged, and when pay-time arrived they set out for the office in high spirits.

That evening, the weather being fine, Slyme went out as usual to his open-air meeting, but Easton departed from HIS usual custom of rushing off to the 'Cricketers' directly he had had his tea, having on this occasion promised to wait for Ruth and to go with her to do the marketing. The baby was left at home alone, asleep in the cradle.

By the time they had made all their purchases they had a fairly heavy load. Easton carried the string-bag containing the potatoes and other vegetables, and the meat, and Ruth, the groceries. On their way home, they had to pass the 'Cricketers' and just before they reached that part of their journey they met Mr and Mrs Crass, who were also out marketing. They both insisted on Easton and Ruth going in to have a drink with them. Ruth did not want to go, but she allowed herself to be persuaded for she could see that Easton was beginning to get angry with her for refusing. Crass had on a new overcoat and a new hat, with dark grey trousers and yellow boots, and a 'stand-up' collar with a bright blue tie. His wife--a fat, vulgar-looking, well-preserved woman about forty--was arrayed in a dark red 'motor' costume, with hat to match. Both Easton and Ruth--whose best clothes had all been pawned to raise the money to pay the poor rate--felt very mean and shabby before

them.

When they got inside, Crass paid for the first round of drinks, a pint of Old Six for himself; the same for Easton, half a pint for Mrs Easton and threepenny-worth of gin for Mrs Crass.

The Besotted Wretch was there, just finishing a game of hooks and rings with the Semi-drunk--who had called round on the day after he was thrown out, to apologize for his conduct to the Old Dear, and had since then become one of the regular customers. Philpot was absent. He had been there that afternoon, so the Old Dear said, but he had gone home about five o'clock, and had not been back since. He was almost sure to look in again in the course of the evening.

Although the house was not nearly so full as it would have been if times had been better, there was a large number of people there, for the 'Cricketers' was one of the most popular houses in the town.

Another thing that helped to make them busy was the fact that two other public houses in the vicinity had recently been closed up. There were people in all the compartments. Some of the seats in the public bar were occupied by women, some young and accompanied by their husbands, some old and evidently sodden with drink. In one corner of the public bar, drinking beer or gin with a number of young fellows, were three young girls who worked at a steam laundry in the neighbourhood. Two large, fat, gipsy-looking women: evidently hawkers, for on the floor beside them were two baskets containing bundles of flowers--chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies. There were also two

very plainly and shabbily dressed women about thirty-five years of age, who were always to be found there on Saturday nights, drinking with any man who was willing to pay for them. The behaviour of these two women was very quiet and their manners unobtrusive. They seemed to realize that they were there only on sufferance, and their demeanour was shamefaced and humble.

The majority of the guests were standing. The floor was sprinkled with sawdust which served to soak up the beer that slopped out of the glasses of those whose hands were too unsteady to hold them upright. The air was foul with the smell of beer, spirits and tobacco smoke, and the uproar was deafening, for nearly everyone was talking at the same time, their voices clashing discordantly with the strains of the Polyphone, which was playing 'The Garden of Your Heart'. In one corner a group of men convulsed with laughter at the details of a dirty story related by one of their number. Several impatient customers were banging the bottoms of their empty glasses or pewters on the counter and shouting their orders for more beer. Oaths, curses and obscene expressions resounded on every hand, coming almost as frequently from the women as the men. And over all the rattle of money, the ringing of the cash register. The clinking and rattling of the glasses and pewter pots as they were being washed, and the gurgling noise made by the beer as it poured into the drinking vessels from the taps of the beer engine, whose handles were almost incessantly manipulated by the barman, the Old Dear and the glittering landlady, whose silken blouse, bejewelled hair, ears, neck and fingers scintillated gloriously in the blaze of the gaslight.

The scene was so novel and strange to Ruth that she felt dazed and bewildered. Previous to her marriage she had been a total abstainer, but since then she had occasionally taken a glass of beer with Easton for company's sake with their Sunday dinner at home; but it was generally Easton who went out and bought the beer in a jug. Once or twice she had bought it herself at an Off Licence beer-shop near where they lived, but she had never before been in a public house to drink. She was so confused and ill at ease that she scarcely heard or understood Mrs Crass, who talked incessantly, principally about their other residents in North Street where they both resided; and about Mr Crass. She also promised Ruth to introduce her presently--if he came in, as he was almost certain to do--to Mr Partaker, one of her two lodgers a most superior young man, who had been with them now for over three years and would not leave on any account. In fact, he had been their lodger in their old house, and when they moved he came with them to North Street, although it was farther away from his place of business than their former residence. Mrs Crass talked a lot more of the same sort of stuff, to which Ruth listened like one in a dream, and answered with an occasional yes or no.

Meantime, Crass and Easton--the latter had deposited the string-bag on the seat at Ruth's side--and the Semi-drunk and the Besotted Wretch, arranged to play a match of Hooks and Rings, the losers to pay for drinks for all the party, including the two women. Crass and the Semi-drunk tossed up for sides. Crass won and picked the Besotted Wretch, and the game began. It was a one-sided affair from the first,

for Easton and the Semi-drunk were no match for the other two. The end of it was that Easton and his partner had to pay for the drinks. The four men had a pint each of four ale, and Mrs Crass had another threepennyworth of gin. Ruth protested that she did not want any more to drink, but the others ridiculed this, and both the Besotted Wretch and the Semi-drunk seemed to regard her unwillingness as a personal insult, so she allowed them to get her another half-pint of beer, which she was compelled to drink, because she was conscious that the others were watching her to see that she did so.

The Semi-drunk now suggested a return match. He wished to have his revenge. He was a little out of practice, he said, and was only just getting his hand in as they were finishing the other game. Crass and his partner readily assented, and in spite of Ruth's whispered entreaty that they should return home without further delay, Easton insisted on joining the game.

Although they played more carefully than before, and notwithstanding the fact that the Besotted Wretch was very drunk, Easton and his partner were again beaten and once more had to pay for the drinks. The men had a pint each as before. Mrs Crass--upon whom the liquor so far seemed to have no effect--had another threepennyworth of gin; and Ruth consented to take another glass of beer on condition that Easton would come away directly their drinks were finished. Easton agreed to do so, but instead of keeping his word he began to play a four-handed game of shove-ha'penny with the other three, the sides and stakes being arranged as before.

The liquor was by this time beginning to have some effect upon Ruth: she felt dizzy and confused. Whenever it was necessary to reply to Mrs Crass's talk she found some difficulty in articulating the words and she knew she was not answering very intelligently. Even when Mrs Crass introduced her to the interesting Mr Partaker, who arrived about this time, she was scarcely able to collect herself sufficiently to decline that fascinating gentleman's invitation to have another drink with himself and Mrs Crass.

After a time a kind of terror took possession of her, and she resolved that if Easton would not come when he had finished the game he was playing, she would go home without him.

Meantime the game of shove-ha'penny proceeded merrily, the majority of the male guests crowding round the board, applauding or censuring the players as occasion demanded. The Semi-drunk was in high glee, for Crass was not much of a hand at this game, and the Besotted Wretch, although playing well, was not able to make up for his partner's want of skill. As the game drew near its end and it became more and more certain that his opponents would be defeated, the joy of the Semi-drunk was unbounded, and he challenged them to make it double or quits--a generous offer which they wisely declined, and shortly afterwards, seeing that their position was hopeless, they capitulated and prepared to pay the penalty of the vanquished.

Crass ordered the drinks and the Besotted Wretch--half the damage--a

pint of four ale for each of the men and the same as before for the ladies. The Old Dear executed the order, but by mistake, being very busy, he served two 'threes' of gin instead of one. Ruth did not want any more at all, but she was afraid to say so, and she did not like to make any fuss about it being the wrong drink, especially as they all assured her that the spirits would do her more good than beer. She did not want either; she wanted to get away, and would have liked to empty the stuff out of the glass on the floor, but she was afraid that Mrs Crass or one of the others might see her doing so, and there might be some trouble about it. Anyway, it seemed easier to drink this small quantity of spirits and water than a big glass of beer, the very thought of which now made her feel ill. She drank the stuff which Easton handed to her at a single draught and, handing back the empty glass with a shudder, stood up resolutely.

'Are you coming home now? You promised you would,' she said.

'All right: presently,' replied Easton. 'There's plenty of time; it's not nine yet.'

'That doesn't matter; it's quite late enough. You know we've left the child at home alone in the house. You promised you'd come as soon as you'd finished that other game.'

'All right, all right,' answered Easton impatiently. 'Just wait a minute, I want to see this, and then I'll come.'

'This' was a most interesting problem propounded by Crass, who had arranged eleven matches side by side on the shove-ha'penny board. The problem was to take none away and yet leave only nine. Nearly all the men in the bar were crowding round the shove-ha'penny board, some with knitted brows and drunken gravity trying to solve the puzzle and others waiting curiously for the result. Easton crossed over to see how it was done, and as none of the crowd were able to do the trick, Crass showed that it could be accomplished by simply arranging the eleven matches so as to form the word NINE. Everybody said it was very good indeed, very clever and interesting. But the Semi-drunk and the Besotted Wretch were reminded by this trick of several others equally good, and they proceeded to do them; and then the men had another pint each all round as a reviver after the mental strain of the last few minutes.

Easton did not know any tricks himself, but he was an interested spectator of those done by several others until Ruth came over and touched his arm.

'Aren't you coming?'

'Wait a minute, can't you?' cried Easton roughly. 'What's your hurry?'

'I don't want to stay here any longer,' said Ruth, hysterically. 'You said you'd come as soon as you saw that trick. If you don't come, I shall go home by myself. I don't want to stay in this place any longer.'

'Well, go by yourself if you want to!' shouted Easton fiercely, pushing her away from him. 'I shall stop 'ere as long as I please, and if you don't like it you can do the other thing.'

Ruth staggered and nearly fell from the force of the push he gave her, and the man turned again to the table to watch the Semi-drunk, who was arranging six matches so as to form the numeral XII, and who said he could prove that this was equal to a thousand.

Ruth waited a few minutes longer, and then as Easton took no further notice of her, she took up the string-bag and the other parcels, and without staying to say good night to Mrs Crass--who was earnestly conversing with the interesting Partaker--she with some difficulty opened the door and went out into the street. The cold night air felt refreshing and sweet after the foul atmosphere of the public house, but after a little while she began to feel faint and dizzy, and was conscious also that she was walking unsteadily, and she fancied that people stared at her strangely as they passed. The parcels felt very heavy and awkward to carry, and the string-bag seemed as if it were filled with lead.

Although under ordinary circumstances it was only about ten minutes' walk home from here, she resolved to go by one of the trams which passed by the end of North Street. With this intention, she put down her bag on the pavement at the stopping-place, and waited, resting her hand on the iron pillar at the corner of the street, where a little

crowd of people were standing evidently with the same object as herself. Two trains passed without stopping, for they were already full of passengers, a common circumstance on Saturday nights. The next one stopped, and several persons alighted, and then ensued a fierce struggle amongst the waiting crowd for the vacant seats. Men and women pushed, pulled and almost fought, shoving their fists and elbows into each other's sides and breasts and faces. Ruth was quickly thrust aside and nearly knocked down, and the tram, having taken aboard as many passengers as it had accommodation for, passed on. She waited for the next one, and the same scene was enacted with the same result for her, and then, reflecting that if she had not stayed for these trains she might have been home by now, she determined to resume her walk. The parcels felt heavier than ever, and she had not proceeded very far before she was compelled to put the bag down again upon the pavement, outside an empty house.

Leaning against the railings, she felt very tired and ill. Everything around her--the street, the houses, the traffic--seemed vague and shadowy and unreal. Several people looked curiously at her as they passed, but by this time she was scarcely conscious of their scrutiny.

Slyme had gone that evening to the usual 'open-air' conducted by the Shining Light Mission. The weather being fine, they had a most successful meeting, the disciples, including Hunter, Rushton, Sweater, Didlum, and Mrs Starvem--Ruth's former mistress--assembled in great force so as to be able to deal more effectively with any infidels or hired critics or drunken scoffers who might try to disturb the

proceedings; and--possibly as an evidence of how much real faith there was in them--they had also arranged to have a police officer in attendance, to protect them from what they called the 'Powers of Darkness'. One might be excused for thinking that--if they really believed--they would have relied rather upon those powers of Light which they professed to represent on this planet to protect them without troubling to call in the aid of such a 'worldly' force as the police. However, it came to pass that on this occasion the only infidels present were those who were conducting the meeting, but as these consisted for the most part of members of the chapel, it will be seen that the infidel fraternity was strongly represented.

On his way home after the meeting Slyme had to pass by the 'Cricketers' and as he drew near the place he wondered if Easton was there, but he did not like to go and look in, because he was afraid someone might see him coming away and perhaps think he had been in to drink. Just as he arrived opposite the house another man opened the door of the public bar and entered, enabling Slyme to catch a momentary glimpse of the interior, where he saw Easton and Crass with a number of others who were strangers to him, laughing and drinking together.

Slyme hurried away; it had turned very cold, and he was anxious to get home. As he approached the place where the trams stopped to take up passengers and saw that there was a tram in sight he resolved to wait for it and ride home: but when the tram arrived and there were only one or two seats vacant, and although he did his best to secure one of these he was unsuccessful, and after a moment's hesitation he decided

that it would be quicker to walk than to wait for the next one. He accordingly resumed his journey, but he had not gone very far when he saw a small crowd of people on the pavement on the other side of the road outside an unoccupied house, and although he was in a hurry to get home he crossed over to see what was the matter. There were about twenty people standing there, and in the centre close to the railing there were three or four women whom Slyme could not see although he could hear their voices.

'What's up?' he inquired of a man on the edge of the crowd.

'Oh, nothing much,' returned the other. 'Some young woman; she's either ill, come over faint, or something--or else she's had a drop too much.'

'Quite a respectable-looking young party, too,' said another man.

Several young fellows in the crowd were amusing themselves by making suggestive jokes about the young woman and causing some laughter by the expressions of mock sympathy.

'Doesn't anyone know who she is?' said the second man who had spoken in reply to Slyme's inquiry.

'No,' said a woman who was standing a little nearer the middle of the crowd. 'And she won't say where she lives.'

'She'll be all right now she's had that glass of soda,' said another man, elbowing his way out of the crowd. As this individual came out, Slyme managed to work himself a little further into the group of people, and he uttered an involuntary cry of astonishment as he caught sight of Ruth, very pale, and looking very ill, as she stood clasping one of the railings with her left hand and holding the packages of groceries in the other. She had by this time recovered sufficiently to feel overwhelmed with shame and confusion before the crowd of strangers who hemmed her in on every side, and some of whom she could hear laughing and joking about her. It was therefore with a sensation of intense relief and gratitude that she saw Slyme's familiar face and heard his friendly voice as he forced his way through to her side.

'I can walk home all right now,' she stammered in reply to his anxious questioning. 'If you wouldn't mind carrying some of these things for me.'

He insisted on taking all the parcels, and the crowd, having jumped to the conclusion that he was the young woman's husband began to dwindle away, one of the jokers remarking 'It's all over!' in a loud voice as he took himself off.

It was only about seven minutes' walk home from there, and as the streets along which they had to pass were not very brilliantly lighted, Ruth was able to lean on Slyme's arm most of the way. When they arrived home, after she had removed her hat, he made her sit down in the armchair by the fire, which was burning brightly, and the kettle

was singing on the hob, for she had banked up the fire with cinders and small coal before she went out.

The baby was still asleep in the cradle, but his slumbers had evidently not been of the most restful kind, for he had kicked all the bedclothes off him and was lying all uncovered. Ruth obeyed passively when Slyme told her to sit down, and, lying back languidly in the armchair, she watched him through half-closed eyes and with a slight flush on her face as he deftly covered the sleeping child with the bedclothes and settled him more comfortably in the cot.

Slyme now turned his attention to the fire, and as he placed the kettle upon it he remarked: 'As soon as the water boils I'll make you some strong tea.'

During their walk home she had acquainted Slyme with the cause of her being in the condition in which he found her in the street, and as she reclined in the armchair, drowsily watching him, she wondered what would have happened to her if he had not passed by when he did.

'Are you feeling better?' he asked, looking down at her.

'Yes, thanks. I feel quite well now; but I'm afraid I've given you a lot of trouble.'

'No, you haven't. Nothing I can do for you is a trouble to me. But don't you think you'd better take your jacket off? Here, let me help

you.'

It took a very long time to get this jacket off, because whilst he was helping her, Slyme kissed her repeatedly and passionately as she lay limp and unresisting in his arms.