

Chapter 26

The Slaughter

During the afternoon, Rushton and Sweater visited the house, the latter having an appointment to meet there a gardener to whom he wished to give instructions concerning the laying out of the grounds, which had been torn up for the purpose of putting in the new drains. Sweater had already arranged with the head gardener of the public park to steal some of the best plants from that place and have them sent up to 'The Cave'. These plants had been arriving in small lots for about a week. They must have been brought there either in the evening after the men left off or very early in the morning before they came. The two gentlemen remained at the house for about half an hour and as they went away the mournful sound of the Town Hall bell--which was always tolled to summon meetings of the Council--was heard in the distance, and the hands remarked to each other that another robbery was about to be perpetrated.

Hunter did not come to the job again that day: he had been sent by Rushton to price some work for which the firm was going to tender an estimate. There was only one person who felt any regret at his absence, and that was Mrs White--Bert's mother, who had been working at 'The Cave' for several days, scrubbing the floors. As a rule, Hunter paid her wages every night, and on this occasion she happened to need the money even more than usual. As leaving off time drew near, she

mentioned the matter to Crass, who advised her to call at the office on her way home and ask the young lady clerk for the money. As Hunter did not appear, she followed the foreman's advice.

When she reached the shop Rushton was just coming out. She explained to him what she wanted and he instructed Mr Budd to tell Miss Wade to pay her. The shopman accordingly escorted her to the office at the back of the shop, and the young lady book-keeper--after referring to former entries to make quite certain of the amount, paid her the sum that Hunter had represented as her wages, the same amount that Miss Wade had on the previous occasions given him to pay the charwoman. When Mrs White got outside she found that she held in her hand half a crown instead of the two shillings she usually received from Mr Hunter. At first she felt inclined to take it back, but after some hesitation she thought it better to wait until she saw Hunter, when she could tell him about it; but the next morning when she saw the disciple at 'The Cave' he broached the subject first, and told her that Miss Wade had made a mistake. And that evening when he paid her, he deducted the sixpence from the usual two shillings.

The lecture announced by Philpot was not delivered. Anxiously awaiting the impending slaughter the men kept tearing into it as usual, for they generally keep working in the usual way, each one trying to outdo the others so as not to lose his chance of being one of the lucky one...

Misery now went round and informed all the men with the exception of Crass, Owen, Slyme and Sawkins--that they would have to stand off that

night. He told them that the firm had several jobs in view--work they had tendered for and hoped to get, and said they could look round after Christmas and he might--possibly--be able to start some of them again. They would be paid at the office tomorrow--Saturday--at one o'clock as usual, but if any of them wished they could have their money tonight. The men thanked him, and most of them said they would come for their wages at the usual pay-time, and would call round as he suggested, after the holidays, to see if there was anything to do.

In all, fifteen men--including Philpot, Harlow, Easton and Ned Dawson, were to 'stand off' that night. They took their dismissal stolidly, without any remark, some of them even with an affectation of indifference, but there were few attempts at conversation afterwards. The little work that remained to be done they did in silence, every man oppressed by the same terror--the dread of the impending want, the privation and unhappiness that they knew they and their families would have to suffer during the next few months.

Bundy and his mate Dawson were working in the kitchen fixing the new range in place of the old one which they had taken out. They had been engaged on this job all day, and their hands and faces and clothes were covered with soot, which they had also contrived to smear and dab all over the surfaces of the doors and other woodwork in the room, much to the indignation of Crass and Slyme, who had to wash it all off before they could put on the final coat of paint.

'You can't help makin' a little mess on a job of this kind, you know,'

remarked Bundy, as he was giving the finishing touches to the work, making good the broken parts of the wall with cement, whilst his mate was clearing away the debris.

'Yes; but there's no need to claw 'old of the bloody doors every time you goes in and out,' snarled Crass, 'and you could 'ave put yer tools on the floor instead of makin' a bench of the dresser.'

'You can 'ave the bloody place all to yerself in about five minutes,' replied Bundy, as he assisted to lift a sack of cement weighing about two hundredweight on to Dawson's buck. 'We're finished now.'

When they had cleared away all the dirt and fragments of bricks and mortar, while Crass and Slyme proceeded with the painting, Bundy and Dawson loaded up their hand-cart with the old range and the bags of unused cement and plaster, which they took back to the yard. Meantime, Misery was wandering about the house and pounds like an evil spirit seeking rest and finding none. He stood for some time gloomily watching the four gardeners, who were busily at work laying strips of turf, mowing the lawn, rolling the gravel paths and trimming the trees and bushes. The boy Bert, Philpot, Harlow, Easton and Sawkins were loading a hand-cart with ladders and empty paint-pots to return to the yard. Just as they were setting out, Misery stopped them, remarking that the cart was not half loaded--he said it would take a month to get all the stuff away if they went on like that; so by his directions they placed another long ladder on top of the pile and once more started on their way, but before they had gone two dozen yards one of the wheels

of the cart collapsed and the load was scattered over the roadway. Bert was at the same side of the cart as the wheel that broke and he was thrown violently to the ground, where he lay half stunned, in the midst of the ladders and planks. When they got him out they were astonished to find that, thanks to the special Providence that watches over all small boys, he was almost unhurt--just a little dazed, that was all; and by the time Sawkins returned with another cart, Bert was able to help to gather up the fallen paint-pots and to accompany the men with the load to the yard. At the corner of the road they paused to take a last look at the 'job'.

'There it stands!' said Harlow, tragically, extending his arm towards the house. 'There it stands! A job that if they'd only have let us do it properly, couldn't 'ave been done with the number of 'ands we've 'ad, in less than four months; and there it is, finished, messed up, slobbered over and scamped, in nine weeks!'

'Yes, and now we can all go to 'ell,' said Philpot, gloomily.

At the yard they found Bundy and his mate, Ned Dawson, who helped them to hang up the ladders in their usual places. Philpot was glad to get out of assisting to do this, for he had contracted a rather severe attack of rheumatism when working outside at the 'Cave'. Whilst the others were putting the ladders away he assisted Bert to carry the paint-pots and buckets into the paint shop, and while there he filled a small medicine bottle he had brought with him for the purpose, with turpentine from the tank. He wanted this stuff to rub into his

shoulders and legs, and as he secreted the bottle in the inner pocket of his coat, he muttered: 'This is where we gets some of our own back.'

They took the key of the yard to the office and as they separated to go home Bundy suggested that the best thing they could do would be to sew their bloody mouths up for a few months, because there was not much probability of their getting another job until about March.

The next morning while Crass and Slyme were finishing inside, Owen wrote the two gates. On the front entrance 'The Cave' and on the back 'Tradesmens Entrance', in gilded letters. In the meantime, Sawkins and Bert made several journeys to the Yard with the hand-cart.

Crass--working in the kitchen with Slyme--was very silent and thoughtful. Ever since the job was started, every time Mr Sweater had visited the house to see what progress was being made, Crass had been grovelling to him in the hope of receiving a tip when the work was finished. He had been very careful to act upon any suggestions that Sweater had made from time to time and on several occasions had taken a lot of trouble to get just the right tints of certain colours, making up a number of different shades and combinations, and doing parts of the skirtings or mouldings of rooms in order that Mr Sweater might see exactly--before they went on with it--what it would look like when finished. He made a great pretence of deferring to Sweater's opinion, and assured him that he did not care how much trouble he took as long as he--Sweater--was pleased. In fact, it was no trouble at all: it was a pleasure. As the work neared completion, Crass began to speculate

upon the probable amount of the donation he would receive as the reward of nine weeks of cringing, fawning, abject servility. He thought it quite possible that he might get a quid: it would not be too much, considering all the trouble he had taken. It was well worth it. At any rate, he felt certain that he was sure to get ten bob; a gentleman like Mr Sweater would never have the cheek to offer less. The more he thought about it the more improbable it appeared that the amount would be less than a quid, and he made up his mind that whatever he got he would take good care that none of the other men knew anything about it. HE was the one who had had all the worry of the job, and he was the only one entitled to anything there was to be had. Besides, even if he got a quid, by the time you divided that up amongst a dozen--or even amongst two or three--it would not be worth having.

At about eleven o'clock Mr Sweater arrived and began to walk over the house, followed by Crass, who carried a pot of paint and a small brush and made believe to be 'touching up' and finishing off parts of the work. As Sweater went from one room to another Crass repeatedly placed himself in the way in the hope of being spoken to, but Sweater took no notice of him whatever. Once or twice Crass's heart began to beat quickly as he furtively watched the great man and saw him thrust his thumb and finger into his waistcoat pocket, but on each occasion Sweater withdrew his hand with nothing in it. After a while, observing that the gentleman was about to depart without having spoken, Crass determined to break the ice himself.

'It's a little better weather we're 'avin' now, sir.'

'Yes,' replied Sweater.

'I was beginnin' to be afraid as I shouldn't be hable to git heverything finished in time for you to move in before Christmas, sir,' Crass continued, 'but it's hall done now, sir.'

Sweater made no reply.

'I've kept the fire agoin' in hall the rooms has you told me, sir,' resumed Crass after a pause. 'I think you'll find as the place is nice and dry, sir; the honly places as is a bit damp is the kitchen and scullery and the other rooms in the basement, sir, but of course that's nearly halways the case, sir, when the rooms is partly hunderground, sir.'

'But of course it don't matter so much about the basement, sir, because it's honly the servants what 'as to use it, sir, and even down there it'll be hall right hin the summer, sir.'

One would scarcely think, from the contemptuous way in which he spoke of 'servants' that Crass's own daughter was 'in service', but such was the case.

'Oh, yes, there's no doubt about that,' replied Sweater as he moved towards the door; 'there's no doubt it will be dry enough in the summer. Good morning.'

'Good morning to YOU, sir,' said Crass, following him. 'I 'opes as you're pleased with all the work, sir; everything satisfactory, sir.'

'Oh, yes. I think it looks very nice; very nice indeed; I'm very pleased with it,' said Sweater affably. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning, sir,' replied the foreman with a sickly smile as Sweater departed.

When the other was gone, Crass sat down dejectedly on the bottom step of the stairs, overwhelmed with the ruin of his hopes and expectations. He tried to comfort himself with the reflection that all hope was not lost, because he would have to come to the house again on Monday and Tuesday to fix the venetian blinds; but all the same he could not help thinking that it was only a very faint hope, for he felt that if Sweater had intended giving anything he would have done so today; and it was very improbable that he would see Sweater on Monday or Tuesday at all, for the latter did not usually visit the job in the early part of the week. However, Crass made up his mind to hope for the best, and, pulling himself together, he presently returned to the kitchen, where he found Slyme and Sawkins waiting for him. He had not mentioned his hopes of a tip to either of them, but they did not need any telling and they were both determined to have their share of whatever he got. They eyed him keenly as he entered.

'What did 'e give yer?' demanded Sawkins, going straight to the point.

'Give me?' replied Crass. 'Nothing!'

Slyme laughed in a sneering, incredulous way, but Sawkins was inclined to be abusive. He averred that he had been watching Crass and Sweater and had seen the latter put his thumb and finger into his waistcoat pocket as he walked into the dining-room, followed by Crass. It took the latter a long time to convince his two workmates of the truth of his own account, but he succeeded at last, and they all three agreed that Old Sweater was a sanguinary rotter, and they lamented over the decay of the good old-fashioned customs.

'Why, at one time o' day,' said Crass, 'only a few years ago, if you went to a gentleman's 'ouse to paint one or two rooms you could always be sure of a bob or two when you'd finished.'

By half past twelve everything was squared up, and, having loaded up the hand-cart with all that remained of the materials, dirty paint-pots and plant, they all set out together for the yard, to put all the things away before going to the office for their money. Sawkins took the handle of the cart, Slyme and Crass walked at one side and Owen and Bert at the other. There was no need to push, for the road was downhill most of the way; so much so that they had all to help to hold back the cart, which travelled so rapidly that Bert found it difficult to keep pace with the others and frequently broke into a trot to recover lost ground, and Crass--being fleshy and bloated with beer, besides being unused to much exertion--began to perspire and soon

appealed to the others not to let it go so fast--there was no need to get done before one o'clock.