

Chapter 27

The March of the Imperialists

It was an unusually fine day for the time of year, and as they passed along the Grand Parade--which faced due south--they felt quite warm. The Parade was crowded with richly dressed and bejewelled loafers, whose countenances in many instances bore unmistakable signs of drunkenness and gluttony. Some of the females had tried to conceal the ravages of vice and dissipation by coating their faces with powder and paint. Mingling with and part of this crowd were a number of well-fed-looking individuals dressed in long garments of black cloth of the finest texture, and broad-brimmed soft felt hats. Most of these persons had gold rings on their soft white fingers and glove-like kid or calfskin boots on their feet. They belonged to the great army of imposters who obtain an easy living by taking advantage of the ignorance and simplicity of their fellow-men, and pretending to be the 'followers' and 'servants' of the lowly Carpenter of Nazareth--the Man of Sorrows, who had not where to lay His head.

None of these black-garbed 'disciples' were associating with the groups of unemployed carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers, and painters who stood here and there in the carriage-way dressed in mean and shabby clothing and with faces pale with privation. Many of these latter were known to our friends with the cart, and nodded to them as they passed. Now and then some of them came over and walked a little distance by

their side, inquiring whether there was any news of another job at Rushton's.

When they were about half-way down the Parade, just near the Fountain, Crass and his mates encountered a number of men on whose arms were white bands with the word 'Collector' in black letters. They carried collecting boxes and accosted the people in the street, begging for money for the unemployed. These men were a kind of skirmishers for the main body, which could be seen some distance behind.

As the procession drew near, Sawkins steered the cart into the kerb and halted as they went past. There were about three hundred men altogether, marching four abreast. They carried three large white banners with black letters, 'Thanks to our Subscribers' 'In aid of Genuine Unemployed', 'The Children must be Fed'. Although there were a number of artisans in the procession, the majority of the men belonged to what is called the unskilled labourer class. The skilled artisan does not as a rule take part in such a procession except as a very last resource... And all the time he strives to keep up an appearance of being well-to-do, and would be highly indignant if anyone suggested that he was really in a condition of abject, miserable poverty. Although he knows that his children are often not so well fed as are the pet dogs and cats of his 'betters', he tries to bluff his neighbours into thinking that he has some mysterious private means of which they know nothing, and conceals his poverty as if it were a crime. Most of this class of men would rather starve than beg. Consequently not more than a quarter of the men in the procession were

skilled artisans; the majority were labourers.

There was also a sprinkling of those unfortunate outcasts of society--tramps and destitute, drunken loafers. If the self-righteous hypocrites who despise these poor wretches had been subjected to the same conditions, the majority of them would inevitably have become the same as these.

Haggard and pale, shabbily or raggedly dressed, their boots broken and down at heel, they slouched past. Some of them stared about with a dazed or half-wild expression, but most of them walked with downcast eyes or staring blankly straight in front of them. They appeared utterly broken-spirited, hopeless and ashamed...

'Anyone can see what THEY are,' sneered Crass, 'there isn't fifty genuine tradesmen in the whole crowd, and most of 'em wouldn't work if they 'ad the offer of it.'

'That's just what I was thinkin',' agreed Sawkins with a laugh.

'There will be plenty of time to say that when they have been offered work and have refused to do it,' said Owen.

'This sort of thing does the town a lot of 'arm,' remarked Slyme; 'it oughtn't to be allowed; the police ought to stop it. It's enough to drive all the gentry out of the place!'

'Bloody disgraceful, I call it,' said Crass, 'marchin' along the Grand Parade on a beautiful day like this, just at the very time when most of the gentry is out enjoyin' the fresh hair.'

'I suppose you think they ought to stay at home and starve quietly,' said Owen. 'I don't see why these men should care what harm they do to the town; the town doesn't seem to care much what becomes of THEM.'

'Do you believe in this sort of thing, then?' asked Slyme.

'No; certainly not. I don't believe in begging as a favour for what one is entitled to demand as a right from the thieves who have robbed them and who are now enjoying the fruits of their labour. From the look of shame on their faces you might think that they were the criminals instead of being the victims.'

'Well you must admit that most of them is very inferior men,' said Crass with a self-satisfied air. 'There's very few mechanics amongst em.'

'What about it if they are? What difference does that make?' replied Owen. 'They're human beings, and they have as much right to live as anyone else. What is called unskilled labour is just as necessary and useful as yours or mine. I am no more capable of doing the "unskilled" labour that most of these men do than most of them would be capable of doing my work.'

'Well, if they was skilled tradesmen, they might find it easier to get a job,' said Crass.

Owen laughed offensively.

'Do you mean to say you think that if all these men could be transformed into skilled carpenters, plasterers, bricklayers, and painters, that it would be easier for all those other chaps whom we passed a little while ago to get work? Is it possible that you or any other sane man can believe anything so silly as that?'

Crass did not reply.

'If there is not enough work to employ all the mechanics whom we see standing idle about the streets, how would it help these labourers in the procession if they could all become skilled workmen?'

Still Crass did not answer, and neither Slyme nor Sawkins came to his assistance.

'If that could be done,' continued Owen, 'it would simply make things worse for those who are already skilled mechanics. A greater number of skilled workers--keener competition for skilled workmen's jobs--a larger number of mechanics out of employment, and consequently, improved opportunities for employers to reduce wages. That is probably the reason why the Liberal Party--which consists for the most part of exploiters of labour--procured the great Jim Scalds to tell us that

improved technical education is the remedy for unemployment and poverty.'

'I suppose you think Jim Scalds is a bloody fool, the same as everybody else what don't see things YOUR way?' said Sawkins.

'I should think he was a fool if I thought he believed what he says. But I don't think he believes it. He says it because he thinks the majority of the working classes are such fools that they will believe him. If he didn't think that most of us are fools he wouldn't tell us such a yarn as that.'

'And I suppose you think as 'is opinion ain't far wrong,' snarled Crass.

'We shall be better able to judge of that after the next General Election,' replied Owen. 'If the working classes again elect a majority of Liberal or Tory landlords and employers to rule over them, it will prove that Jim Scalds' estimate of their intelligence is about right.'

'Well, anyhow,' persisted Slyme, 'I don't think it's a right thing that they should be allowed to go marchin' about like that--driving visitors out of the town.'

'What do you think they ought to do, then?' demanded Owen.

'Let the b--rs go to the bloody workhouse!' shouted Crass.

'But before they could be received there they would have to be absolutely homeless and destitute, and then the ratepayers would have to keep them. It costs about twelve shillings a week for each inmate, so it seems to me that it would be more sensible and economical for the community to employ them on some productive work.'

They had by this time arrived at the yard. The steps and ladders were put away in their places and the dirty paint-pots and pails were placed in the paint-shop on the bench and on the floor. With what had previously been brought back there were a great many of these things, all needing to be cleaned out, so Bert at any rate stood in no danger of being out of employment for some time to come.

When they were paid at the office, Owen on opening his envelope found it contained as usual, a time sheet for the next week, which meant that he was not 'stood off' although he did not know what work there would be to do. Crass and Slyme were both to go to the 'Cave' to fix the venetian blinds, and Sawkins also was to come to work as usual.