

Chapter 31

The Deserter

About the end of January, Slyme left Easton's. The latter had not succeeded in getting anything to do since the work at 'The Cave' was finished, and latterly the quality of the food had been falling off. The twelve shillings Slyme paid for his board and lodging was all that Ruth had to keep house with. She had tried to get some work to do herself, but generally without success; there were one or two jobs that she might have had if she had been able to give her whole time to them, but of course that was not possible; the child and the housework had to be attended to, and Slyme's meals had to be prepared. Nevertheless, she contrived to get away several times when she had a chance of earning a few shillings by doing a day's charring for some lady or other, and then she left everything in such order at home that Easton was able to manage all right while she was away. On these occasions, she usually left the baby with Owen's wife, who was an old schoolmate of hers. Nora was the more willing to render her this service because Frankie used to be so highly delighted whenever it happened. He never tired of playing with the child, and for several days afterwards he used to worry his mother with entreaties to buy a baby of their own.

Easton earned a few shillings occasionally; now and then he got a job to clean windows, and once or twice he did a few days' or hours' work with some other painter who had been fortunate enough to get a little

job 'on his own'--such as a ceiling to wash and whiten, or a room or two to paint; but such jobs were few.

Sometimes, when they were very hard up, they sold something; the Bible that used to lie on the little table in the bay window was one of the first things to be parted with. Ruth erased the inscription from the fly-leaf and then they sold the book at a second-hand shop for two shillings. As time went on, they sold nearly everything that was saleable, except of course, the things that were obtained on the hire system.

Slyme could see that they were getting very much into debt and behind with the rent, and on two occasions already Easton had borrowed five shillings from him, which he might never be able to pay back. Another thing was that Slyme was always in fear that Ruth--who had never wholly abandoned herself to wrongdoing--might tell Easton what had happened; more than once she had talked of doing so, and the principal reason why she refrained was that she knew that even if he forgave her, he could never think the same of her as before. Slyme repeatedly urged this view upon her, pointing out that no good could result from such a confession.

Latterly the house had become very uncomfortable. It was not only that the food was bad and that sometimes there was no fire, but Ruth and Easton were nearly always quarrelling about something or other. She scarcely spoke to Slyme at all, and avoided sitting at the table with him whenever possible. He was in constant dread that Easton might

notice her manner towards him, and seek for some explanation. Altogether the situation was so unpleasant that Slyme determined to clear out. He made the excuse that he had been offered a few weeks' work at a place some little distance outside the town. After he was gone they lived for several weeks in semi-starvation on what credit they could get and by selling the furniture or anything else they possessed that could be turned into money. The things out of Slyme's room were sold almost directly he left.