

Chapter 32

The Veteran

Old Jack Linden had tried hard to earn a little money by selling bloaters, but they often went bad, and even when he managed to sell them all the profit was so slight that it was not worth doing.

Before the work at 'The Cave' was finished, Philpot was a good friend to them; he frequently gave old Jack sixpence or a shilling and often brought a bag off cakes or buns for the children. Sometimes he came to tea with them on Sundays as an excuse for bringing a tin of salmon.

Elsie and Charley frequently went to Owen's house to take tea with Frankie; in fact, whilst Owen had anything to do, they almost lived there, for both Owen and Nora, knowing that the Lindens had nothing to live on except the earnings of the young woman, encouraged the children to come often.

Old Jack made some hopeless attempts to get work--work of any kind, but nobody wanted him; and to make things worse, his eyesight, which had been failing for a long time, became very bad. Once he was given a job by a big provision firm to carry an advertisement about the streets. The man who had been carrying it before--an old soldier--had been sacked the previous day for getting drunk while on duty. The advertisement was not an ordinary pair of sandwich boards, but a sort

of box without any bottom or lid, a wooden frame, four sides covered with canvas, and which were pasted printed bills advertising margarine. Each side of this box or frame was rather larger than an ordinary sandwich board.

Old Linden had to get inside this thing and carry it about the streets; two straps fixed across the top of the frame and passing one over each of his shoulders enabled him to carry it. It swayed about a good deal as he walked along, especially when the wind caught it, but there were two handles inside to hold it steady by. The pay was eighteenpence a day, and he had to travel a certain route, up and down the busiest streets.

At first the frame did not feel very heavy, but the weight seemed to increase as the time went on, and the straps hurt his shoulders. He felt very much ashamed, also, whenever he encountered any of his old mates, some of whom laughed at him.

In consequence of the frame requiring so much attention to keep it steady, and being unused to the work, and his sight so bad, he several times narrowly escaped being run over. Another thing that added to his embarrassment was the jeering of the other sandwichmen, the loafers outside the public houses, and the boys, who shouted 'old Jack in the box' after him. Sometimes the boys threw refuse at the frame, and once a decayed orange thrown by one of them knocked his hat off.

By the time evening came he was scarcely able to stand for weariness.

His shoulders, his legs and his feet ached terribly, and as he was taking the thing back to the shop he was accosted by a ragged, dirty-looking, beer-sodden old man whose face was inflamed with drink and fury. 'This was the old soldier who had been discharged the previous day. He cursed and swore in the most awful manner and accused Linden of 'taking the bread out of his mouth', and, shaking his fist fiercely at him, shouted that he had a good mind to knock his face through his head and out of the back of his neck. He might possibly have tried to put this threat into practice but for the timely appearance of a policeman, when he calmed down at once and took himself off.

Jack did not go back the next day; he felt that he would rather starve than have any more of the advertisement frame, and after this he seemed to abandon all hope of earning money: wherever he went it was the same--no one wanted him. So he just wandered about the streets aimlessly, now and then meeting an old workmate who asked him to have a drink, but this was not often, for nearly all of them were out of work and penniless.