

## Chapter 33

### The Soldier's Children

During most of this time, Jack Linden's daughter-in-law had 'Plenty of Work', making blouses and pinafores for Sweater & Co. She had so much to do that one might have thought that the Tory Millennium had arrived, and that Tariff Reform was already an accomplished fact.

She had Plenty of Work.

At first they had employed her exclusively on the cheapest kind of blouses--those that were paid for at the rate of two shillings a dozen, but they did not give her many of that sort now. She did the work so neatly that they kept her busy on the better qualities, which did not pay her so well, because although she was paid more per dozen, there was a great deal more work in them than in the cheaper kinds. Once she had a very special one to make, for which she was paid six shillings; but it took her four and a half days--working early and late--to do it. The lady who bought this blouse was told that it came from Paris, and paid three guineas for it. But of course Mrs Linden knew nothing of that, and even if she had known, it would have made no difference to her.

Most of the money she earned went to pay the rent, and sometimes there was only two or three shillings left to buy food for all of them:

sometimes not even so much, because although she had Plenty of Work she was not always able to do it. There were times when the strain of working the machine was unendurable: her shoulders ached, her arms became cramped, and her eyes pained so that it was impossible to continue. Then for a change she would leave the sewing and do some housework.

Once, when they owed four weeks' rent, the agent was so threatening that they were terrified at the thought of being sold up and turned out of the house, and so she decided to sell the round mahogany table and some of the other things out of the sitting-room. Nearly all the furniture that was in the house now belonged to her, and had formed her home before her husband died. The old people had given most of their things away at different times to their other sons since she had come to live there. These men were all married and all in employment. One was a fitter at the gasworks; the second was a railway porter, and the other was a butcher; but now that the old man was out of work they seldom came to the house. The last time they had been there was on Christmas Eve, and then there had been such a terrible row between them that the children had been awakened by it and frightened nearly out of their lives. The cause of the row was that some time previously they had mutually agreed to each give a shilling a week to the old people. They had done this for three weeks and after that the butcher had stopped his contribution: it had occurred to him that he was not to be expected to help to keep his brother's widow and her children. If the old people liked to give up the house and go to live in a room somewhere by themselves, he would continue paying his shilling a week,

but not otherwise. Upon this the railway porter and the gas-fitter also ceased paying. They said it wasn't fair that they should pay a shilling a week each when the butcher--who was the eldest and earned the best wages--paid nothing. Provided he paid, they would pay; but if he didn't pay anything, neither would they. On Christmas Eve they all happened to come to the house at the same time; each denounced the others, and after nearly coming to blows they all went away raging and cursing and had not been near the place since.

As soon as she decided to sell the things, Mary went to Didlum's second-hand furniture store, and the manager said he would ask Mr Didlum to call and see the table and other articles. She waited anxiously all the morning, but he did not appear, so she went once more to the shop to remind him. When he did come at last he was very contemptuous of the table and of everything else she offered to sell. Five shillings was the very most he could think of giving for the table, and even then he doubted whether he would ever get his money back. Eventually he gave her thirty shillings for the table, the overmantel, the easy chair, three other chairs and the two best pictures--one a large steel engraving of 'The Good Samaritan' and the other 'Christ Blessing Little Children'.

He paid the money at once; half an hour afterwards the van came to take the things away, and when they were gone, Mary sank down on the hearthrug in the wrecked room and sobbed as if her heart would break.

This was the first of several similar transactions. Slowly, piece by

piece, in order to buy food and to pay the rent, the furniture was sold. Every time Didlum came he affected to be doing them a very great favour by buying the things at all. Almost an act of charity. He did not want them. Business was so bad: it might be years before he could sell them again, and so on. Once or twice he asked Mary if she did not want to sell the clock--the one that her late husband had made for his mother, but Mary shrank from the thought of selling this, until at last there was nothing else left that Didlum would buy, and one week, when Mary was too ill to do any needlework--it had to go. He gave them ten shillings for it.

Mary had expected the old woman to be heartbroken at having to part with this clock, but she was surprised to see her almost indifferent. The truth was, that lately both the old people seemed stunned, and incapable of taking an intelligent interest in what was happening around them, and Mary had to attend to everything.

From time to time nearly all their other possessions--things of inferior value that Didlum would not look at, she carried out and sold at small second-hand shops in back streets or pledged at the pawn-broker's. The feather pillows, sheets, and blankets: bits of carpet or oilcloth, and as much of their clothing as was saleable or pawnable. They felt the loss of the bedclothes more than anything else, for although all the clothes they wore during the day, and all the old clothes and dresses in the house, and even an old coloured tablecloth, were put on the beds at night, they did not compensate for the blankets, and they were often unable to sleep on account of the

intense cold.

A lady district visitor who called occasionally sometimes gave Mary an order for a hundredweight of coal or a shillingworth of groceries, or a ticket for a quart of soup, which Elsie fetched in the evening from the Soup Kitchen. But this was not very often, because, as the lady said, there were so many cases similar to theirs that it was impossible to do more than a very little for any one of them.

Sometimes Mary became so weak and exhausted through overwork, worry, and lack of proper food that she broke down altogether for the time being, and positively could not do any work at all. Then she used to lie down on the bed in her room and cry.

Whenever she became like this, Elsie and Charley used to do the housework when they came home from school, and make tea and toast for her, and bring it to the bedside on a chair so that she could eat lying down. When there was no margarine or dripping to put on the toast, they made it very thin and crisp and pretended it was biscuit.

The children rather enjoyed these times; the quiet and leisure was so different from other days when their mother was so busy she had no time to speak to them.

They would sit on the side of the bed, the old grandmother in her chair opposite with the cat beside her listening to the conversation and purring or mewling whenever they stroked it or spoke to it. They talked

principally of the future. Elsie said she was going to be a teacher and earn a lot of money to bring home to her mother to buy things with. Charley was thinking of opening a grocer's shop and having a horse and cart. When one has a grocer's shop, there is always plenty to eat; even if you have no money, you can take as much as you like out of your shop--good stuff, too, tins of salmon, jam, sardines, eggs, cakes, biscuits and all those sorts of things--and one was almost certain to have some money every day, because it wasn't likely that a whole day would go by without someone or other coming into the shop to buy something. When delivering the groceries with the horse and cart, he would give rides to all the boys he knew, and in the summertime, after the work was done and the shop shut up, Mother and Elsie and Granny could also come for long rides into the country.

The old grandmother--who had latterly become quite childish--used to sit and listen to all this talk with a superior air. Sometimes she argued with the children about their plans, and ridiculed them. She used to say with a chuckle that she had heard people talk like that before--lots of times--but it never came to nothing in the end.

One week about the middle of February, when they were in very sore straits indeed, old Jack applied to the secretary of the Organized Benevolence Society for assistance. It was about eleven o'clock in the morning when he turned the corner of the street where the office of the society was situated and saw a crowd of about thirty men waiting for the doors to be opened in order to apply for soup tickets. Some of these men were of the tramp or the drunken loafer class; some were old,

broken-down workmen like himself, and others were labourers wearing corduroy or moleskin trousers with straps round their legs under their knees.

Linden waited at a distance until all these were gone before he went in. The secretary received him sympathetically and gave him a big form to fill up, but as Linden's eyes were so bad and his hand so unsteady the secretary very obligingly wrote in the answers himself, and informed him that he would inquire into the case and lay his application before the committee at the next meeting, which was to be held on the following Thursday--it was then Monday.

Linden explained to him that they were actually starving. He had been out of work for sixteen weeks, and during all that time they had lived for the most part on the earnings of his daughter-in-law, but she had not done anything for nearly a fortnight now, because the firm she worked for had not had any work for her to do. There was no food in the house and the children were crying for something to eat. All last week they had been going to school hungry, for they had had nothing but dry bread and tea every day: but this week--as far as he could see--they would not get even that. After some further talk the secretary gave him two soup tickets and an order for a loaf of bread, and repeated his promise to inquire into the case and bring it before the committee.

As Jack was returning home he passed the Soup Kitchen, where he saw the same lot of men who had been to the office of the Organized Benevolence

Society for the soup tickets. They were waiting in a long line to be admitted. The premises being so small, the proprietor served them in batches of ten at a time.

On Wednesday the secretary called at the house, and on Friday Jack received a letter from him to the effect that the case had been duly considered by the committee, who had come to the conclusion that as it was a 'chronic' case they were unable to deal with it, and advised him to apply to the Board of Guardians. This was what Linden had hitherto shrunk from doing, but the situation was desperate. They owed five weeks' rent, and to crown their misfortune his eyesight had become so bad that even if there had been any prospect of obtaining work it was very doubtful if he could have managed to do it. So Linden, feeling utterly crushed and degraded, swallowed all that remained of his pride and went like a beaten dog to see the relieving officer, who took him before the Board, who did not think it a suitable case for out-relief, and after some preliminaries it was arranged that Linden and his wife were to go into the workhouse, and Mary was to be allowed three shillings a week to help her to support herself and the two children. As for Linden's sons, the Guardians intimated their Intention of compelling them to contribute towards the cost of their parents' maintenance.

Mary accompanied the old people to the gates of their future dwelling-place, and when she returned home she found there a letter addressed to J. Linden. It was from the house agent and contained a notice to leave the house before the end of the ensuing week. Nothing

was said about the rent that was due. Perhaps Mr Sweater thought that as he had already received nearly six hundred pounds in rent from Linden he could afford to be generous about the five weeks that were still owing--or perhaps he thought there was no possibility of getting the money. However that may have been, there was no reference to it in the letter--it was simply a notice to clear out, addressed to Linden, but meant for Mary.

It was about half past three o'clock in the afternoon when she returned home and found this letter on the floor in the front passage. She was faint with fatigue and hunger, for she had had nothing but a cup of tea and a slice of bread that day, and her fare had not been much better for many weeks past. The children were at school, and the house--now almost destitute of furniture and without carpets or oilcloth on the floors--was deserted and cold and silent as a tomb. On the kitchen table were a few cracked cups and saucers, a broken knife, some lead teaspoons, a part of a loaf, a small basin containing some dripping and a brown earthenware teapot with a broken spout. Near the table were two broken kitchen chairs, one with the top cross-piece gone from the back, and the other with no back to the seat at all. The bareness of the walls was relieved only by a coloured almanac and some paper pictures which the children had tacked upon them, and by the side of the fireplace was the empty wicker chair where the old woman used to sit. There was no fire in the grate, and the cold hearth was untidy with an accumulation of ashes, for during the trouble of these last few days she had not had time or heart to do any housework. The floor was unswept and littered with scraps of paper and dust: in one corner was a

heap of twigs and small branches of trees that Charley had found somewhere and brought home for the fire.

The same disorder prevailed all through the house: all the doors were open, and from where she stood in the kitchen she could see the bed she shared with Elsie, with its heterogeneous heap of coverings. The sitting-room contained nothing but a collection of odds and ends of rubbish which belonged to Charley--his 'things' as he called them--bits of wood, string and rope; one wheel of a perambulator, a top, an iron hoop and so on. Through the other door was visible the dilapidated bedstead that had been used by the old people, with a similar lot of bedclothes to those on her own bed, and the torn, ragged covering of the mattress through the side of which the flock was protruding and falling in particles on to the floor.

As she stood there with the letter in her hand--faint and weary in the midst of all this desolation, it seemed to her as if the whole world were falling to pieces and crumbling away all around her.