

Chapter 34

The Beginning of the End

During the months of January and February, Owen, Crass, Slyme and Sawkins continued to work at irregular intervals for Rushton & Co., although--even when there was anything to do--they now put in only six hours a day, commencing in the morning and leaving off at four, with an hour's interval for dinner between twelve and one. They finished the 'plant' and painted the front of Rushton's shop. When all this was completed, as no other work came in, they all had to 'stand off' with the exception of Sawkins, who was kept on because he was cheap and able to do all sorts of odd jobs, such as unstopping drains, repairing leaky roofs, rough painting or lime-washing, and he was also useful as a labourer for the plumbers, of whom there were now three employed at Rushton's, the severe weather which had come in with January having made a lot of work in that trade. With the exception of this one branch, practically all work was at a standstill.

During this time Rushton & Co. had had several 'boxing-up' jobs to do, and Crass always did the polishing of the coffins on these occasions, besides assisting to take the 'box' home when finished and to 'lift in' the corpse, and afterwards he always acted as one of the bearers at the funerals. For an ordinary class funeral he usually put in about three hours for the polishing; that came to one and nine. Taking home the coffin and lifting in the corpse, one shilling--usually there were two

men to do this besides Hunter, who always accompanied them to superintend the work--attending the funeral and acting as bearer, four shillings: so that altogether Crass made six shillings and ninepence out of each funeral, and sometimes a little more. For instance, when there was an unusually good-class corpse they had a double coffin and then of course there were two 'lifts in', for the shell was taken home first and the outer coffin perhaps a day or two later: this made another shilling. No matter how expensive the funeral was, the bearers never got any more money. Sometimes the carpenter and Crass were able to charge an hour or two more on the making and polishing of a coffin for a good job, but that was all. Sometimes, when there was a very cheap job, they were paid only three shillings for attending as bearers, but this was not often: as a rule they got the same amount whether it was a cheap funeral or an expensive one. Slyme earned only five shillings out of each funeral, and Owen only one and six--for writing the coffin plate.

Sometimes there were three or four funerals in a week, and then Crass did very well indeed. He still had the two young men lodgers at his house, and although one of them was out of work he was still able to pay his way because he had some money in the bank.

One of the funeral jobs led to a terrible row between Crass and Sawkins. The corpse was that of a well-to-do woman who had been ill for a long time with cancer of the stomach, and after the funeral Rushton & Co. had to clean and repaint and paper the room she had occupied during her illness. Although cancer is not supposed to be an

infectious disease, they had orders to take all the bedding away and have it burnt. Sawkins was instructed to take a truck to the house and get the bedding and take it to the town Refuse Destructor to be destroyed. There were two feather beds, a bolster and two pillows: they were such good things that Sawkins secretly resolved that instead of taking them to the Destructor he would take them to a second-hand dealer and sell them.

As he was coming away from the house with the things he met Hunter, who told him that he wanted him for some other work; so he was to take the truck to the yard and leave it there for the present; he could take the bedding to the Destructor later on in the day. Sawkins did as Hunter ordered, and in the meantime Crass, who happened to be working at the yard painting some venetian blinds, saw the things on the truck, and, hearing what was to be done with them, he also thought it was a pity that such good things should be destroyed: so when Sawkins came in the afternoon to take them away Crass told him he need not trouble; 'I'm goin' to 'ave that lot, he said; 'they're too good to chuck away; there's nothing wrong with 'em.'

This did not suit Sawkins at all. He said he had been told to take them to the Destructor, and he was going to do so. He was dragging the cart out of the yard when Crass rushed up and lifted the bundle off and carried it into the paint-shop. Sawkins ran after him and they began to curse and swear at each other; Crass accusing Sawkins of intending to take the things to the marine stores and sell them. Sawkins seized hold of the bundle with the object of replacing it on the cart, but

Crass got hold of it as well and they had a tussle for it--a kind of tug of war--reeling and struggling all over the shop. cursing and swearing horribly all the time. Finally, Sawkins--being the better man of the two--succeeded in wrenching the bundle away and put it on the cart again, and then Crass hurriedly put on his coat and said he was going to the office to ask Mr Rushton if he might have the things.

Upon hearing this, Sawkins became so infuriated that he lifted the bundle off the cart and, throwing it upon the muddy ground, right into a pool of dirty water, trampled it underfoot; and then, taking out his clasp knife, began savagely hacking and ripping the ticking so that the feathers all came falling out. In a few minutes he had damaged the things beyond hope of repair, while Crass stood by, white and trembling, watching the proceedings but lacking the courage to interfere.

'Now go to the office and ask Rushton for 'em, if you like!' shouted Sawkins. 'You can 'ave 'em now, if you want 'em.'

Crass made no answer and, after a moment's hesitation, went back to his work, and Sawkins piled the things on the cart once more and took them away to the Destructor. He would not be able to sell them now, but at any rate he had stopped that dirty swine Crass from getting them.

When Crass went back to the paint-shop he found there one of the pillows which had fallen out of the bundle during the struggle. He took it home with him that evening and slept upon it. It was a fine pillow, much fuller and softer and more cosy than the one he had been

accustomed to.

A few days afterwards when he was working at the room where the woman died, they gave him some other things that had belonged to her to do away with, and amongst them was a kind of wrap of grey knitted wool. Crass kept this for himself: it was just the thing to wrap round one's neck when going to work on a cold morning, and he used it for that purpose all through the winter. In addition to the funerals, there was a little other work: sometimes a room or two to be painted and papered and ceilings whitened, and once they had the outside of two small cottages to paint--doors and windows--two coats. All four of them worked at this job and it was finished in two days. And so they went on.

Some weeks Crass earned a pound or eighteen shillings; sometimes a little more, generally less and occasionally nothing at all.

There was a lot of jealousy and ill-feeling amongst them about the work. Slyme and Crass were both aggrieved about Sawkins whenever they were idle, especially if the latter were painting or whitewashing, and their indignation was shared by all the others who were 'off'. Harlow swore horribly about it, and they all agreed that it was disgraceful that a bloody labourer should be employed doing what ought to be skilled work for fivepence an hour, while properly qualified men were 'walking about'. These other men were also incensed against Slyme and Crass because the latter were given the preference whenever there was a little job to do, and it was darkly insinuated that in order to secure

this preference these two were working for sixpence an hour. There was no love lost between Crass and Slyme either: Crass was furious whenever it happened that Slyme had a few hours' work to do if he himself were idle, and if ever Crass was working while Slyme was 'standing still' the latter went about amongst the other unemployed men saying ugly things about Crass, whom he accused of being a 'crawler'. Owen also came in for his share of abuse and blame: most of them said that a man like him should stick out for higher wages whether employed on special work or not, and then he would not get any preference. But all the same, whatever they said about each other behind each other's backs, they were all most friendly to each other when they met face to face.

Once or twice Owen did some work--such as graining a door or writing a sign--for one or other of his fellow workmen who had managed to secure a little job 'on his own', but putting it all together, the coffin-plates and other work at Rushton's and all, his earnings had not averaged ten shillings a week for the last six weeks. Often they had no coal and sometimes not even a penny to put into the gas meter, and then, having nothing left good enough to pawn, he sometimes obtained a few pence by selling some of his books to second-hand book dealers. However, bad as their condition was, Owen knew that they were better off than the majority of the others, for whenever he went out he was certain to meet numbers of men whom he had worked with at different times, who said--some of them--that they had been idle for ten, twelve, fifteen and in some cases for twenty weeks without having earned a shilling.

Owen used to wonder how they managed to continue to exist. Most of them were wearing other people's cast-off clothes, hats, and boots, which had in some instances been given to their wives by 'visiting ladies', or by the people at whose houses their wives went to work, charring. As for food, most of them lived on such credit as they could get, and on the scraps of broken victuals and meat that their wives brought home from the places they worked at. Some of them had grown-up sons and daughters who still lived with them and whose earnings kept their homes together, and the wives of some of them eked out a miserable existence by letting lodgings.

The week before old Linden went into the workhouse Owen earned nothing, and to make matters worse the grocer from whom they usually bought their things suddenly refused to let them have any more credit. Owen went to see him, and the man said he was very sorry, but he could not let them have anything more without the money; he did not mind waiting a few weeks for what was already owing, but he could not let the amount get any higher; his books were full of bad debts already. In conclusion, he said that he hoped Owen would not do as so many others had done and take his ready money elsewhere. People came and got credit from him when they were hard up, and afterwards spent their ready money at the Monopole Company's stores on the other side of the street, because their goods were a trifle cheaper, and it was not fair. Owen admitted that it was not fair, but reminded him that they always bought their things at his shop. The grocer, however, was inexorable; he repeated several times that his books were full of bad debts and his own creditors were pressing him. During their conversation the

shopkeeper's eyes wandered continually to the big store on the other side of the street; the huge, gilded letters of the name 'Monopole Stores' seemed to have an irresistible attraction for him. Once he interrupted himself in the middle of a sentence to point out to Owen a little girl who was just coming out of the Stores with a small parcel in her hand.

'Her father owes me nearly thirty shillings,' he said, 'but they spend their ready money there.'

The front of the grocer's shop badly needed repainting, and the name on the fascia, 'A. Smallman', was so faded as to be almost indecipherable. It had been Owen's intention to offer to do this work--the cost to go against his account--but the man appeared to be so harassed that Owen refrained from making the suggestion.

They still had credit at the baker's, but they did not take much bread: when one has had scarcely anything else but bread to eat for nearly a month one finds it difficult to eat at all. That same day, when he returned home after his interview with the grocer, they had a loaf of beautiful fresh bread, but none of them could eat it, although they were hungry: it seemed to stick in their throats, and they could not swallow it even with the help of a drink of tea. But they drank the tea, which was the one thing that enabled them to go on living.

The next week Owen earned eight shillings altogether: a few hours he put in assisting Crass to wash off and whiten a ceiling and paint a

room, and there was one coffin-plate. He wrote the latter at home, and while he was doing it he heard Frankie--who was out in the scullery with Nora--say to her:

'Mother, how many more days to you think we'll have to have only dry bread and tea?'

Owen's heart seemed to stop as he heard the child's question and listened for Nora's answer, but the question was not to be answered at all just then, for at that moment they heard someone running up the stairs and presently the door was unceremoniously thrown open and Charley Linden rushed into the house, out of breath, hatless, and crying piteously. His clothes were old and ragged; they had been patched at the knees and elbows, but the patches were tearing away from the rotting fabric into which they had been sewn. He had on a pair of black stockings full of holes through which the skin was showing. The soles of his boots were worn through at one side right to the uppers, and as he walked the sides of his bare heels came into contact with the floor, the front part of the sole of one boot was separated from the upper, and his bare toes, red with cold and covered with mud, protruded through the gap. Some sharp substance--a nail or a piece of glass or flint--had evidently lacerated his right foot, for blood was oozing from the broken heel of his boot on to the floor.

They were unable to make much sense of the confused story he told them through his sobs as soon as he was able to speak. All that was clear was that there was something very serious the matter at home: he

thought his mother must be either dying or dead, because she did not speak or move or open her eyes, and 'please, please, please will you come home with me and see her?'

While Nora was getting ready to go with the boy, Owen made him sit on a chair, and having removed the boot from the foot that was bleeding, washed the cut with some warm water and bandaged it with a piece of clean rag, and then they tried to persuade him to stay there with Frankie while Nora went to see his mother, but the boy would not hear of it. So Frankie went with them instead. Owen could not go because he had to finish the coffin-plate, which was only just commenced.

It will be remembered that we left Mary Linden alone in the house after she returned from seeing the old people away. When the children came home from school, about half an hour afterwards, they found her sitting in one of the chairs with her head resting on her arms on the table, unconscious. They were terrified, because they could not awaken her and began to cry, but presently Charley thought of Frankie's mother and, telling his sister to stay there while he was gone, he started off at a run for Owen's house, leaving the front door wide open after him.

When Nora and the two boys reached the house they found there two other women neighbours, who had heard Elsie crying and had come to see what was wrong. Mary had recovered from her faint and was lying down on the bed. Nora stayed with her for some time after the other women went

away. She lit the fire and gave the children their tea--there was still some coal and food left of what had been bought with the three shillings obtained from the Board of Guardians--and afterwards she tidied the house.

Mary said that she did not know exactly what she would have to do in the future. If she could get a room somewhere for two or three shillings a week, her allowance from the Guardians would pay the rent, and she would be able to earn enough for herself and the children to live on.

This was the substance of the story that Nora told Owen when she returned home. He had finished writing the coffin-plate, and as it was now nearly dry he put on his coat and took it down to the carpenter's shop at the yard.

On his way back he met Easton, who had been hanging about in the vain hope of seeing Hunter and finding out if there was any chance of a job. As they walked along together, Easton confided to Owen that he had earned scarcely anything since he had been stood off at Rushton's, and what he had earned had gone, as usual, to pay the rent. Slyme had left them some time ago. Ruth did not seem able to get on with him; she had been in a funny sort of temper altogether, but since he had gone she had had a little work at a boarding-house on the Grand Parade. But things had been going from bad to worse. They had not been able to keep up the payments for the furniture they had hired, so the things had been seized and carted off. They had even stripped the oilcloth from

the floor. Easton remarked he was sorry he had not tacked the bloody stuff down in such a manner that they would not have been able to take it up without destroying it. He had been to see Didlum, who said he didn't want to be hard on them, and that he would keep the things together for three months, and if Easton had paid up arrears by that time he could have them back again, but there was, in Easton's opinion, very little chance of that.

Owen listened with contempt and anger. Here was a man who grumbled at the present state of things, yet took no trouble to think for himself and try to alter them, and who at the first chance would vote for the perpetuation of the System which produced his misery.

'Have you heard that old Jack Linden and his wife went to the workhouse today,' he said.

'No,' replied Easton, indifferently. 'It's only what I expected.'

Owen then suggested it would not be a bad plan for Easton to let his front room, now that it was empty, to Mrs Linden, who would be sure to pay her rent, which would help Easton to pay his. Easton agreed and said he would mention it to Ruth, and a few minutes later they parted.

The next morning Nora found Ruth talking to Mary Linden about the room and as the Eastons lived only about five minutes' walk away, they all three went round there in order that Mary might see the room. The appearance of the house from outside was unaltered: the white lace

curtains still draped the windows of the front room; and in the centre of the bay was what appeared to be a small round table covered with a red cloth, and upon it a geranium in a flowerpot standing in a saucer with a frill of coloured tissue paper round it. These things and the curtains, which fell close together, made it impossible for anyone to see that the room was, otherwise, unfurnished. The 'table' consisted of an empty wooden box--procured from the grocer's--stood on end, with the lid of the scullery copper placed upside down upon it for a top and covered with an old piece of red cloth. The purpose of this was to prevent the neighbours from thinking that they were hard up; although they knew that nearly all those same neighbours were in more or less similar straits.

It was not a very large room, considering that it would have to serve all purposes for herself and the two children, but Mrs Linden knew that it was not likely that she would be able to get one as good elsewhere for the same price, so she agreed to take it from the following Monday at two shillings a week.

As the distance was so short they were able to carry most of the smaller things to their new home during the next few days, and on the Monday evening, when it was dark. Owen and Easton brought the remainder on a truck they borrowed for the purpose from Hunter.

During the last weeks of February the severity of the weather increased. There was a heavy fall of snow on the 20th followed by a hard frost which lasted several days.

About ten o'clock one night a policeman found a man lying unconscious in the middle of a lonely road. At first he thought the man was drunk, and after dragging him on to the footpath out of the way of passing vehicles he went for the stretcher. They took the man to the station and put him into a cell, which was already occupied by a man who had been caught in the act of stealing a swede turnip from a barn. When the police surgeon came he pronounced the supposed drunken man to be dying from bronchitis and want of food; and he further said that there was nothing to indicate that the man was addicted to drink. When the inquest was held a few days afterwards, the coroner remarked that it was the third case of death from destitution that had occurred in the town within six weeks.

The evidence showed that the man was a plasterer who had walked from London with the hope of finding work somewhere in the country. He had no money in his possession when he was found by the policeman; all that his pockets contained being several pawn-tickets and a letter from his wife, which was not found until after he died, because it was in an inner pocket of his waistcoat. A few days before this inquest was held, the man who had been arrested for stealing the turnip had been taken before the magistrates. The poor wretch said he did it because he was starving, but Aldermen Sweater and Grinder, after telling him that starvation was no excuse for dishonesty, sentenced him to pay a fine of seven shillings and costs, or go to prison for seven days with hard labour. As the convict had neither money nor friends, he had to go to jail, where he was, after all, better off than most of those who

were still outside because they lacked either the courage or the opportunity to steal something to relieve their sufferings.

As time went on the long-continued privation began to tell upon Owen and his family. He had a severe cough; his eyes became deeply sunken and of remarkable brilliancy, and his thin face was always either deathly pale or dyed with a crimson flush.

Frankie also began to show the effects of being obliged to go so often without his porridge and milk; he became very pale and thin and his long hair came out in handfuls when his mother combed or brushed it. This was a great trouble to the boy, who, since hearing the story of Samson read out of the Bible at school, had ceased from asking to have his hair cut short, lest he should lose his strength in consequence. He used to test himself by going through a certain exercise he had himself invented, with a flat iron, and he was always much relieved when he found that, notwithstanding the loss of the porridge, he was still able to lift the iron the proper number of times. But after a while, as he found that it became increasingly difficult to go through the exercise, he gave it up altogether, secretly resolving to wait until 'Dad' had more work to do, so that he could have the porridge and milk again. He was sorry to have to discontinue the exercise, but he said nothing about it to his father or mother because he did not want to 'worry' them...

Sometimes Nora managed to get a small job of needlework. On one occasion a woman with a small son brought a parcel of garments

belonging to herself or her husband, an old ulster, several coats, and so on--things that although they were too old-fashioned or shabby to wear, yet might look all right if turned and made up for the boy.

Nora undertook to do this, and after working several hours every day for a week she earned four shillings: and even then the woman thought it was so dear that she did not bring any more.

Another time Mrs Easton got her some work at a boarding-house where she herself was employed. The servant was laid up, and they wanted some help for a few days. The pay was to be two shillings a day, and dinner. Owen did not want her to go because he feared she was not strong enough to do the work, but he gave way at last and Nora went. She had to do the bedrooms, and on the evening of the second day, as a result of the constant running up and down the stairs carrying heavy cans and pails of water, she was in such intense pain that she was scarcely able to walk home, and for several days afterwards had to lie in bed through a recurrence of her old illness, which caused her to suffer untold agony whenever she tried to stand.

Owen was alternately dejected and maddened by the knowledge of his own helplessness: when he was not doing anything for Rushton he went about the town trying to find some other work, but usually with scant success. He did some samples of showcard and window tickets and endeavoured to get some orders by canvassing the shops in the town, but this was also a failure, for these people generally had a ticket-writer to whom they usually gave their work. He did get a few trifling

orders, but they were scarcely worth doing at the price he got for them. He used to feel like a criminal when he went into the shops to ask them for the work, because he realized fully that, in effect, he was saying to them: 'Take your work away from the other man, and employ me.' He was so conscious of this that it gave him a shamefaced manner, which, coupled as it was with his shabby clothing, did not create a very favourable impression upon those he addressed, who usually treated him with about as much courtesy as they would have extended to any other sort of beggar. Generally, after a day's canvassing, he returned home unsuccessful and faint with hunger and fatigue.

Once, when there was a bitterly cold east wind blowing, he was out on one of these canvassing expeditions and contracted a severe cold: his chest became so bad that he found it almost impossible to speak, because the effort to do so often brought on a violent fit of coughing. It was during this time that a firm of drapers, for whom he had done some showcards, sent him an order for one they wanted in a hurry, it had to be delivered the next morning, so he stayed up by himself till nearly midnight to do it. As he worked, he felt a strange sensation in his chest: it was not exactly a pain, and he would have found it difficult to describe it in words--it was just a sensation. He did not attach much importance to it, thinking it an effect of the cold he had taken, but whatever it was he could not help feeling conscious of it all the time.

Frankie had been put to bed that evening at the customary hour, but did not seem to be sleeping as well as usual. Owen could hear him twisting

and turning about and uttering little cries in his sleep.

He left his work several times to go into the boy's room and cover him with the bedclothes which his restless movements had disordered. As the time wore on, the child became more tranquil, and about eleven o'clock, when Owen went in to look at him, he found him in a deep sleep, lying on his side with his head thrown back on the pillow, breathing so softly through his slightly parted lips that the sound was almost imperceptible. The fair hair that clustered round his forehead was damp with perspiration, and he was so still and pale and silent that one might have thought he was sleeping the sleep that knows no awakening.

About an hour later, when he had finished writing the showcard, Owen went out into the scullery to wash his hands before going to bed: and whilst he was drying them on the towel, the strange sensation he had been conscious of all the evening became more intense, and a few seconds afterwards he was terrified to find his mouth suddenly filled with blood.

For what seemed an eternity he fought for breath against the suffocating torrent, and when at length it stopped, he sank trembling into a chair by the side of the table, holding the towel to his mouth and scarcely daring to breathe, whilst a cold sweat streamed from every pore and gathered in large drops upon his forehead.

Through the deathlike silence of the night there came from time to time

the chimes of the clock of a distant church, but he continued to sit there motionless, taking no heed of the passing hours, and possessed with an awful terror.

So this was the beginning of the end! And afterwards the other two would be left by themselves at the mercy of the world. In a few years' time the boy would be like Bert White, in the clutches of some psalm-singing devil like Hunter or Rushton, who would use him as if he were a beast of burden. He imagined he could see him now as he would be then: worked, driven, and bullied, carrying loads, dragging carts, and running here and there, trying his best to satisfy the brutal tyrants, whose only thought would be to get profit out of him for themselves. If he lived, it would be to grow up with his body deformed and dwarfed by unnatural labour and with his mind stultified, degraded and brutalized by ignorance and poverty. As this vision of the child's future rose before him, Owen resolved that it should never be! He would not leave them alone and defenceless in the midst of the 'Christian' wolves who were waiting to rend them as soon as he was gone. If he could not give them happiness, he could at least put them out of the reach of further suffering. If he could not stay with them, they would have to come with him. It would be kinder and more merciful.