

## Chapter 40

### Vive la System!

The alterations which the Corporation had undertaken to make in the Kiosk on the Grand Parade provided employment for several carpenters and plasterers for about three weeks, and afterwards for several painters. This fact was sufficient to secure the working men's unqualified approval of the action of the Council in letting the place to Grinder, and Councillor Weakling's opposition--the reasons of which they did not take the trouble to inquire into or understand--they as heartily condemned. All they knew or cared was that he had tried to prevent the work being done, and that he had referred in insulting terms to the working men of the town. What right had he to call them half-starved, poverty-stricken, poor wretches? If it came to being poverty-stricken, according to all accounts, he wasn't any too well off himself. Some of those blokes who went swaggering about in frock-coats and pot-'ats was just as 'ard up as anyone else if the truth was known.

As for the Corporation workmen, it was quite right that their wages should be reduced. Why should they get more money than anyone else?

'It's us what's got to find the money,' they said. 'We're the ratepayers, and why should we have to pay them more wages than we get ourselves? And why should they be paid for holidays any more than us?'

During the next few weeks the dearth of employment continued, for, of course, the work at the Kiosk and the few others jobs that were being done did not make much difference to the general situation. Groups of workmen stood at the corners or walked aimlessly about the streets. Most of them no longer troubled to go to the different firms to ask for work, they were usually told that they would be sent for if wanted.

During this time Owen did his best to convert the other men to his views. He had accumulated a little library of Socialist books and pamphlets which he lent to those he hoped to influence. Some of them took these books and promised, with the air of men who were conferring a great favour, that they would read them. As a rule, when they returned them it was with vague expressions of approval, but they usually evinced a disinclination to discuss the contents in detail because, in nine instances out of ten, they had not attempted to read them. As for those who did make a half-hearted effort to do so, in the majority of cases their minds were so rusty and stultified by long years of disuse, that, although the pamphlets were generally written in such simple language that a child might have understood, the argument was generally too obscure to be grasped by men whose minds were addled by the stories told them by their Liberal and Tory masters. Some, when Owen offered to lend them some books or pamphlets refused to accept them, and others who did him the great favour of accepting them, afterwards boasted that they had used them as toilet paper.

Owen frequently entered into long arguments with the other men, saying that it was the duty of the State to provide productive work for all

those who were willing to do it. Some few of them listened like men who only vaguely understood, but were willing to be convinced.

'Yes, mate. It's right enough what you say,' they would remark.

'Something ought to be done.'

Others ridiculed this doctrine of State employment: It was all very fine, but where was the money to come from? And then those who had been disposed to agree with Owen could relapse into their old apathy.

There were others who did not listen so quietly, but shouted with many curses that it was the likes of such fellows as Owen who were responsible for all the depression in trade. All this talk about Socialism and State employment was frightening Capital out of the country. Those who had money were afraid to invest it in industries, or to have any work done for fear they would be robbed. When Owen quoted statistics to prove that as far as commerce and the quantity produced of commodities of all kinds was concerned, the last year had been a record one, they became more infuriated than ever, and talked threateningly of what they would like to do to those bloody Socialists who were upsetting everything.

One day Crass, who was one of these upholders of the existing system, scored off Owen finely. A little group of them were standing talking in the Wage Slave Market near the Fountain. In the course of the argument, Owen made the remark that under existing conditions life was not worth living, and Crass said that if he really thought so, there

was no compulsion about it; if he wasn't satisfied--if he didn't want to live--he could go and die. Why the hell didn't he go and make a hole in the water, or cut his bloody throat?

On this particular occasion the subject of the argument was--at first--the recent increase of the Borough Engineer's salary to seventeen pounds per week. Owen had said it was robbery, but the majority of the others expressed their approval of the increase. They asked Owen if he expected a man like that to work for nothing! It was not as if he were one of the likes of themselves. They said that, as for it being robbery, Owen would be very glad to have the chance of getting it himself. Most of them seemed to think the fact that anyone would be glad to have seventeen pounds a week, proved that it was right for them to pay that amount to the Borough Engineer!

Usually whenever Owen reflected upon the gross injustices, and inhumanity of the existing social disorder, he became convinced that it could not possibly last; it was bound to fall to pieces because of its own rottenness. It was not just, it was not common sense, and therefore it could not endure. But always after one of these arguments--or, rather, disputes--with his fellow workmen, he almost relapsed into hopelessness and despondency, for then he realized how vast and how strong are the fortifications that surround the present system; the great barriers and ramparts of invincible ignorance, apathy and self-contempt, which will have to be broken down before the system of society of which they are the defences, can be swept away.

At other times as he thought of this marvellous system, it presented itself to him in such an aspect of almost comical absurdity that he was forced to laugh and to wonder whether it really existed at all, or if it were only an illusion of his own disordered mind.

One of the things that the human race needed in order to exist was shelter; so with much painful labour they had constructed a large number of houses. Thousands of these houses were now standing unoccupied, while millions of the people who had helped to build the houses were either homeless or herding together in overcrowded hovels.

These human beings had such a strange system of arranging their affairs that if anyone were to go and burn down a lot of the houses he would be conferring a great boon upon those who had built them, because such an act would 'Make a lot more work!'

Another very comical thing was that thousands of people wore broken boots and ragged clothes, while millions of pairs of boots and abundance of clothing, which they had helped to make, were locked up in warehouses, and the System had the keys.

Thousands of people lacked the necessaries of life. The necessaries of life are all produced by work. The people who lacked begged to be allowed to work and create those things of which they stood in need. But the System prevented them from so doing.

If anyone asked the System why it prevented these people from producing

the things of which they were in want, the System replied:

'Because they have already produced too much. The markets are glutted. The warehouses are filled and overflowing, and there is nothing more for them to do.'

There was in existence a huge accumulation of everything necessary. A great number of the people whose labour had produced that vast store were now living in want, but the System said that they could not be permitted to partake of the things they had created. Then, after a time, when these people, being reduced to the last extreme of misery, cried out that they and their children were dying of hunger, the System grudgingly unlocked the doors of the great warehouses, and taking out a small part of the things that were stored within, distributed it amongst the famished workers, at the same time reminding them that it was Charity, because all the things in the warehouses, although they had been made by the workers, were now the property of the people who do nothing.

And then the starving, bootless, ragged, stupid wretches fell down and worshipped the System, and offered up their children as living sacrifices upon its altars, saying:

'This beautiful System is the only one possible, and the best that human wisdom can devise. May the System live for ever! Cursed be those who seek to destroy the System!'

As the absurdity of the thing forced itself upon him, Owen, in spite of the unhappiness he felt at the sight of all the misery by which he was surrounded, laughed aloud and said to himself that if he was sane, then all these people must be mad.

In the face of such colossal imbecility it was absurd to hope for any immediate improvement. The little already accomplished was the work of a few self-sacrificing enthusiasts, battling against the opposition of those they sought to benefit, and the results of their labours were, in many instances, as pearls cast before the swine who stood watching for opportunities to fall upon and rend their benefactors.

There was only one hope. It was possible that the monopolists, encouraged by the extraordinary stupidity and apathy of the people would proceed to lay upon them even greater burdens, until at last, goaded by suffering, and not having sufficient intelligence to understand any other remedy, these miserable wretches would turn upon their oppressors and drown both them and their System in a sea of blood.

Besides the work at the Kiosk, towards the end of March things gradually began to improve in other directions. Several firms began to take on a few hands. Several large empty houses that were relet had to be renovated for their new tenants, and there was a fair amount of inside work arising out of the annual spring-cleaning in other houses. There was not enough work to keep everyone employed, and most of those who were taken on as a rule only managed to make a few hours a week, but still it was better than absolute idleness, and there also began to

be talk of several large outside jobs that were to be done as soon as the weather was settled.

This bad weather, by the way, was a sort of boon to the defenders of the present system, who were hard-up for sensible arguments to explain the cause of poverty. One of the principal causes was, of course, the weather, which was keeping everything back. There was not the slightest doubt that if only the weather would allow there would always be plenty of work, and poverty would be abolished.

Rushton & Co. had a fair share of what work there was, and Crass, Sawkins, Slyme and Owen were kept employed pretty regularly, although they did not start until half past eight and left off at four. At different houses in various parts of the town they had ceilings to wash off and distemper, to strip the old paper from the walls, and to repaint and paper the rooms, and sometimes there were the venetian blinds to repair and repaint. Occasionally a few extra hands were taken on for a few days, and discharged again as soon as the job they were taken on to do was finished.

The defenders of the existing system may possibly believe that the knowledge that they would be discharged directly the job was done was a very good incentive to industry, that they would naturally under these circumstances do their best to get the work done as quickly as possible. But then it must be remembered that most of the defenders of the existing system are so constituted, that they can believe anything provided it is not true and sufficiently silly.

All the same, it was a fact that the workmen did do their very best to get over this work in the shortest possible time, because although they knew that to do so was contrary to their own interests, they also knew that it would be very much more contrary to their interests not to do so. Their only chance of being kept on if other work came in was to tear into it for all they were worth. Consequently, most of the work was rushed and botched and slobbered over in about half the time that it would have taken to do it properly. Rooms for which the customers paid to have three coats of paint were scamped with one or two. What Misery did not know about scamping and faking the work, the men suggested to and showed him in the hope of currying favour with him in order that they might get the preference over others and be sent for when the next job came in. This is the principal incentive provided by the present system, the incentive to cheat. These fellows cheated the customers of their money. They cheated themselves and their fellow workmen of work, and their children of bread, but it was all for a good cause--to make profit for their master.

Harlow and Slyme did one job--a room that Rushton & Co. had contracted to paint three coats. It was finished with two and the men cleared away their paints. The next day, when Slyme went there to paper the room, the lady of the house said that the painting was not yet finished--it was to have another coat. Slyme assured her that it had already had three, but, as the lady insisted, Slyme went to the shop and sought out Misery. Harlow had been stood off, as there was not another job in just then, but fortunately he happened to be standing in

the street outside the shop, so they called him and then the three of them went round to the job and swore that the room had had three coats. The lady protested that it was not so. She had watched the progress of the work. Besides, it was impossible; they had only been there three days. The first day they had not put any paint on at all; they had done the ceiling and stripped the walls; the painting was not started till the second day. How then could it have had three coats? Misery explained the mystery: he said that for first coating they had an extra special very fast-drying paint--paint that dried so quickly that they were able to give the work two coats in one day. For instance, one man did the window, the other the door: when these were finished both men did the skirting; by the time the skirting was finished the door and window were dry enough to second coat; and then, on the following day--the finishing coat!

Of course, this extra special quick-drying paint was very expensive, but the firm did not mind that. They knew that most of their customers wished to have their work finished as quickly as possible, and their study was to give satisfaction to the customers. This explanation satisfied the lady--a poverty-stricken widow making a precarious living by taking in lodgers--who was the more easily deceived because she regarded Misery as a very holy man, having seen him preaching in the street on many occasions.

There was another job at another boarding-house that Owen and Easton did--two rooms which had to be painted three coats of white paint and one of enamel, making four coats altogether. That was what the firm

had contracted to do. As the old paint in these rooms was of a rather dark shade it was absolutely necessary to give the work three coats before enamelling it. Misery wanted them to let it go with two, but Owen pointed out that if they did so it would be such a ghastly mess that it would never pass. After thinking the matter over for a few minutes, Misery told them to go on with the third coat of paint. Then he went downstairs and asked to see the lady of the house. He explained to her that, in consequence of the old paint being so dark, he found that it would be necessary, in order to make a good job of it, to give the work four coats before enamelling it. Of course, they had agreed for only three, but as they always made a point of doing their work in a first-class manner rather than not make a good job, they would give it the extra coat for nothing, but he was sure she would not wish them to do that. The lady said that she did not want them to work for nothing, and she wanted it done properly. If it were necessary to give it an extra coat, they must do so and she would pay for it. How much would it be? Misery told her. The lady was satisfied, and Misery was in the seventh heaven. Then he went upstairs again and warned Owen and Easton to be sure to say, if they were asked, that the work had had four coats.

It would not be reasonable to blame Misery or Rushton for not wishing to do good, honest work--there was no incentive. When they secured a contract, if they had thought first of making the very best possible job of it, they would not have made so much profit. The incentive was not to do the work as well as possible, but to do as little as possible. The incentive was not to make good work, but to make good

profit.

The same rule applied to the workers. They could not justly be blamed for not doing good work--there was no incentive. To do good work requires time and pains. Most of them would have liked to take time and pains, because all those who are capable of doing good work find pleasure and happiness in doing it, and have pride in it when done: but there was no incentive, unless the certainty of getting the sack could be called an incentive, for it was a moral certainty that any man who was caught taking time and pains with his work would be promptly presented with the order of the boot. But there was plenty of incentive to hurry and scamp and slobber and botch.

There was another job at a lodging-house--two rooms to be painted and papered. The landlord paid for the work, but the tenant had the privilege of choosing the paper. She could have any pattern she liked so long as the cost did not exceed one shilling per roll, Rushton's estimate being for paper of that price. Misery sent her several patterns of sixpenny papers, marked at a shilling, to choose from, but she did not fancy any of them, and said that she would come to the shop to make her selection. So Hunter tore round to the shop in a great hurry to get there before her. In his haste to dismount, he fell off his bicycle into the muddy road, and nearly smashed the plate-glass window with the handle-bar of the machine as he placed it against the shop front before going in.

Without waiting to clean the mud off his clothes, he ordered Budd, the

pimple-faced shopman, to get out rolls of all the sixpenny papers they had, and then they both set to work and altered the price marked upon them from sixpence to a shilling. Then they got out a number of shilling papers and altered the price marked upon them, changing it from a shilling to one and six.

When the unfortunate woman arrived, Misery was waiting for her with a benign smile upon his long visage. He showed her all the sixpenny ones, but she did not like any of them, so after a while Nimrod suggested that perhaps she would like a paper of a little better quality, and she could pay the trifling difference out of her own pocket. Then he showed her the shilling papers that he had marked up to one and sixpence, and eventually the lady selected one of these and paid the extra sixpence per roll herself, as Nimrod suggested. There were fifteen rolls of paper altogether--seven for one room and eight for the other--so that in addition to the ordinary profit on the sale of the paper--about two hundred and seventy-five per cent.--the firm made seven and sixpence on this transaction. They might have done better out of the job itself if Slyme had not been hanging the paper piece-work, for, the two rooms being of the same pattern, he could easily have managed to do them with fourteen rolls; in fact, that was all he did use, but he cut up and partly destroyed the one that was over so that he could charge for hanging it.

Owen was working there at the same time, for the painting of the rooms was not done before Slyme papered them; the finishing coat was put on after the paper was hung. He noticed Slyme destroying the paper and,

guessing the reason, asked him how he could reconcile such conduct as that with his profession of religion.

Slyme replied that the fact that he was a Christian did not imply that he never did anything wrong: if he committed a sin, he was a Christian all the same, and it would be forgiven him for the sake of the Blood. As for this affair of the paper, it was a matter between himself and God, and Owen had no right to set himself up as a Judge.

In addition to all this work, there were a number of funerals. Crass and Slyme did very well out of it all, working all day white-washing or painting, and sometimes part of the night painting venetian blinds or polishing coffins and taking them home, to say nothing of the lifting in of the corpses and afterwards acting as bearers.

As time went on, the number of small jobs increased, and as the days grew longer the men were allowed to put in a greater number of hours. Most of the firms had some work, but there was never enough to keep all the men in the town employed at the same time. It worked like this: Every firm had a certain number of men who were regarded as the regular hands. When there was any work to do, they got the preference over strangers or outsiders. When things were busy, outsiders were taken on temporarily. When the work fell off, these casual hands were the first to be 'stood still'. If it continued to fall off, the old hands were also stood still in order of seniority, the older hands being preferred to strangers--so long, of course, as they were not old in the sense of being aged or inefficient.

This kind of thing usually continued all through the spring and summer. In good years the men of all trades, carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers, painters and so on, were able to keep almost regularly at work, except in wet weather.

The difference between a good and bad spring and summer is that in good years it is sometimes possible to make a little overtime, and the periods of unemployment are shorter and less frequent than in bad years. It is rare even in good years for one of the casual hands to be employed by one firm for more than one, two or three months without a break. It is usual for them to put in a month with one firm, then a fortnight with another, then perhaps six weeks somewhere else, and often between there are two or three days or even weeks of enforced idleness. This sort of thing goes on all through spring, summer and autumn.