

Chapter 42

June

During the early part of May the weather was exceptionally bad, with bitterly cold winds. Rain fell nearly every day, covering the roads with a slush that penetrated the rotten leather of the cheap or second-hand boots worn by the workmen. This weather had the effect of stopping nearly all outside work, and also caused a lot of illness, for those who were so fortunate as to have inside jobs frequently got wet through on their way to work in the morning and had to work all day in damp clothing, and with their boots saturated with water. It was also a source of trouble to those of the men who had allotments, because if it had been fine they would have been able to do something to their gardens while they were out of work.

Newman had not succeeded in getting a job at the trade since he came out of prison, but he tried to make a little money by hawking bananas. Philpot--when he was at work--used often to buy a tanner's or a bob's worth from him and give them to Mrs Linden's children. On Saturdays Old Joe used to waylay these children and buy them bags of cakes at the bakers. One week when he knew that Mrs Linden had not had much work to do, he devised a very cunning scheme to help her. He had been working with Slyme, who was papering a large boarded ceiling in a shop. It had to be covered with unbleached calico before it could be papered and when the work was done there were a number of narrow pieces of calico

left over. These he collected and tore into strips about six inches wide which he took round to Mrs Linden, and asked her to sew them together, end to end, so as to make one long strip: then this long strip had to be cut into four pieces of equal length and the edges sewn together in such a manner that it would form a long tube. Philpot told her that it was required for some work that Rushton's were doing, and said he had undertaken to get the sewing done. The firm would have to pay for it, so she could charge a good price.

'You see,' he said with a wink, 'this is one of those jobs where we gets a chance to get some of our own back.'

Mary thought it was rather a strange sort of job, but she did as Philpot directed and when he came for the stuff and asked how much it was she said threepence: it had only taken about half an hour. Philpot ridiculed this: it was not nearly enough. THEY were not supposed to know how long it took: it ought to be a bob at the very least. So, after some hesitation she made out a bill for that amount on a half-sheet of note-paper. He brought her the money the next Saturday afternoon and went off chuckling to himself over the success of the scheme. It did not occur to him until the next day that he might just as well have got her to make him an apron or two: and when he did think of this he said that after all it didn't matter, because if he had done that it would have been necessary to buy new calico, and anyhow, it could be done some other time.

Newman did not make his fortune out of the bananas--seldom more than

two shillings a day--and consequently he was very glad when Philpot called at his house one evening and told him there was a chance of a job at Rushton's. Newman accordingly went to the yard the next morning, taking his apron and blouse and his bag of tools with him, ready to start work. He got there at about quarter to six and was waiting outside when Hunter arrived. The latter was secretly very glad to see him, for there was a rush of work in and they were short of men. He did not let this appear, of course, but hesitated for a few minutes when Newman repeated the usual formula: 'Any chance of a job, sir?'

'We wasn't at all satisfied with you last time you was on, you know,' said Misery. 'Still, I don't mind giving you another chance. But if you want to hold your job you'll have to move yourself a bit quicker than you did before.'

Towards the end of the month things began to improve all round. The weather became finer and more settled. As time went on the improvement was maintained and nearly everyone was employed. Rushton's were so busy that they took on several other old hands who had been sacked the previous year for being too slow.

Thanks to the influence of Crass, Easton was now regarded as one of the regular hands. He had recently resumed the practice of spending some of his evenings at the Cricketers. It is probable that even if it had not been for his friendship with Crass, he would still have continued to frequent the public house, for things were not very comfortable at home. Somehow or other, Ruth and he seemed to be always quarrelling,

and he was satisfied that it was not always his fault. Sometimes, after the day's work was over he would go home resolved to be good friends with her: he would plan on his way homewards to suggest to her that they should have their tea and then go out for a walk with the child. Once or twice she agreed, but on each occasion, they quarrelled before they got home again. So after a time he gave up trying to be friends with her and went out by himself every evening as soon as he had had his tea.

Mary Linden, who was still lodging with them, could not help perceiving their unhappiness: she frequently noticed that Ruth's eyes were red and swollen as if with crying, and she gently sought to gain her confidence, but without success. On one occasion when Mary was trying to advise her, Ruth burst out into a terrible fit of weeping, but she would not say what was the cause--except that her head was aching--she was not well, that was all.

Sometimes Easton passed the evening at the Cricketers but frequently he went over to the allotments, where Harlow had a plot of ground. Harlow used to get up about four o'clock in the morning and put in an hour or so at his garden before going to work; and every evening as soon as he had finished tea he used to go there again and work till it was dark. Sometimes he did not go home to tea at all, but went straight from work to the garden, and his children used to bring his tea to him there in a glass bottle, with something to eat in a little basket. He had four children, none of whom were yet old enough to go to work, and as may be imagined, he found it a pretty hard struggle to live. He was not a

teetotaller, but as he often remarked, 'what the publicans got from him wouldn't make them very fat', for he often went for weeks together without tasting the stuff, except a glass or two with the Sunday dinner, which he did not regard as an unnecessary expense, because it was almost as cheap as tea or coffee.

Fortunately his wife was a good needlewoman, and as sober and industrious as himself; by dint of slaving incessantly from morning till night she managed to keep her home fairly comfortable and the children clean and decently dressed; they always looked respectable, although they did not always have enough proper food to eat. They looked so respectable that none of the 'visiting ladies' ever regarded them as deserving cases.

Harlow paid fifteen shillings a year for his plot of ground, and although it meant a lot of hard work it was also a source of pleasure and some profit. He generally made a few shillings out of the flowers, besides having enough potatoes and other vegetables to last them nearly all the year.

Sometimes Easton went over to the allotments and lent Harlow a hand with this gardening work, but whether he went there or to the Cricketers, he usually returned home about half past nine, and then went straight to bed, often without speaking a single word to Ruth, who for her part seldom spoke to him except to answer something he said, or to ask some necessary question. At first, Easton used to think that it was all because of the way he had behaved to her in the public house,

but when he apologized--as he did several times--and begged her to forgive him and forget about it, she always said it was all right; there was nothing to forgive. Then, after a time, he began to think it was on account of their poverty and the loss of their home, for nearly all their furniture had been sold during the last winter. But whenever he talked of trying to buy some more things to make the place comfortable again, she did not appear to take any interest: the house was neat enough as it was: they could manage very well, she said, indifferently.

One evening, about the middle of June, when he had been over to the allotments, Easton brought her home a bunch of flowers that Harlow had given him--some red and white roses and some pansies. When he came in, Ruth was packing his food basket for the next day. The baby was asleep in its cot on the floor near the window. Although it was nearly nine o'clock the lamp had not yet been lighted and the mournful twilight that entered the room through the open window increased the desolation of its appearance. The fire had burnt itself out and the grate was filled with ashes. On the hearth was an old rug made of jute that had once been printed in bright colours which had faded away till the whole surface had become almost uniformly drab, showing scarcely any trace of the original pattern. The rest of the floor was bare except for two or three small pieces of old carpet that Ruth had bought for a few pence at different times at some inferior second-hand shop. The chairs and the table were almost the only things that were left of the original furniture of the room, and except for three or four plates of different patterns and sizes and a few cups and saucers, the shelves of the

dresser were bare.

The stillness of the atmosphere was disturbed only by the occasional sound of the wheels of a passing vehicle and the strangely distinct voices of some children who were playing in the street.

'I've brought you these,' said Easton, offering her the flowers. 'I thought you'd like them. I got them from Harlow. You know I've been helping him a little with his garden.'

At first he thought she did not want to take them. She was standing at the table with her back to the window, so that he was unable to see the expression of her face, and she hesitated for a moment before she faltered out some words of thanks and took the flowers, which she put down on the table almost as soon as she touched them.

Offended at what he considered her contemptuous indifference, Easton made no further attempt at conversation but went into the scullery to wash his hands, and then went up to bed.

Downstairs, for a long time after he was gone, Ruth sat alone by the fireless grate, in the silence and the gathering shadows, holding the bunch of flowers in her hand, living over again the events of the last year, and consumed with an agony of remorse.

The presence of Mary Linden and the two children in the house probably saved Ruth from being more unhappy than she was. Little Elsie had made

an arrangement with her to be allowed to take the baby out for walks, and in return Ruth did Elsie's housework. As for Mary, she had not much time to do anything but sew, almost the only relaxation she knew being when she took the work home, and on Sunday, which she usually devoted to a general clean-up of the room, and to mending the children's clothes. Sometimes on Sunday evening she used to go with Ruth and the children to see Mrs Owen, who, although she was not ill enough to stay in bed, seldom went out of the house. She had never really recovered from the attack of illness which was brought on by her work at the boarding house. The doctor had been to see her once or twice and had prescribed--rest. She was to lie down as much as possible, not to do any heavy work--not to carry or lift any heavy articles, scrub floors, make beds, or anything of that sort: and she was to take plenty of nourishing food, beef tea, chicken, a little wine and so on. He did not suggest a trip round the world in a steam yacht or a visit to Switzerland--perhaps he thought they might not be able to afford it. Sometimes she was so ill that she had to observe one at least of the doctor's instructions--to lie down: and then she would worry and fret because she was not able to do the housework and because Owen had to prepare his own tea when he came home at night. On one of these occasions it would have been necessary for Owen to stay at home from work if it had not been for Mrs Easton, who came for several days in succession to look after her and attend to the house.

Fortunately, Owen's health was better since the weather had become warmer. For a long time after the attack of haemorrhage he had while writing the show-card he used to dread going to sleep at night for fear

it should recur. He had heard of people dying in their sleep from that cause. But this terror gradually left him. Nora knew nothing of what occurred that night: to have told her would have done no good, but on the contrary would have caused her a lot of useless anxiety. Sometimes he doubted whether it was right not to tell her, but as time went by and his health continued to improve he was glad he had said nothing about it.

Frankie had lately resumed his athletic exercises with the flat iron: his strength was returning since Owen had been working regularly, because he had been having his porridge and milk again and also some Parrish's Food which a chemist at Windley was selling large bottles of for a shilling. He used to have what he called a 'party' two or three times a week with Elsie, Charley and Easton's baby as the guests. Sometimes, if Mrs Owen were not well, Elsie used to stay in with her after tea and do some housework while the boys went out to play, but more frequently the four children used to go together to the park to play or sail boats on the lake. Once one of the boats was becalmed about a couple of yards from shore and while trying to reach it with a stick Frankie fell into the water, and when Charley tried to drag him out he fell in also. Elsie put the baby down on the bank and seized hold of Charley and while she was trying to get him out, the baby began rolling down, and would probably have tumbled in as well if a man who happened to be passing by had not rushed up in time to prevent it. Fortunately the water at that place was only about two feet deep, so the boys were not much the worse for their ducking. They returned home wet through, smothered with mud, and feeling very important, like boys

who had distinguished themselves.

After this, whenever she could manage to spare the time, Ruth Easton used to go with the children to the park. There was a kind of summer-house near the shore of the lake, only a few feet away from the water's edge, surrounded and shaded by trees, whose branches arched over the path and drooped down to the surface of the water. While the children played Ruth used to sit in this arbour and sew, but often her work was neglected and forgotten as she gazed pensively at the water, which just there looked very still, and dark, and deep, for it was sheltered from the wind and over-shadowed by the trees that lined the banks at the end of the lake.

Sometimes, if it happened to be raining, instead of going out the children used to have some games in the house. On one such occasion Frankie produced the flat iron and went through the exercise, and Charley had a go as well. But although he was slightly older and taller than Frankie he could not lift the iron so often or hold it out so long as the other, a failure that Frankie attributed to the fact that Charley had too much tea and bread and butter instead of porridge and milk and Parrish's Food. Charley was so upset about his lack of strength that he arranged with Frankie to come home with him the next day after school to see his mother about it. Mrs Linden had a flat iron, so they gave a demonstration of their respective powers before her. Mrs Easton being also present, by request, because Frankie said

that the diet in question was suitable for babies as well as big children. He had been brought up on it ever since he could remember, and it was almost as cheap as bread and butter and tea.

The result of the exhibition was that Mrs Linden promised to make porridge for Charley and Elsie whenever she could spare the time, and Mrs Easton said she would try it for the baby also.