

## Chapter 46

### The 'Sixty-five'

The next morning after breakfast, Philpot, Sawkins, Harlow and Barrington went to the Yard to get the long ladder--the 65--so called because it had sixty-five rungs. It was really what is known as a builder's scaffold ladder, and it had been strengthened by several iron bolts or rods which passed through just under some of the rungs. One side of the ladder had an iron band or ribbon twisted and nailed round it spirally. It was not at all suitable for painters' work, being altogether too heavy and cumbersome. However, as none of the others were long enough to reach the high gable at the Refuge, they managed, with a struggle, to get it down from the hooks and put it on one of the handcarts and soon passed through the streets of mean and dingy houses in the vicinity of the yard, and began the ascent of the long hill.

There had been a lot of rain during the night, and the sky was still overcast with dark grey clouds. The cart went heavily over the muddy road; Sawkins was at the helm, holding the end of the ladder and steering; the others walked a little further ahead, at the sides of the cart.

It was such hard work that by the time they were half-way up the hill they were so exhausted and out of breath that they had to stop for a rest.

'This is a bit of all right, ain't it?' remarked Harlow as he took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief.

While they rested they kept a good look out for Rushton or Hunter, who were likely to pass by at any moment.

At first, no one made any reply to Harlow's observation, for they were all out of breath and Philpot's lean fingers trembled violently as he wiped the perspiration from his face.

'Yes, mate,' he said despondently, after a while. 'It's one way of gettin' a livin' and there's plenty better ways.'

In addition to the fact that his rheumatism was exceptionally bad, he felt unusually low-spirited this morning; the gloomy weather and the prospect of a long day of ladder work probably had something to do with it.

'A "living" is right,' said Barrington bitterly. He also was exhausted with the struggle up the hill and enraged by the woebegone appearance of poor old Philpot, who was panting and quivering from the exertion.

They relapsed into silence. The unaccountable depression that possessed Philpot deprived him of all his usual jocularities and filled him with melancholy thoughts. He had travelled up and down this hill a great many times before under similar circumstances and he said to

himself that if he had half a quid now for every time he had pushed a cart up this road, he wouldn't need to do anyone out of a job all the rest of his life.

The shop where he had been apprenticed used to be just down at the bottom; the place had been pulled down years ago, and the ground was now occupied by more pretentious buildings. Not quite so far down the road--on the other side--he could see the church where he used to attend Sunday School when he was a boy, and where he was married just thirty years ago. Presently--when they reached the top of the hill--he would be able to look across the valley and see the spire of the other church, the one in the graveyard, where all those who were dear to him had been one by one laid to rest. He felt that he would not be sorry when the time came to join them there. Possibly, in the next world--if there were such a place--they might all be together once more.

He was suddenly aroused from these thoughts by an exclamation from Harlow.

'Look out! Here comes Rushton.'

They immediately resumed their journey. Rushton was coming up the hill in his dog-cart with Grinder sitting by his side. They passed so closely that Philpot--who was on that side of the cart--was splashed with mud from the wheels of the trap.

'Them's some of your chaps, ain't they?' remarked Grinder.

'Yes,' replied Rushton. 'We're doing a job up this way.'

'I should 'ave thought it would pay you better to use a 'orse for sich work as that,' said Grinder.

'We do use the horses whenever it's necessary for very big loads, you know,' answered Rushton, and added with a laugh: 'But the donkeys are quite strong enough for such a job as that.'

The 'donkeys' struggled on up the hill for about another hundred yards and then they were forced to halt again.

'We mustn't stop long, you know,' said Harlow. 'Most likely he's gone to the job, and he'll wait to see how long it takes us to get there.'

Barrington felt inclined to say that in that case Rushton would have to wait, but he remained silent, for he remembered that although he personally did not care a brass button whether he got the sack or not, the others were not so fortunately circumstanced.

While they were resting, another two-legged donkey passed by pushing another cart--or rather, holding it back, for he was coming slowly down the hill. Another Heir of all the ages--another Imperialist--a degraded, brutalized wretch, clad in filthy, stinking rags, his toes protruding from the rotten broken boots that were tied with bits of string upon his stockingless feet. The ramshackle cart was loaded with

empty bottles and putrid rags, heaped loosely in the cart and packed into a large sack. Old coats and trousers, dresses, petticoats, and under-clothing, greasy, mildewed and malodorous. As he crept along with his eyes on the ground, the man gave utterance at intervals to uncouth, inarticulate sounds.

'That's another way of gettin' a livin',' said Sawkins with a laugh as the miserable creature slunk past.

Harlow also laughed, and Barrington regarded them curiously. He thought it strange that they did not seem to realize that they might some day become like this man themselves.

'I've often wondered what they does with all them dirty old rags,' said Philpot.

'Made into paper,' replied Harlow, briefly.

'Some of them are,' said Barrington, 'and some are manufactured into shoddy cloth and made into Sunday clothes for working men.

'There's all sorts of different ways of gettin' a livin',' remarked Sawkins, after a pause. 'I read in a paper the other day about a bloke wot goes about lookin' for open trap doors and cellar flaps in front of shops. As soon as he spotted one open, he used to go and fall down in it; and then he'd be took to the 'orspital, and when he got better he used to go and threaten to bring a action against the shop-keeper and

get damages, and most of 'em used to part up without goin' in front of the judge at all. But one day a slop was a watchin' of 'im, and seen 'im chuck 'isself down one, and when they picked 'im up they found he'd broke his leg. So they took 'im to the 'orspital and when he came out and went round to the shop and started talkin' about bringin' a action for damages, the slop collared 'im and they give 'im six months.'

'Yes, I read about that,' said Harlow, 'and there was another case of a chap who was run over by a motor, and they tried to make out as 'e put 'isself in the way on purpose; but 'e got some money out of the swell it belonged to; a 'undered pound I think it was.'

'I only wish as one of their motors would run inter me,' said Philpot, making a feeble attempt at a joke. 'I lay I'd get some a' me own back out of 'em.'

The others laughed, and Harlow was about to make some reply but at that moment a cyclist appeared coming down the hill from the direction of the job. It was Nimrod, so they resumed their journey once more and presently Hunter shot past on his machine without taking any notice of them...

When they arrived they found that Rushton had not been there at all, but Nimrod had. Crass said that he had kicked up no end of a row because they had not called at the yard at six o'clock that morning for the ladder, instead of going for it after breakfast--making two journeys instead of one, and he had also been ratty because the big

gable had not been started the first thing that morning.

They carried the ladder into the garden and laid it on the ground along the side of the house where the gable was. A brick wall about eight feet high separated the grounds of 'The Refuge' from those of the premises next door. Between this wall and the side wall of the house was a space about six feet wide and this space formed a kind of alley or lane or passage along the side of the house. They laid the ladder on the ground along this passage, the 'foot' was placed about half-way through; just under the centre of the gable, and as it lay there, the other end of the ladder reached right out to the front railings.

Next, it was necessary that two men should go up into the attic--the window of which was just under the point of the gable--and drop the end of a long rope down to the others who would tie it to the top of the ladder. Then two men would stand on the bottom rung, so as to keep the 'foot' down, and the three others would have to raise the ladder up, while the two men up in the attic hauled on the rope.

They called Bundy and his mate Ned Dawson to help, and it was arranged that Harlow and Crass should stand on the foot because they were the heaviest. Philpot, Bundy, and Barrington were to 'raise', and Dawson and Sawkins were to go up to the attic and haul on the rope.

'Where's the rope?' asked Crass.

The others looked blankly at him. None of them had thought of bringing

one from the yard.

'Why, ain't there one 'ere?' asked Philpot.

'One 'ere? Of course there ain't one 'ere!' snarled Crass. 'Do you mean to say as you ain't brought one, then?'

Philpot stammered out something about having thought there was one at the house already, and the others said they had not thought about it at all.

'Well, what the bloody hell are we to do now?' cried Crass, angrily.

'I'll go to the yard and get one,' suggested Barrington. 'I can do it in twenty minutes there and back.'

'Yes! and a bloody fine row there'd be if Hunter was to see you! 'Ere it's nearly ten o'clock and we ain't made a start on this gable wot we ought to 'ave started first thing this morning.'

'Couldn't we tie two or three of those short ropes together?' suggested Philpot. 'Those that the other two ladders was spliced with?'

As there was sure to be a row if they delayed long enough to send to the yard, it was decided to act on Philpot's suggestion.

Several of the short ropes were accordingly tied together but upon



examination it was found that some parts were so weak that even Crass had to admit it would be dangerous to attempt to haul the heavy ladder up with them.

'Well, the only thing as I can see for it,' he said, 'is that the boy will 'ave to go down to the yard and get the long rope. It won't do for anyone else to go: there's been one row already about the waste of time because we didn't call at the yard for the ladder at six o'clock.'

Bert was down in the basement of the house limewashing a cellar. Crass called him up and gave him the necessary instructions, chief of which was to get back again as soon as ever he could. The boy ran off, and while they were waiting for him to come back the others went on with their several jobs. Philpot returned to the small gable he had been painting before breakfast, which he had not quite finished. As he worked a sudden and unaccountable terror took possession of him. He did not want to do that other gable; he felt too ill; and he almost resolved that he would ask Crass if he would mind letting him do something else. There were several younger men who would not object to doing it--it would be mere child's play to them, and Barrington had already--yesterday--offered to change jobs with him.

But then, when he thought of what the probable consequences would be, he hesitated to take that course, and tried to persuade himself that he would be able to get through with the work all right. He did not want Crass or Hunter to mark him as being too old for ladder work.

Bert came back in about half an hour flushed and sweating with the weight of the rope and with the speed he had made. He delivered it to Crass and then returned to his cellar and went on with the limewashing, while Crass passed the word for Philpot and the others to come and raise the ladder. He handed the rope to Ned Dawson, who took it up to the attic, accompanied by Sawkins; arrived there they lowered one end out of the window down to the others.

'If you ask me,' said Ned Dawson, who was critically examining the strands of the rope as he passed it out through the open window, 'If you ask me, I don't see as this is much better than the one we made up by tyin' the short pieces together. Look 'ere,'--he indicated a part of the rope that was very frayed and worn--'and 'ere's another place just as bad.'

'Well, for Christ's sake don't say nothing about it now,' replied Sawkins. 'There's been enough talk and waste of time over this job already.'

Ned made no answer and the end having by this time reached the ground, Bundy made it fast to the ladder, about six rungs from the top.

The ladder was lying on the ground, parallel to the side of the house. The task of raising it would have been much easier if they had been able to lay it at right angles to the house wall, but this was impossible because of the premises next door and the garden wall between the two houses. On account of its having to be raised in this

manner the men at the top would not be able to get a straight pull on the rope; they would have to stand back in the room without being able to see the ladder, and the rope would have to be drawn round the corner of the window, rasping against the edge of the stone sill and the brickwork.

The end of the rope having been made fast to the top of the ladder, Crass and Harlow stood on the foot and the other three raised the top from the ground; as Barrington was the tallest, he took the middle position--underneath the ladder--grasping the rungs, Philpot being on his left and Bundy on his right, each holding one side of the ladder.

At a signal from Crass, Dawson and Sawkins began to haul on the rope, and the top of the ladder began to rise slowly into the air.

Philpot was not of much use at this work, which made it all the harder for the other two who were lifting, besides putting an extra strain on the rope. His lack of strength, and the efforts of Barrington and Bundy to make up for him caused the ladder to sway from side to side, as it would not have done if they had all been equally capable.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Dawson and Sawkins--although the ladder was as yet only a little more than half the way up--noticed, as they hauled and strained on the rope, that it had worn a groove for itself in the corner of the brickwork at the side of the window; and every now and then, although they pulled with all their strength, they were not able to draw in any part of the rope at all; and it seemed to them as if

those others down below must have let go their hold altogether, or ceased lifting.

That was what actually happened. The three men found the weight so overpowering, that once or twice they were compelled to relax their efforts for a few seconds, and at those times the rope had to carry the whole weight of the ladder; and the part of the rope that had to bear the greatest strain was the part that chanced to be at the angle of the brickwork at the side of the window. And presently it happened that one of the frayed and worn places that Dawson had remarked about was just at the angle during one of those momentary pauses. On one end there hung the ponderous ladder, straining the frayed rope against the corner of the brickwork and the sharp edge of the stone sill, at the other end were Dawson and Sawkins pulling with all their strength, and in that instant the rope snapped like a piece of thread. One end remained in the hands of Sawkins and Dawson, who reeled backwards into the room, and the other end flew up into the air, writhing like the lash of a gigantic whip. For a moment the heavy ladder swayed from side to side: Barrington, standing underneath, with his hands raised above his head grasping one of the rungs, struggled desperately to hold it up. At his right stood Bundy, also with arms upraised holding the side; and on the left, between the ladder and the wall, was Philpot.

For a brief space they strove fiercely to support the overpowering weight, but Philpot had no strength, and the ladder, swaying over to the left, crashed down, crushing him upon the ground and against the wall of the house. He fell face downwards, with the ladder across his

shoulders; the side that had the iron bands twisted round it fell across the back of his neck, forcing his face against the bricks at the base of the wall. He uttered no cry and was quite still, with blood streaming from the cuts on his face and trickling from his ears.

Barrington was also hurled to the ground with his head and arms under the ladder; his head and face were cut and bleeding and he was unconscious; none of the others was hurt, for they had all had time to jump clear when the ladder fell. Their shouts soon brought all the other men running to the spot, and the ladder was quickly lifted off the two motionless figures. At first it seemed that Philpot was dead, but Easton rushed off for a neighbouring doctor, who came in a few minutes.

He knelt down and carefully examined the crushed and motionless form of Philpot, while the other men stood by in terrified silence.

Barrington, who fortunately was but momentarily stunned was sitting against the wall and had suffered nothing more serious than minor cuts and bruises.

The doctor's examination of Philpot was a very brief one, and when he rose from his knees, even before he spoke they knew from his manner that their worst fears were realized.

Philpot was dead.