

## Chapter 51

### The Widow's Son

The next morning when they went to the yard at half past eight o'clock Hunter told them that there was nothing to do, but that they had better come on Monday in case some work came in. They accordingly went on the Monday, and Tuesday and Wednesday, but as nothing 'came in' of course they did not do any work. On Thursday morning the weather was dark and bitterly cold. The sky presented an unbroken expanse of dull grey and a keen north wind swept through the cheerless streets. Owen--who had caught cold whilst painting the outside of the conservatory at Sweater's house the previous week--did not get to the yard until ten o'clock. He felt so ill that he would not have gone at all if they had not needed the money he would be able to earn if there was anything to do. Strange though it may appear to the advocates of thrift, although he had been so fortunate as to be in employment when so many others were idle, they had not saved any money. On the contrary, during all the summer they had not been able to afford to have proper food or clothing. Every week most of the money went to pay arrears of rent or some other debts, so that even whilst he was at work they had often to go without some of the necessaries of life. They had broken boots, shabby, insufficient clothing, and barely enough to eat.

The weather had become so bitterly cold that, fearing he would be laid up if he went without it any longer, he took his overcoat out of pawn,

and that week they had to almost starve. Not that it was much better other weeks, for lately he had only been making six and a half hours a day--from eight-thirty in the morning till four o'clock in the evening, and on Saturday only four and a half hours--from half past eight till one. This made his wages--at sevenpence an hour--twenty-one shillings and sevenpence a week--that is, when there was work to do every day, which was not always. Sometimes they had to stand idle three days out of six. The wages of those who got sixpence halfpenny came out at one pound and twopence--when they worked every day--and as for those who--like Sawkins--received only fivepence, their week's wages amounted to fifteen and sixpence.

When they were only employed for two or three days or perhaps only a few hours, their 'Saturday night' sometimes amounted to half a sovereign, seven and sixpence, five shillings or even less. Then most of them said that it was better than nothing at all.

Many of them were married men, so, in order to make existence possible, their wives went out charing or worked in laundries. They had children whom they had to bring up for the most part on 'skim' milk, bread, margarine, and adulterated tea. Many of these children--little mites of eight or nine years--went to work for two or three hours in the morning before going to school; the same in the evening after school, and all day on Saturday, carrying butchers' trays loaded with meat, baskets of groceries and vegetables, cans of paraffin oil, selling or delivering newspapers, and carrying milk. As soon as they were old enough they got Half Time certificates and directly they were fourteen

they left school altogether and went to work all the day. When they were old enough some of them tried to join the Army or Navy, but were found physically unfit.

It is not much to be wondered at that when they became a little older they were so degenerate intellectually that they imagined that the surest way to obtain better conditions would be to elect gangs of Liberal and Tory land-grabbers, sweaters, swindlers and lawyers to rule over them.

When Owen arrived at the yard he found Bert White cleaning out the dirty pots in the paint-shop. The noise he made with the scraping knife prevented him from hearing Owen's approach and the latter stood watching him for some minutes without speaking. The stone floor of the paint shop was damp and shiny and the whole place was chilly as a tomb. The boy was trembling with cold and he looked pitifully undersized and frail as he bent over his work with an old apron girt about him.

Because it was so cold he was wearing his jacket with the ends of the sleeves turned back to keep them clean, or to prevent them getting any dirtier, for they were already in the same condition as the rest of his attire, which was thickly encrusted with dried paint of many colours, and his hands and fingernails were grimed with it.

As he watched the poor boy bending over his task, Owen thought of Frankie, and with a feeling akin to terror wondered whether he would ever be in a similar plight.

When he saw Owen, the boy left off working and wished him good morning, remarking that it was very cold.

'Why don't you light a fire? There's lots of wood lying about the yard.'

'No,' said Bert shaking his head. 'That would never do! Misery wouldn't 'arf ramp if 'e caught me at it. I used to 'ave a fire 'ere last winter till Rushton found out, and 'e kicked up an orful row and told me to move meself and get some work done and then I wouldn't feel the cold.'

'Oh, he said that, did he?' said Owen, his pale face becoming suddenly suffused with blood. 'We'll see about that.'

He went out into the yard and crossing over to where--under a shed--there was a great heap of waste wood, stuff that had been taken out of places where Rushton & Co. had made alterations, he gathered an armful of it and was returning to the paintshop when Sawkins accosted him.

'You mustn't go burnin' any of that, you know! That's all got to be saved and took up to the bloke's house. Misery spoke about it only this mornin'.'

Owen did not answer him. He carried the wood into the shop and after throwing it into the fireplace he poured some old paint over it, and,

applying a match, produced a roaring fire. Then he brought in several more armfuls of wood and piled them in a corner of the shop. Bert took no part in these proceedings, and at first rather disapproved of them because he was afraid there would be trouble when Misery came, but when the fire was an accomplished fact he warmed his hands and shifted his work to the other side of the bench so as to get the benefit of the heat.

Owen waited for about half an hour to see if Hunter would return, but as that disciple did not appear, he decided not to wait any longer. Before leaving he gave Bert some instructions:

'Keep up the fire with all the old paint that you can scrape off those things and any other old paint or rubbish that's here, and whenever it grows dull put more wood on. There's a lot of old stuff here that's of no use except to be thrown away or burnt. Burn it all. If Hunter says anything, tell him that I lit the fire, and that I told you to keep it burning. If you want more wood, go out and take it.'

'All right,' replied Bert.

On his way out Owen spoke to Sawkins. His manner was so menacing, his face so pale, and there was such a strange glare in his eyes, that the latter thought of the talk there had been about Owen being mad, and felt half afraid of him.

'I am going to the office to see Rushton; if Hunter comes here, you say

I told you to tell him that if I find the boy in that shop again without a fire, I'll report it to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. And as for you, if the boy comes out here to get more wood, don't you attempt to interfere with him.'

'I don't want to interfere with the bloody kid,' grunted Sawkins. 'It seems to me as if he's gorn orf 'is bloody crumpet,' he added as he watched Owen walking rapidly down the street. 'I can't understand why people can't mind their own bloody business: anyone would think the boy belonged to 'IM.'

That was just how the matter presented itself to Owen. The idea that it was his own child who was to be treated in this way possessed and infuriated him as he strode savagely along. In the vicinity of the Slave Market on the Grand Parade he passed--without seeing them--several groups of unemployed artisans whom he knew. Some of them were offended and remarked that he was getting stuck up, but others, observing how strange he looked, repeated the old prophecy that one of these days Owen would go out of his mind.

As he drew near to his destination large flakes of snow began to fall. He walked so rapidly and was in such a fury that by the time he reached the shop he was scarcely able to speak.

'Is--Hunter--or Rushton here?' he demanded of the shopman.

'Hunter isn't, but the guv'nor is. What was it you wanted?'

'He'll soon--know--that,' panted Owen as he strode up to the office door, and without troubling to knock, flung it violently open and entered.

The atmosphere of this place was very different from that of the damp cellar where Bert was working. A grate fitted with asbestos blocks and lit with gas communicated a genial warmth to the air.

Rushton was standing leaning over Miss Wade's chair with his left arm round her neck. Owen recollected afterwards that her dress was disarranged. She retired hastily to the far end of the room as Rushton jumped away from her, and stared in amazement and confusion at the intruder--he was too astonished and embarrassed to speak. Owen stood panting and quivering in the middle of the office and pointed a trembling finger at his employer:

'I've come--here--to tell--you--that--if I find young--Bert White--working--down in that shop--without a fire--I'll have you prosecuted. The place is not good enough for a stable--if you owned a valuable dog--you wouldn't keep it there--I give you fair warning--I know--enough--about you--to put you--where you deserve to be--if you don't treat him better I'll have you punished I'll show you up.'

Rushton continued to stare at him in mingled confusion, fear and perplexity; he did not yet comprehend exactly what it was all about; he was guiltily conscious of so many things which he might reasonably fear

to be shown up or prosecuted for if they were known, and the fact of being caught under such circumstances with Miss Wade helped to reduce him to a condition approaching terror.

'If the boy has been there without a fire, I 'aven't known anything about it,' he stammered at last. 'Mr 'Unter has charge of all those matters.'

'You--yourself--forbade him--to make a fire last winter--and anyhow--you know about it now. You obtained money from his mother under the pretence--that you were going--to teach him a trade--but for the last twelve months--you have been using him--as if he were--a beast of burden. I advise you to see to it--or I shall--find--means--to make you--wish you had done so.'

With this Owen turned and went out, leaving the door open, and Rushton in a state of mind compounded of fear, amazement and anger.

As he walked homewards through the snow-storm, Owen began to realize that the consequence of what he had done would be that Rushton would not give him any more work, and as he reflected on all that this would mean to those at home, for a moment he doubted whether he had done right. But when he told Nora what had happened she said there were plenty of other firms in the town who would employ him--when they had the work. He had done without Rushton before and could do so again; for her part--whatever the consequences might be--she was glad that he had acted as he did.



'We'll get through somehow, I suppose,' said Owen, wearily. 'There's not much chance of getting a job anywhere else just now, but I shall try to get some work on my own account. I shall do some samples of show-cards the same as I did last winter and try to get orders from some of the shops--they usually want something extra at this time, but I'm afraid it is rather too late: most of them already have all they want.'

'I shouldn't go out again today if I were you,' said Nora, noticing how ill he looked. 'You should stay at home and read, or write up those minutes.'

The minutes referred to were those of the last meeting of the local branch of the Painters' Society, of which Owen was the secretary, and as the snow continued to fall, he occupied himself after dinner in the manner his wife suggested, until four o'clock, when Frankie returned from school bringing with him a large snowball, and crying out as a piece of good news that the snow was still falling heavily, and that he believed it was freezing!

They went to bed very early that night, for it was necessary to economize the coal, and not only that, but--because the rooms were so near the roof--it was not possible to keep the place warm no matter how much coal was used. The fire seemed, if anything, to make the place colder, for it caused the outer air to pour in through the joints of the ill-fitting doors and windows.

Owen lay awake for the greater part of the night. The terror of the future made rest or sleep impossible. He got up very early the next morning--long before it was light--and after lighting the fire, set about preparing the samples he had mentioned to Nora, but found that it would not be possible to do much in this direction without buying more cardboard, for most of what he had was not in good condition.

They had bread and butter and tea for breakfast. Frankie had his in bed and it was decided to keep him away from school until after dinner because the weather was so very cold and his only pair of boots were so saturated with moisture from having been out in the snow the previous day.

'I shall make a few inquiries to see if there's any other work to be had before I buy the cardboard,' said Owen, 'although I'm afraid it's not much use.'

Just as he was preparing to go out, the front door bell rang, and as he was going down to answer it he saw Bert White coming upstairs. The boy was carrying a flat, brown-paper parcel under his arm.

'A corfin plate,' he explained as he arrived at the door. 'Wanted at once--Misery ses you can do it at 'ome, an' I've got to wait for it.'

Owen and his wife looked at each other with intense relief. So he was not to be dismissed after all. It was almost too good to be true.

'There's a piece of paper inside the parcel with the name of the party what's dead,' continued Bert, 'and here's a little bottle of Brunswick black for you to do the inscription with.'

'Did he send any other message?'

'Yes: he told me to tell you there's a job to be started Monday morning--a couple of rooms to be done out somewhere. Got to be finished by Thursday; and there's another job 'e wants you to do this afternoon--after dinner--so you've got to come to the yard at one o'clock. 'E told me to tell you 'e meant to leave a message for you yesterday morning, but 'e forgot.'

'What did he say to you about the fire--anything?'

'Yes: they both of 'em came about an hour after you went away--Misery and the Bloke too--but they didn't kick up a row. I wasn't arf frightened, I can tell you, when I saw 'em both coming, but they was quite nice. The Bloke ses to me, "Ah, that's right, my boy," 'e ses. "Keep up a good fire. I'm going to send you some coke," 'e ses. And then they 'ad a look round and 'e told Sawkins to put some new panes of glass where the winder was broken, and--you know that great big packing-case what was under the truck shed?'

'Yes.'

'Well, 'e told Sawkins to saw it up and cover over the stone floor of the paint-shop with it. It ain't 'arf all right there now. I've cleared out all the muck from under the benches and we've got two sacks of coke sent from the gas-works, and the Bloke told me when that's all used up I've got to get a order orf Miss Wade for another lot.'

At one o'clock Owen was at the yard, where he saw Misery, who instructed him to go to the front shop and paint some numbers on the racks where the wallpapers were stored. Whilst he was doing this work Rushton came in and greeted him in a very friendly way.

'I'm very glad you let me know about the boy working in that paint-shop,' he observed after a few preliminary remarks. 'I can assure you as I don't want the lad to be uncomfortable, but you know I can't attend to everything myself. I'm much obliged to you for telling me about it; I think you did quite right; I should have done the same myself.'

Owen did not know what to reply, but Rushton walked off without waiting...