

Chapter 52

'It's a Far, Far Better Thing that I do, than I have Ever Done'

Although Owen, Easton and Crass and a few others were so lucky as to have had a little work to do during the last few months, the majority of their fellow workmen had been altogether out of employment most of the time, and meanwhile the practical business-men, and the pretended disciples of Christ--the liars and hypocrites who professed to believe that all men are brothers and God their Father--had continued to enact the usual farce that they called 'Dealing' with the misery that surrounded them on every side. They continued to organize 'Rummage' and 'Jumble' sales and bazaars, and to distribute their rotten cast-off clothes and boots and their broken victuals and soup to such of the Brethren as were sufficiently degraded to beg for them. The beautiful Distress Committee was also in full operation; over a thousand Brethren had registered themselves on its books. Of this number--after careful investigation--the committee had found that no fewer than six hundred and seventy-two were deserving of being allowed to work for their living. The Committee would probably have given these six hundred and seventy-two the necessary permission, but it was somewhat handicapped by the fact that the funds at its disposal were only sufficient to enable that number of Brethren to be employed for about three days. However, by adopting a policy of temporizing, delay, and general artful dodging, the Committee managed to create the impression that they were Dealing with the Problem.

If it had not been for a cunning device invented by Brother Rushton, a much larger number of the Brethren would have succeeded in registering themselves as unemployed on the books of the Committee. In previous years it had been the practice to issue an application form called a 'Record Paper' to any Brother who asked for one, and the Brother returned it after filling it in himself. At a secret meeting of the Committee Rushton proposed--amid laughter and applause, it was such a good joke--a new and better way, calculated to keep down the number of applicants. The result of this innovation was that no more forms were issued, but the applicants for work were admitted into the office one at a time, and were there examined by a junior clerk, somewhat after the manner of a French Juge d'Instruction interrogating a criminal, the clerk filling in the form according to the replies of the culprit.

'What's your name?'

'Where do you live?'

'How long have you been living there?'

'Where did you live before you went there?'

'How long were you living at that place?'

'Why did you move?'

'Did you owe any rent when you left?'

'What was your previous address?'

'How old are you? When was your last birthday?'

'What is your Trade, Calling, Employment, or Occupation?'

'Are you Married or single or a Widower or what?'

'How many children have you? How many boys? How many girls? Do they go to work? What do they earn?'

'What kind of a house do you live in? How many rooms are there?'

'How much rent do you owe?'

'Who was your last employer? What was the foreman's name? How long did you work there? What kind of work did you do? Why did you leave?'

'What have you been doing for the last five years? What kind of work, how many hours a day? What wages did you get?'

'Give the full names and addresses of all the different employers you have worked for during the last five years, and the reasons why you left them?'

'Give the names of all the foremen you have worked under during the last five years?'

'Does your wife earn anything? How much?'

'Do you get any money from any Club or Society, or from any Charity, or from any other source?'

'Have you ever received Poor Relief?'

'Have you ever worked for a Distress Committee before?'

'Have you ever done any other kinds of work than those you have mentioned? Do you think you would be fit for any other kind? 'Have you any references?' and so on and so forth.

When the criminal had answered all the questions, and when his answers had all been duly written down, he was informed that a member of the Committee, or an Authorized Officer, or some Other Person, would in due course visit his home and make inquiries about him, after which the Authorized Officer or Other Person would make a report to the Committee, who would consider it at their next meeting.

As the interrogation of each criminal occupied about half an hour, to say nothing of the time he was kept waiting, it will be seen that as a means of keeping down the number of registered unemployed the idea

worked splendidly.

When Rushton introduced this new rule it was carried unanimously, Dr Weakling being the only dissentient, but of course he--as Brother Grinder remarked--was always opposed to any sensible proposal. There was one consolation, however, Grinder added, they was not likely to be pestered with 'im much longer; the first of November was coming and if he--Grinder--knowed anything of working men they was sure to give Weakling the dirty kick out directly they got the chance.

A few days afterwards the result of the municipal election justified Brother Grinder's prognostications, for the working men voters of Dr Weakling's ward did give him the dirty kick out: but Rushton, Didlum, Grinder and several other members of the band were triumphantly returned with increased majorities.

Mr Dauber, of Dauber and Botchit, had already been elected a Guardian of the Poor.

During all this time Hunter, who looked more worried and miserable as the dreary weeks went by, was occupied every day in supervising what work was being done and in running about seeking for more. Nearly every night he remained at the office until a late hour, poring over specifications and making out estimates. The police had become so accustomed to seeing the light in the office that as a rule they took no notice of it, but one Thursday night--exactly one week after the scene between Owen and Rushton about the boy--the constable on the beat

observed the light there much later than usual. At first he paid no particular attention to the fact, but when night merged into morning and the light still remained, his curiosity was aroused.

He knocked at the door, but no one came in answer, and no sound disturbed the deathlike stillness that reigned within. The door was locked, but he was not able to tell whether it had been closed from the inside or outside, because it had a spring latch. The office window was low down, but it was not possible to see in because the back of the glass had been painted.

The constable thought that the most probable explanation of the mystery was that whoever had been there earlier in the evening had forgotten to turn out the light when they went away; it was not likely that thieves or anyone who had no business to be there would advertise their presence by lighting the gas.

He made a note of the incident in his pocket-book and was about to resume his beat when he was joined by his inspector. The latter agreed that the conclusion arrived at by the constable was probably the right one and they were about to pass on when the inspector noticed a small speck of light shining through the lower part of the painted window, where a small piece of the paint had either been scratched or had shelled off the glass. He knelt down and found that it was possible to get a view of the interior of the office, and as he peered through he gave a low exclamation. When he made way for his subordinate to look in his turn, the constable was with some difficulty able to distinguish

the figure of a man lying prone upon the floor.

It was an easy task for the burly policeman to force open the office door: a single push of his shoulder wrenched it from its fastenings and as it flew back the socket of the lock fell with a splash into a great pool of blood that had accumulated against the threshold, flowing from the place where Hunter was lying on his back, his arms extended and his head nearly severed from his body. On the floor, close to his right hand, was an open razor. An overturned chair lay on the floor by the side of the table where he usually worked, the table itself being littered with papers and drenched with blood.

Within the next few days Crass resumed the role he had played when Hunter was ill during the summer, taking charge of the work and generally doing his best to fill the dead man's place, although--as he confided to certain of his cronies in the bar of the Cricketers--he had no intention of allowing Rushton to do the same as Hunter had done. One of his first jobs--on the morning after the discovery of the body--was to go with Mr Rushton to look over a house where some work was to be done for which an estimate had to be given. It was this estimate that Hunter had been trying to make out the previous evening in the office, for they found that the papers on his table were covered with figures and writing relating to this work. These papers justified the subsequent verdict of the Coroner's jury that Hunter committed suicide in a fit of temporary insanity, for they were covered with a lot of meaningless scribbling, the words wrongly spelt and having no intelligible connection with each other. There was one sum that he had

evidently tried repeatedly to do correctly, but which came wrong in a different way every time. The fact that he had the razor in his possession seemed to point to his having premeditated the act, but this was accounted for at the inquest by the evidence of the last person who saw him alive, a hairdresser, who stated that Hunter had left the razor with him to be sharpened a few days previously and that he had called for it on the evening of the tragedy. He had ground this razor for Mr Hunter several times before.

Crass took charge of all the arrangements for the funeral. He bought a new second-hand pair of black trousers at a cast-off clothing shop in honour of the occasion, and discarded his own low-crowned silk hat--which was getting rather shabby--in favour of Hunter's tall one, which he found in the office and annexed without hesitation or scruple. It was rather large for him, but he put some folded strips of paper inside the leather lining. Crass was a proud man as he walked in Hunter's place at the head of the procession, trying to look solemn, but with a half-smile on his fat, pasty face, destitute of colour except one spot on his chin near his underlip, where there was a small patch of inflammation about the size of a threepenny piece. This spot had been there for a very long time. At first--as well as he could remember--it was only a small pimple, but it had grown larger, with something the appearance of scurvy. Crass attributed its continuation to the cold having 'got into it last winter'. It was rather strange, too, because he generally took care of himself when it was cold: he always wore the warm wrap that had formerly belonged to the old lady who died of cancer. However, Crass did not worry much about this

little sore place; he just put a little zinc ointment on it
occasionally and had no doubt that it would get well in time.