

Chapter 53

Barrington Finds a Situation

The revulsion of feeling that Barrington experienced during the progress of the election was intensified by the final result. The blind, stupid, enthusiastic admiration displayed by the philanthropists for those who exploited and robbed them; their extraordinary apathy with regard to their own interests; the patient, broken-spirited way in which they endured their sufferings, tamely submitting to live in poverty in the midst of the wealth they had helped to create; their callous indifference to the fate of their children, and the savage hatred they exhibited towards anyone who dared to suggest the possibility of better things, forced upon him the thought that the hopes he cherished were impossible of realization. The words of the renegade Socialist recurred constantly to his mind:

'You can be a Jesus Christ if you like, but for my part I'm finished. For the future I intend to look after myself. As for these people, they vote for what they want, they get what they vote for, and, by God! they deserve nothing better! They are being beaten with whips of their own choosing, and if I had my way they should be chastised with scorpions. For them, the present system means joyless drudgery, semi-starvation, rags and premature death; and they vote for it and uphold it. Let them have what they vote for! Let them drudge and let them starve!'

These words kept ringing in his ears as he walked through the crowded streets early one fine evening a few days before Christmas. The shops were all brilliantly lighted for the display of their Christmas stores, and the pavements and even the carriageways were thronged with sightseers.

Barrington was specially interested in the groups of shabbily dressed men and women and children who gathered in the roadway in front of the poulterers' and butchers' shops, gazing at the meat and the serried rows of turkeys and geese decorated with coloured ribbons and rosettes. He knew that to come here and look at these things was the only share many of these poor people would have of them, and he marvelled greatly at their wonderful patience and abject resignation.

But what struck him most of all was the appearance of many of the women, evidently working men's wives. Their faded, ill-fitting garments and the tired, sad expressions on their pale and careworn faces. Some of them were alone; others were accompanied by little children who trotted along trustfully clinging to their mothers' hands. The sight of these poor little ones, their utter helplessness and dependence, their patched unsightly clothing and broken boots, and the wistful looks on their pitiful faces as they gazed into the windows of the toy-shops, sent a pang of actual physical pain to his heart and filled his eyes with tears. He knew that these children--naked of joy and all that makes life dear--were being tortured by the sight of the things that were placed so cruelly before their eyes, but which they

were not permitted to touch or to share; and, like Joseph of old, his heart yearned over to his younger brethren.

He felt like a criminal because he was warmly clad and well fed in the midst of all this want and unhappiness, and he flushed with shame because he had momentarily faltered in his devotion to the noblest cause that any man could be privileged to fight for--the uplifting of the disconsolate and the oppressed.

He presently came to a large toy shop outside which several children were standing admiring the contents of the window. He recognized some of these children and paused to watch them and to listen to their talk. They did not notice him standing behind them as they ranged to and fro before the window, and as he looked at them, he was reminded of the way in which captive animals walk up and down behind the bars of their cages. These children wandered repeatedly, backwards and forwards from one end of the window to the other, with their little hands pressed against the impenetrable plate glass, choosing and pointing out to each other the particular toys that took their fancies.

'That's mine!' cried Charley Linden, enthusiastically indicating a large strongly built waggon. 'If I had that I'd give Freddie rides in it and bring home lots of firewood, and we could play at fire engines as well.'

'I'd rather have this railway,' said Frankie Owen. 'There's a real tunnel and real coal in the tenders; then there's the station and the

signals and a place to turn the engine round, and a red lantern to light when there's danger on the line.'

'Mine's this doll--not the biggest one, the one in pink with clothes that you can take off,' said Elsie; 'and this tea set; and this needlecase for Mother.'

Little Freddie had let go his hold of Elsie, to whom he usually clung tightly and was clapping his hands and chuckling with delight and desire. 'Gee-gee?' he cried eagerly. 'Gee-gee. Pwetty Gee-gee! Fweddy want gee-gee!'

'But it's no use lookin' at them any longer,' continued Elsie, with a sigh, as she took hold of Freddie's hand to lead him away. 'It's no use lookin' at 'em any longer; the likes of us can't expect to have such good things as them.'

This remark served to recall Frankie and Charley to the stern realities of life, and turning reluctantly away from the window they prepared to follow Elsie, but Freddie had not yet learnt the lesson--he had not lived long enough to understand that the good things of the world were not for the likes of him; so when Elsie attempted to draw him away he pursed up his underlip and began to cry, repeating that he wanted a gee-gee. The other children dustered round trying to coax and comfort him by telling him that no one was allowed to have anything out of the windows yet--until Christmas--and that Santa Claus would be sure to bring him a gee-gee then; but these arguments failed to make any

impression on Freddie, who tearfully insisted upon being supplied at once.

Whilst they were thus occupied they caught sight of Barrington, whom they hailed with evident pleasure born of the recollection of certain gifts of pennies and cakes they had at different times received from him.

'Hello, Mr Barrington,' said the two boys in a breath.

'Hello,' replied Barrington, as he patted the baby's cheek. 'What's the matter here? What's Freddie crying for?'

'He wants that there 'orse, mister, the one with the real 'air on,' said Charley, smiling indulgently like a grown-up person who realized the absurdity of the demand.

'Fweddie want gee-gee,' repeated the child, taking hold of Barrington's hand and returning to the window. 'Nice gee-gee.'

'Tell him that Santa Claus'll bring it to him on Christmas,' whispered Elsie. 'P'raps he'll believe you and that'll satisfy him, and he's sure to forget all about it in a little while.'

'Are you still out of work, Mr Barrington?' inquired Frankie.

'No,' replied Barrington slowly. 'I've got something to do at last.'

'Well, that's a good job, ain't it?' remarked Charley.

'Yes,' said Barrington. 'And whom do you think I'm working for?'

'Who?'

'Santa Claus.'

'Santa Claus!' echoed the children, opening their eyes to the fullest extent.

'Yes,' continued Barrington, solemnly. 'You know, he is a very old man now, so old that he can't do all his work himself. Last year he was so tired that he wasn't able to get round to all the children he wanted to give things to, and consequently a great many of them never got anything at all. So this year he's given me a job to help him. He's given me some money and a list of children's names, and against their names are written the toys they are to have. My work is to buy the things and give them to the boys and girls whose names are on the list.'

The children listened to this narrative with bated breath. Incredible as the story seemed, Barrington's manner was so earnest as to almost compel belief.

'Really and truly, or are you only having a game?' said Frankie at length, speaking almost in a whisper. Elsie and Charley maintained an

awestruck silence, while Freddie beat upon the glass with the palms of his hands.

'Really and truly,' replied Barrington unblushingly as he took out his pocket-book and turned over the leaves. 'I've got the list here; perhaps your names are down for something.'

The three children turned pale and their hearts beat violently as they listened wide-eyed for what was to follow.

'Let me see,' continued Barrington, scanning the pages of the book, 'Why, yes, here they are! Elsie Linden, one doll with clothes that can be taken off, one tea-set, one needlecase. Freddie Easton, one horse with real hair. Charley Linden, one four-wheeled waggon full of groceries. Frankie Owen, one railway with tunnel, station, train with real coal for engine, signals, red lamp and place to turn the engines round.'

Barrington closed the book: 'So you may as well have your things now,' he continued, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone. 'We'll buy them here; it will save me a lot of work. I shall not have the trouble of taking them round to where you live. It's lucky I happened to meet you, isn't it?'

The children were breathless with emotion, but they just managed to gasp out that it was--very lucky.

As they followed him into the shop, Freddie was the only one of the four whose condition was anything like normal. All the others were in a half-dazed state. Frankie was afraid that he was not really awake at all. It couldn't be true; it must be a dream.

In addition to the hair, the horse was furnished with four wheels. They did not have it made into a parcel, but tied some string to it and handed it over to its new owner. The elder children were scarcely conscious of what took place inside the shop; they knew that Barrington was talking to the shopman, but they did not hear what was said--the sound seemed far away and unreal.

The shopman made the doll, the tea-set and the needlecase into one parcel and gave it to Elsie. The railway, in a stout cardboard box, was also wrapped up in brown paper, and Frankie's heart nearly burst when the man put the package into his arms.

When they came out of the toy shop they said 'Good night' to Frankie, who went off carrying his parcel very carefully and feeling as if he were walking on air. The others went into a provision merchant's nearby, where the groceries were purchased and packed into the waggon.

Then Barrington, upon referring to the list to make quite certain that he had not forgotten anything, found that Santa Claus had put down a pair of boots each for Elsie and Charley, and when they went to buy these, it was seen that their stockings were all ragged and full of holes, so they went to a draper's and bought some stocking also.

Barrington said that although they were not on the list, he was sure Santa Claus would not object--he had probably meant them to have them, but had forgotten to put them down.