Chapter 54

The End

The following evening Barrington called at Owen's place. He said he was going home for the holidays and had come to say goodbye for a time.

Owen had not been doing very well during these last few months, although he was one of the few lucky ones who had had some small share of work. Most of the money he earned went for rent, to pay which they often had to go short of food. Lately his chest had become so bad that the slightest exertion brought on fits of coughing and breathlessness, which made it almost impossible to work even when he had the opportunity; often it was only by an almost superhuman effort of will that he was able to continue working at all. He contrived to keep up appearances to a certain extent before Rushton, who, although he knew that Owen was not so strong as the other men, was inclined to overlook it so long as he was able to do his share of work, for Owen was a very useful hand when things were busy. But lately some of the men with whom he worked began to manifest dissatisfaction at having him for a mate. When two men are working together, the master expects to see two men's work done, and if one of the two is not able to do his share it makes it all the harder for the other.

He never had the money to go to a doctor to get advice, but earlier in the winter he had obtained from Rushton a ticket for the local

hospital. Every Saturday throughout the year when the men were paid they were expected to put a penny or twopence in the hospital box. Contributions were obtained in this way from every firm and workshop in the town. The masters periodically handed these boxes over to the hospital authorities and received in return some tickets which they gave to anyone who needed and asked for them. The employer had to fill in the ticket or application form with the name and address of the applicant, and to certify that in his opinion the individual was a deserving case, 'suitable to receive this charity'. In common with the majority of workmen, Owen had a sort of horror of going for advice to this hospital, but he was so ill that he stifled his pride and went.
It happened that it turned out to be more expensive than going to a private doctor, for he had to be at the hospital at a certain hour on a particular morning. To do this he had to stay away from work. The medicine they prescribed and which he had to buy did him no good, for the truth was that it was not medicine that he--like thousands of others--needed, but proper conditions of life and proper food; things that had been for years past as much out of his reach as if he had been dying alone in the middle of a desert.

Occasionally Nora contrived--by going without some other necessary--to buy him a bottle of one of the many much-advertised medicines; but although some of these things were good she was not able to buy enough for him to derive any benefit from them.

Although he was often seized with a kind of terror of the future--of being unable to work--he fought against these feelings and tried to

believe that when the weather became warmer he would be all right once more.

When Barrington came in Owen was sitting in a deck-chair by the fire in the sitting-room. He had been to work that day with Harlow, washing off the ceilings and stripping the old paper from the walls of two rooms in Rushton's home, and he looked very haggard and exhausted.

'I have never told you before,' said Barrington, after they had been talking for a while, 'but I suppose you have guessed that I did not work for Rushton because I needed to do so in order to live. I just wanted to see things for myself; to see life as it is lived by the majority. My father is a wealthy man. He doesn't approve of my opinions, but at same time he does not interfere with me for holding them, and I have a fairly liberal allowance which I spent in my own way. I'm going to pass Christmas with my own people, but in the spring I intend to fit out a Socialist Van, and then I shall come back here. We'll have some of the best speakers in the movement; we'll hold meetings every night; we'll drench the town with literature, and we'll start a branch of the party.'

Owen's eye kindled and his pale face flushed.

'I shall be able to do something to advertise the meetings,' he said. For instance, I could paint some posters and placards.'

'And I can help to give away handbills,' chimed in Frankie, looking up

from the floor, where he was seated working the railway. 'I know a lot of boys who'll come along with me to put 'em under the doors as well.'

They were in the sitting-room and the door was shut. Mrs Owen was in the next room with Ruth. While the two men were talking the front-door bell was heard to ring and Frankie ran out to see who it was, closing the door after him. Barrington and Owen continued their conversation, and from time to time they could hear a low murmur of voices from the adjoining room. After a little while they heard some one go out by the front door, and almost immediately afterward Frankie--wild with excitement, burst into the room, crying out:

'Dad and Mr Barrington! Three cheers!' And he began capering gleefully about the room, evidently transported with joy.

'What are the cheers to be for?' inquired Barrington, rather mystified by this extraordinary conduct.

'Mr Easton came with Freddie to see Mrs Easton, and she's gone home again with them,' replied Freddie, 'and--she's given the baby to us for a Christmas box!'

Barrington was already familiar with the fact of Easton's separation from his wife, and Owen now told him the Story of their reconciliation.

Barrington took his leave shortly afterwards. His train left at eight; it was already nearly half past seven, and he said he had a letter to

write. Nora brought the baby in to show him before he went, and then she helped Frankie to put on his overcoat, for Barrington had requested that the boy might be permitted to go a little way with him.

There was a stationer's shop at the end of the street. He went in here and bought a sheet of notepaper and an envelope, and, having borrowed the pen and ink, wrote a letter which he enclosed in the envelope with the two other pieces that he took out of his pocketbook. Having addressed the letter he came out of the shop; Frankie was waiting for him outside. He gave the letter to the boy.

'I want you to take this straight home and give it to your dad. I don't want you to stop to play or even to speak to anyone till you get home.'

'All right,' replied Frankie. 'I won't stop running all the way.'

Barrington hesitated and looked at his watch. 'I think I have time to go back with you as far as your front door,' he said, 'then I shall be quite sure you haven't lost it.'

They accordingly retraced their steps and in a few minutes reached the entrance to the house. Barrington opened the door and stood for a moment in the hall watching Frankie ascend the stairs.

'Will your train cross over the bridge?' inquired the boy, pausing and looking over the banisters.

'Yes. Why?'

'Because we can see the bridge from our front-room window, and if you were to wave your handkerchief as your train goes over the bridge, we could wave back.'

'All right. I'll do so. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

Barrington waited till he heard Frankie open and close the door of Owen's fiat, and then he hurried away. When he gained the main road he heard the sound of singing and saw a crowd at the corner of one of the side-streets. As he drew near he perceived that it was a religious meeting.

There was a lighted lamp on a standard in the centre of the crowd and on the glass of this lamp was painted: 'Be not deceived: God is not mocked.'

Mr Rushton was preaching in the centre of the ring. He said that they had come hout there that evening to tell the Glad Tidings of Great Joy to hall those dear people that he saw standing around. The members of the Shining Light Chapel--to which he himself belonged--was the organizers of that meeting but it was not a sectarian meeting, for he was 'appy to say that several members of other denominations was there

co-operating with them in the good work. As he continued his address, Rushton repeatedly referred to the individuals who composed the crowd as his 'Brothers and Sisters' and, strange to say, nobody laughed.

Barrington looked round upon the 'Brothers': Mr Sweater, resplendent in a new silk hat of the latest fashion, and a fur-trimmed overcoat. The Rev. Mr Bosher, Vicar of the Church of the Whited Sepulchre, Mr Grinder--one of the churchwardens at the same place of alleged worship--both dressed in broadcloth and fine linen and glossy silk hats, while their general appearance testified to the fact that they had fared sumptuously for many days. Mr Didlum, Mrs Starvem, Mr Dauber, Mr Botchit, Mr Smeeriton, and Mr Leavit.

And in the midst was the Rev. John Starr, doing the work for which he was paid.

As he stood there in the forefront of this company, there was nothing in his refined and comely exterior to indicate that his real function was to pander to and flatter them; to invest with an air of respectability and rectitude the abominably selfish lives of the gang of swindlers, slave-drivers and petty tyrants who formed the majority of the congregation of the Shining Light Chapel.

He was doing the work for which he was paid. By the mere fact of his presence there, condoning and justifying the crimes of these typical representatives of that despicable class whose greed and inhumanity have made the earth into a hell.

There was also a number of 'respectable', well-dressed people who looked as if they could do with a good meal, and a couple of shabbily dressed, poverty-stricken-looking individuals who seemed rather out of place in the glittering throng.

The remainder of the Brothers consisted of half-starved, pale-faced working men and women, most of them dressed in other people's cast-off clothing, and with broken, patched-up, leaky boots on their feet.

Rushton having concluded his address, Didlum stepped forward to give out the words of the hymn the former had quoted at the conclusion of his remarks:

'Oh, come and jine this 'oly band,
And hon to glory go.'

Strange and incredible as it may appear to the reader, although none of them ever did any of the things Jesus said, the people who were conducting this meeting had the effrontery to claim to be followers of Christ--Christians!

Jesus said: 'Lay not up for yourselves treasure upon earth', 'Love not the world nor the things of the world', 'Woe unto you that are rich--it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.' Yet all these self-styled

'Followers' of Christ made the accumulation of money the principal business of their lives.

Jesus said: 'Be ye not called masters; for they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not touch them with one of their fingers. For one is your master, even Christ, and ye are all brethren.' But nearly all these alleged followers of the humble Workman of Nazareth claimed to be other people's masters or mistresses. And as for being all brethren, whilst most of these were arrayed in broadcloth and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day, they knew that all around them thousands of those they hypocritically called their 'brethren', men, women and little children, were slowly perishing of hunger and cold; and we have already seen how much brotherhood existed between Sweater and Rushton and the miserable, half-starved wretches in their employment.

Whenever they were asked why they did not practise the things Jesus preached, they replied that it is impossible to do so! They did not seem to realize that when they said this they were saying, in effect, that Jesus taught an impracticable religion; and they appeared to forget that Jesus said, 'Wherefore call ye me Lord, Lord, when ye do not the things I say?...' 'Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened to a foolish man who built his house upon the sand.'

But although none of these self-styled 'Followers' of Christ, ever did the things that Jesus said, they talked a great deal about them, and

sang hymns, and for a pretence made long prayers, and came out here to exhort those who were still in darkness to forsake their evil ways. And they procured this lantern and wrote a text upon it: 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked.'

They stigmatized as 'infidels' all those who differed from them, forgetting that the only real infidels are those who are systematically false and unfaithful to the Master they pretend to love and serve.

Grinder, having a slight cold, had not spoken this evening, but several other infidels, including Sweater, Didlum, Bosher, and Starr, had addressed the meeting, making a special appeal to the working people, of whom the majority of the crowd was composed, to give up all the vain pleasures of the world in which they at present indulged, and, as Rushton had eloquently put it at the close of his remarks:

'Come and jine this 'Oly band and hon to glory go!'

As Didlum finished reading out the words, the lady at the harmonium struck up the tune of the hymns, and the disciples all joined in the singing:

'Oh, come and join this 'oly band and hon to glory go.'

During the singing certain of the disciples went about amongst the crowd distributing tracts. Presently one of them offered one to Barrington and as the latter looked at the man he saw that it was

Slyme, who also recognized him at the same instant and greeted him by name. Barrington made no reply except to decline the tract:

'I don't want that--from you,' he said contemptuously.

Slyme turned red. 'Oh, I know what you're thinking of,' he said after a pause and speaking in an injured tone; 'but you shouldn't judge anyone too hard. It wasn't only my fault, and you don't know 'ow much I've suffered for it. If it 'adn't been for the Lord, I believe I should 'ave drownded myself.'

Barrington made no answer and Slyme slunk off, and when the hymn was finished Brother Sweater stood forth and gave all those present a hearty invitation to attend the services to be held during the ensuing week at the Chapel of the Shining Light. He invited them there specially, of course, because it was the place with which he was himself connected, but he entreated and begged of them even if they would not come there to go Somewhere; there were plenty of other places of worship in the town; in fact, there was one at the corner of nearly every street. Those who did not fancy the services at the Shining Light could go to the Church of the Whited Sepulchre, but he really did hope that all those dear people whom he saw standing round would go Somewhere.

A short prayer from Bosher closed the meeting, and now the reason for the presence of the two poverty-stricken-looking shabbily dressed disciples was made manifest, for while the better dressed and therefore

more respectable Brothers were shaking hands with and grinning at each other or hovering round the two clergymen and Mr Sweater, these two poor wretches carried away the harmonium and the lantern, together with the hymn books and what remained of the tracts. As Barrington hurried off to catch the train one of the 'Followers' gave him a card which he read by the light of a street lamp--

Come and join the Brotherhood
at the Shining Light Chapel
PSA
Every Sunday at 3 o'clock.
Let Brotherly Love Continue.
'Oh come and join this Holy Band
and on to Glory go.'

Barrington thought he would, rather go to hell--if there were such a place--with some decent people, than share 'glory' with a crew like this.

Nora sat sewing by the fireside in the front room, with the baby asleep in her lap. Owen was reclining in the deck-chair opposite. They had both been rather silent and thoughtful since Barrington's departure. It was mainly by their efforts that the reconciliation between Easton and Ruth had been effected and they had been so desirous of accomplishing that result that they had not given much thought to their

own position.

'I feel that I could not bear to part with her for anything now,' said Nora at last breaking the long silence, 'and Frankie is so fond of her too. But all the same I can't feel happy about it when I think how ill you are.'

'Oh, I shall be all right when the weather gets a little warmer,' said Owen, affecting a cheerfulness he did not feel. 'We have always pulled through somehow or other; the poor little thing is not going to make much difference, and she'll be as well off with us as she would have been if Ruth had not gone back.'

As he spoke he leaned over and touched the hand of the sleeping child and the little fingers closed round one of his with a clutch that sent a thrill all through him. As he looked at this little helpless, dependent creature, he realized with a kind of thankfulness that he would never have the heart to carry out the dreadful project he had sometimes entertained in hours of despondency.

'We've always got through somehow or other,' he repeated, 'and we'll do so still.'

Presently they heard Frankie's footsteps ascending the stairs and a moment afterwards the boy entered the room.

'We have to look out of the window and wave to Mr Barrington when his

train goes over the bridge,' he cried breathlessly. 'And he's sent this letter. Open the window, quick, Dad, or it may be too late.'

'There's plenty of time yet,' replied Owen, smiling at the boy's impetuosity. 'Nearly twenty minutes. We don't want the window open all that time. It's only a quarter to eight by our clock now, and that's five minutes fast.'

However, so as to make quite certain that the train should not run past unnoticed, Frankie pulled up the blind and, rubbing the steam off the glass, took up his station at the window to watch for its coming, while Owen opened the letter:

'Dear Owen,

'Enclosed you will find two bank-notes, one for ten pounds and the other for five. The first I beg you will accept from me for yourself in the same spirit that I offer it, and as I would accept it from you if our positions were reversed. If I were in need, I know that you would willingly share with me whatever you had and I could not hurt you by refusing. The other note I want you to change tomorrow morning. Give three pounds of it to Mrs Linden and the remainder to Bert White's mother.

'Wishing you all a happy Xmas and hoping to find you well and eager for the fray when I come back in the spring,

'Yours for the cause,

'George Barrington.'

Owen read it over two or three times before he could properly understand it and then, without a word of comment--for he could not have spoken at that moment to save his life--he passed it to Nora, who felt, as she read it in her turn, as if a great burden had been lifted from her heart. All the undefined terror of the future faded away as she thought of all this small piece of paper made possible.

Meanwhile, Frankie, at the window, was straining his eyes in the direction of the station.

'Don't you think we'd better have the window open now, Dad?' he said at last as the clock struck eight. 'The steam keeps coming on the glass as fast as I wipe it off and I can't see out properly. I'm sure it's nearly time now; p'raps our clock isn't as fast as you think it is.'

'All right, we'll have it open now, so as to be on the safe side,' said Owen as he stood up and raised the sash, and Nora, having wrapped the child up in a shawl, joined them at the window.

'It can't be much longer now, you know,' said Frankie. 'The line's clear. They turned the red light off the signal just before you opened the window.'

In a very few minutes they heard the whistle of the locomotive as it drew out of the station, then, an instant before the engine itself came into sight round the bend, the brightly polished rails were illuminated, shining like burnished gold in the glare of its headlight; a few seconds afterwards the train emerged into view, gathering speed as it came along the short stretch of straight way, and a moment later it thundered across the bridge. It was too far away to recognize his face, but they saw someone looking out of a carriage window waving a handkerchief, and they knew it was Barrington as they waved theirs in return. Soon there remained nothing visible of the train except the lights at the rear of the guard's van, and presently even those vanished into the surrounding darkness.

The lofty window at which they were standing overlooked several of the adjacent streets and a great part of the town. On the other side of the road were several empty houses, bristling with different house agents' advertisement boards and bills. About twenty yards away, the shop formerly tenanted by Mr Smallman, the grocer, who had become bankrupt two or three months previously, was also plastered with similar decorations. A little further on, at the opposite corner, were the premises of the Monopole Provision Stores, where brilliant lights were just being extinguished, for they, like most of the other shops, were closing their premises for the night, and the streets took on a more cheerless air as one after another their lights disappeared.

It had been a fine day, and during the earlier part of the evening the moon, nearly at the full, had been shining in a clear and starry sky;

but a strong north-east wind had sprung up within the last hour; the weather had become bitterly cold and the stars were rapidly being concealed from view by the dense banks of clouds that were slowly accumulating overhead.

As they remained at the window looking out over this scene for a few minutes after the train had passed out of sight, it seemed to Owen that the gathering darkness was as a curtain that concealed from view the Infamy existing beyond. In every country, myriads of armed men waiting for their masters to give them the signal to fall upon and rend each other like wild beasts. All around was a state of dreadful anarchy; abundant riches, luxury, vice, hypocrisy, poverty, starvation, and crime. Men literally fighting with each other for the privilege of working for their bread, and little children crying with hunger and cold and slowly perishing of want.

The gloomy shadows enshrouding the streets, concealing for the time their grey and mournful air of poverty and hidden suffering, and the black masses of cloud gathering so menacingly in the tempestuous sky, seemed typical of the Nemesis which was overtaking the Capitalist System. That atrocious system which, having attained to the fullest measure of detestable injustice and cruelty, was now fast crumbling into ruin, inevitably doomed to be overwhelmed because it was all so wicked and abominable, inevitably doomed to sink under the blight and curse of senseless and unprofitable selfishness out of existence for ever, its memory universally execrated and abhorred.

But from these ruins was surely growing the glorious fabric of the Co-operative Commonwealth. Mankind, awaking from the long night of bondage and mourning and arising from the dust wherein they had lain prone so long, were at last looking upward to the light that was riving asunder and dissolving the dark clouds which had so long concealed from them the face of heaven. The light that will shine upon the world wide Fatherland and illumine the gilded domes and glittering pinnacles of the beautiful cities of the future, where men shall dwell together in true brotherhood and goodwill and joy. The Golden Light that will be diffused throughout all the happy world from the rays of the risen sun of Socialism.

Appendix

Mugsborough

Mugsborough was a town of about eighty thousand inhabitants, about two hundred miles from London. It was built in a verdant valley. Looking west, north or east from the vicinity of the fountain on the Grand Parade in the centre of the town, one saw a succession of pine-clad hills. To the south, as far as the eye could see, stretched a vast, cultivated plain that extended to the south coast, one hundred miles away. The climate was supposed to be cool in summer and mild in winter.

The town proper nestled in the valley: to the west, the most beautiful and sheltered part was the suburb of Irene: here were the homes of the wealthy residents and prosperous tradespeople, and numerous boarding-houses for the accommodation of well-to-do visitors. East, the town extended up the slope to the top of the hill and down the other side to the suburb of Windley, where the majority of the working classes lived.

Years ago, when the facilities for foreign travel were fewer and more costly, Mugsborough was a favourite resort of the upper classes, but of late years most of these patriots have adopted the practice of going on the Continent to spend the money they obtain from the working people of England. However, Mugsborough still retained some semblance of prosperity. Summer or winter the place was usually fairly full of what were called good-class visitors, either holidaymakers or invalids. The Grand Parade was generally crowded with well-dressed people and carriages. The shops appeared to be well-patronized and at the time of our story an air of prosperity pervaded the town. But this fair outward appearance was deceitful. The town was really a vast whited sepulchre; for notwithstanding the natural advantages of the place the majority of the inhabitants existed in a state of perpetual poverty which in many cases bordered on destitution. One of the reasons for this was that a great part of the incomes of the tradespeople and boarding-house-keepers and about a third of the wages of the working classes were paid away as rent and rates.

For years the Corporation had been borrowing money for necessary public

works and improvements, and as the indebtedness of the town increased the rates rose in proportion, because the only works and services undertaken by the Council were such as did not yield revenue. Every public service capable of returning direct profit was in the hands of private companies, and the shares of the private companies were in the hands of the members of the Corporation, and the members of the Corporation were in the hands of the four most able and intellectual of their number, Councillors Sweater, Rushton, Didlum and Grinder, each of whom was a director of one or more of the numerous companies which battened on the town.

The Tramway Company, the Water Works Company, the Public Baths Company, the Winter Gardens Company, the Grand Hotel Company and numerous others. There was, however, one Company in which Sweater, Rushton, Didlum and Grinder had no shares, and that was the Gas Company, the oldest and most flourishing of them all. This institution had grown with the place; most of the original promoters were dead, and the greater number of the present shareholders were non-residents; although they lived on the town, they did not live in it.

The profits made by this Company were so great that, being prevented by law from paying a larger dividend than ten percent, they frequently found it a difficult matter to decide what to do with the money. They paid the Directors and principal officials--themselves shareholders, of course--enormous salaries. They built and furnished costly and luxurious offices and gave the rest to the shareholders in the form of Bonuses.

There was one way in which the Company might have used some of the profits: it might have granted shorter hours and higher wages to the workmen whose health was destroyed and whose lives were shortened by the terrible labour of the retort-houses and the limesheds; but of course none of the directors or shareholders ever thought of doing that. It was not the business of the Company to concern itself about them.

Years ago, when it might have been done for a comparatively small amount, some hare-brained Socialists suggested that the town should buy the Gas Works, but the project was wrecked by the inhabitants, upon whom the mere mention of the word Socialist had the same effect that the sight of a red rag is popularly supposed to have on a bull.

Of course, even now it was still possible to buy out the Company, but it was supposed that it would cost so much that it was generally considered to be impracticable.

Although they declined to buy the Gas works, the people of Mugsborough had to buy the gas. The amount paid by the municipality to the Company for the public lighting of the town loomed large in the accounts of the Council. They managed to get some of their own back by imposing a duty of two shillings a ton upon coals imported into the Borough, but although it cost the Gas Works a lot of money for coal dues the Company in its turn got its own back by increasing the price of gas they sold to the inhabitants of the town...