

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists

was no hope of getting a job ; still there was no harm in asking. Besides, he was getting desperate. It was over a month now since he had finished up for his last employer. It had been a very low summer altogether. Sometimes a fortnight for one firm, then perhaps a week doing nothing, then three weeks or a month for another firm, then out again, and so on. And now it was November. Last winter they had got into debt. That was nothing unusual, but owing to the bad summer they had not been able, as in other years, to pay off the debts accumulated in winter. It was doubtful, too, whether they would be able to get credit again this winter. In fact, this morning, when his wife sent their little girl for some butter the grocer had refused to let the child have it without the money. So although he felt it to be hopeless he accosted Hunter.

This time Hunter stopped ; he was winded by his climb up the hill.

'Good morning, sir.'

Hunter did not return the salutation ; he had not the breath to spare. But the man was not hurt, being used to such treatment.

'Any chance of a job, sir ?'

Hunter did not reply at once ; he was short of breath, and he was thinking of a plan that was ever recurring to his mind, and which he had lately been hankering to put into execution. It seemed to him that the long waited for opportunity had come. Just now Rushton and Company were almost the only firm in Mugsborough who had any work. There were dozens of good workmen out. Yes, this was the time. If this man agreed he would give him a start. Hunter knew the man was a good workman, he had worked for Rushton and Company before. To make room for him old Linden, or some other full price man, could be got rid of ; it would not be difficult to find some excuse.

'Well,' Hunter said at last in a doubtful, hesitating kind of way, 'I'm afraid not, Newman. We're about full up.'

He ceased speaking and remained waiting for the other to say something more. He did not look at the man, but stooped down, fidgeting with the mechanism of the bicycle as if adjusting it.

'Things have been so bad this summer,' Newman went on, 'I've had rather a rough time of it. I would be very glad of a job even if it was only for a week or so.'