

## *An Imperial Banquet*

express an opinion. It's my belief that 'arf the money we give 'im is spent in penny 'orribles; 'e's always got one in 'is hand; an' to make wot tea 'e does buy last, 'e collects all the slops wot's left and biles it up day after day.'

'No I don't!' says Bert, who was on the verge of tears. 'It's not me wot buys the things at all. I gives all the money I gets to Crass, and 'e buys them 'imself, so there!'

At this revelation some of the men furtively exchanged significant glances, and Crass, the foreman, became very red.

'You'd better keep your bloody thruppence and make your own tea after this week,' he said, addressing Sawkins, 'and then p'raps we'll 'ave a little peace at meal times.'

'An' you needn't ask me to cook no bloaters or bacon for you no more,' added Bert, tearfully, 'cos I won't do it.'

Sawkins was not popular with any of the others. When, about twelve months previously, he first came to work for Rushton and Company, he was a simple labourer, but since then he had 'picked up' a slight knowledge of the trade, and having armed himself with a putty knife and put on a white jacket, regarded himself as a fully qualified painter. The others perhaps did not object to him trying to better his condition, but his wages—fivepence an hour—were twopence an hour less than the standard rate, and the result was that in slack turns a better workman was often 'stood off' when Sawkins was kept on. Moreover he was generally regarded as a sneak who carried tales to the foreman and the 'Bloke.' Every new hand was usually warned by his mates 'not to let that swine Sawkins see anything.'

The unpleasant silence which now ensued was at length broken by one of the men, who told a dirty story, and in the laughter and applause that followed, the incident of the tea was forgotten.

'How did you get on yesterday?' asked Crass, addressing Bundy, the plasterer, who was intently studying the sporting columns of the 'Daily Obscurer.'

'No luck,' replied Bundy gloomily. 'I had a bob each way on Stockwell, in the first race, but it was scratched before the start.'

This gave rise to a conversation between Crass, Bundy, and one or two others concerning the chances of different horses in the morrow's races. It was Friday, and no one had much money, so at the suggestion of Bundy a syndicate was