

## *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*

although they had tea at breakfast time as well as at dinner the lad was generally considered to be making a fortune.

Two pairs of steps laid sideways in front of the fire at a distance of about eight feet with a plank placed across, several upturned pails, and the drawers belonging to the dresser, formed the seating accommodation. The floor was covered with all manner of débris, dust, dirt, fragments of old mortar and plaster. A sack of cement was leaning against one of the walls, and a bucket containing some stale whitewash stood in one corner.

As each man came in he filled his cup, jam jar, or condensed milk tin with tea from the steaming pail, before sitting down. Most of them brought their food in little wicker baskets, which they held on their laps, or placed on the floor beside them.

At first there was no attempt at conversation and nothing was heard but the sounds of eating and drinking and the frizzling of the bloater which Easton, one of the painters, was toasting on the end of a pointed stick at the fire.

'I don't think much of this bloody tea,' suddenly remarked Sawkins, one of the labourers.

'Well, it oughter be all right,' retorted Bert; 'it's bin bilin' ever since 'arf past eleven.'

Bert White was a frail-looking, weedy, pale-faced boy, fifteen years of age and about four feet nine inches in height. His trousers were part of a suit that he had once worn for best, but that was so long ago that they had become too small for him, fitting rather tightly and scarcely reaching the top of his patched and broken hobnailed boots. The knees had been patched with square pieces of cloth, several shades darker than the original fabric, and these patches were now all in rags. His coat was several sizes too large for him and hung about him like a dirty ragged sack. He was a pitiable spectacle of neglect and wretchedness as he sat there on an upturned pail, eating his bread and cheese with fingers that, like his clothing, were grimed with paint and dirt.

'Well then, you can't have put enough tea in, or else you've bin' usin' up wot was left yesterday,' continued Sawkins.

'Why the bloody 'ell don't you leave the boy alone?' said Harlow, another painter; 'if you don't like the tea you needn't drink it. I'm sick of listening to you about it every dam day.'

'It's all very well for you to say I needn't drink it,' answered Sawkins, 'but I've paid my share an' I've got a right to