

This pastime, whatever it was, and also his odd 'closeness,' were both perfectly harmless, and his regular payments every



Saturday night were a great help, as something to be relied upon, especially in the bad times when the shop scarcely brought in enough to cover the rent, much less to find food for four hungry mouths.

Such a time of scarcity had just passed, for it was March, and the winter had been a bad one, whether you looked at it from the trade or weather point of view.

All that had come in from the shop had been put aside for the inexorable rent, and the family had existed for a month or two on Fergus's couple of shillings, and potatoes: result, a long bread bill, and a generally meagre aspect, as of people who never got a good meal.

One afternoon Mrs. Huckerby was setting the tea-cups, and frying potatoes in readiness for the elder children's return from school.

Her kitchen was a dim little place enough, for an expanse of whitewashed wall stood within a few feet of the oblong window—small, and dark, and inconvenient, most people would have said—with a door into the shop opposite to the window, and a staircase to the upper storey taking up a good part of one side. All the same, it was fairly clean, and Mrs. Huckerby was learned in the science of keeping a good fire without very much to make it of, and that meant comfort in this soul-piercing east wind—a wind which did

not trouble to go round, but went straight through you.

Four o'clock, and in rushed the two children, rosy and ravenous; the mother was busy filling the cup with desperately weak tea, and the plates with hot potatoes—baby on her left arm contentedly sucking her thumb, and apparently no hindrance to her movements.

'And I've been to Mr. Pain,' Mrs. Huckerby was saying to Peggy, 'and he's promised to take out the bread bill in 'taters and vegetables, and a blessing that is to be sure, for I don't know how I *could* have got the money to pay him; and I told him he shouldn't be stinted, and no more he shan't. He shall have good measure and a good article, for he's behaved like a gentleman.'

Peggy, a twelve-year old lassie, all angles as to her features and elbows, and with a corresponding acute expression, nodded her frizzy red head as quite understanding matters.

'We'll get on better now,' she said, sagaciously, 'and if father sends some money we can have new boots; I can see *all* my toes now,' and she looked ruefully at her feet.

'And mayn't we have treacle on the



bread?' asked Albert Edward, a youngster whose soul was mainly absorbed in finding nutriment for his growing body.