

CHAPTER I

AN IMPERIAL BANQUET

THE house was named 'The Cave.' It was a large old-fashioned three-storied building, standing in about an acre of ground, a mile outside the town of Mugsborough. It had been unoccupied for many years, and was now being altered and renovated for its new owner by the firm of Rushton and Company, Builders and Decorators.

Altogether, about twenty-five men were working there—carpenters, plumbers, plasterers, bricklayers and painters, besides several unskilled labourers. They were putting new floors where the old ones were decayed, and making two rooms into one by demolishing the parting wall and substituting an iron girder. They were replacing window frames and sashes, re-plastering cracked ceilings and walls, cutting openings and fixing doors where no doors had ever been before. They were taking down broken chimney pots and fixing new ones in their places. They were washing the old whitewash off the ceilings, and scraping the old paper off the walls. The air was full of the sounds of hammering and sawing, the ringing of trowels, the rattle of pails, the splashing of water brushes and the scraping of the stripping knives. It was also heavily laden with dust and disease germs, powdered mortar, lime, plaster, and the dirt that had been accumulating within the old house for years. In brief, those employed there might be said to be living in a Driff Reform Paradise—they had Plenty of Work.

At twelve o'clock Bob Crass, the painter's foreman, blew a prolonged blast upon a whistle and all hands assembled in the kitchen, where Bert the apprentice had already prepared tea in the large galvanised iron pail placed in the middle of the floor. By the side of the pail were a number of old jam jars, mugs, dilapidated tea-cups and one or two empty condensed milk tins. Each man on the 'job' paid Bert threepence a week for the tea and sugar—they did not have milk—and