

## A Guardian of the Poor

By T. Baron Russell

### I

**B**ORLASE AND COMPANY did not aspire, like certain other drapers in the Southern Suburbs, to be universal providers. Neither did they seek, otherwise than passively, to rival these powerful neighbours in the esteem of villadom and the superior order of suburban society. The wares that changed hands across Borlase's many counters were modestly content to assimilate, at a respectful interval, those examples of last year's mode which found their way to the more ambitious emporia, where they were exhibited to the wives and daughters of retired tradesmen and head-clerks, as Parisian innovations, almost sinfully novel. The raw material of feminine adornment was what Borlase and Company dealt in, uncostly chiffons and faced ribbons, which with the *Penny Dressmaker* and the *Amateur Bonnet Journal* to aid, produced under deft hands a sort of jerry-built finery, whose characteristic a sensitive instinct might divine, in a sympathetic glance, from the "groves" of dingy two-storeyed houses, which sent forth their hundreds a-Saturday's to Borlase's shop. The possibilities latent in shoddy (or débris of old cloth) and of cotton warps in a fabric guaranteed "all wool," and so demonstrated to unconfiding customers,

customers, on a triumphant withdrawal of weft by Mr. Borlase, had been deeply explored by the mercers who supplied him; for the acts of Parliament which forbid adulteration do not apply to wares otherwise than edible, and the later statute against fraudulent misdescription is beneficently evasible, as having no particular officer to set it in motion. Thus, "full-fashioned" stockings, owing their form to judicious blocking after manufacture, and double-width calicoes at four pence three farthings, which yield on agitation a rich dressing of clay-like powder, are quite securely vendible, without danger to the repute of the retailer as a pillar of society and a local vestryman.

Since you cannot be a vestryman and a guardian of the poor, even in the suburbs, for nothing, it is to be gathered that Mr. Borlase—the sole constituent of Borlase and Company—went not unrewarded, even in this world's corruptible profit, for the benefits which he bestowed on society. It was his pride to be referred to as the cheapest draper in the neighbourhood. You could purchase at his shop, on astonishingly economical terms, goods which only a very acute and highly trained perception could distinguish at sight from others, which, in less favoured markets, were priced at twice those rates, an advantage secured by the frequent conferences of Borlase and Company with hungry looking German wholesalers in Jewin Street and other reconдите thoroughfares of the E.C. district.

The purchasing capacity in the individual, among Mr. Borlase's clientele, being small, it follows that the number of his transactions, to be lucrative, must be also large. Hence the sixty-odd "young people" ("who," as a local paper worded it "constituted the *personnel* of Messrs. Borlase and Co's staff") had all their work cut out for them on a Saturday night. But practice, and the consciousness that lapse or error entailed fines not conveniently spared

spared from scanty wages, soon taught new-comers the art of managing two customers at a time, and four on Saturday. Thus the crowded shop full of buyers was kept pretty constantly on the move, even at the busiest of times. Lest any should go empty away, Borlase and Company in person—pompous, full-fed, and evaporating venality at every pore—mingled with his patrons near the exit; and woe to the shop girl who had failed to cajole her customer! This duty of shop-walking Mr. Borlase divided at busy times with a lean man, grey-headed and stooping at the shoulders, who rubbed lank hands together when addressed by a customer (he never ventured to accost one, in the Borlasian manner) and was summoned quickly from counter to counter to “sign.” From Monday to Friday he docketed invoices, checked sales-books, and drudged through the other routine of account-keeping, day by day; on Saturday, from two o’clock onward, he relieved his proprietor of the duty of initialling bills, so that the latter might stand guard at the door. He picked up the arrears of his afternoon work after the shop closed at eleven-thirty.

Alone, of all Borlase and Company’s people, he slept at home, living at a house in Denmark Street, near the back of the shop. He had grown to the lean, grey pantaloen he was, in Borlase and Company’s service, and rising to a proud stipend of two pounds a week, had taken to his arms the faded little wife who had waited for him. His position was deemed one of the plums of the establishment.

On an afternoon, early in January, the eyes of this John Hunt strayed often to the clock. Not that he longed for tea-time: had it not been Saturday he might have wished for five o’clock to come round, but on Saturdays he was not allowed to go home, but shared the bounty of Borlase and Company with the twenty-four young men and twenty-nine “young persons” of the counters. He

knew very well that to-day there could be no hurried home-going; and however he might weary to assure himself that all was well in the shabby little six-roomed house, where the shabby little wife was moving about her work, not quite so actively as usual, he must await, with what patience he might, the end of the day's work. And having an occasion for anxiety, he found the hours, busy as they were, long in passing. There was a little more work during the half hour which the assistants divided among them, in thirds, for tea. Customers were many, and with the best will in the world to keep them in hand, the men and girls had to bear frequent complaints from impatient buyers, and Hunt, hurrying at the call of "sign"—he had no other name in the shop—was summoned hither and thither to stay the departure of patrons who "really couldn't wait about any longer." To suffer a customer to go away unsupplied was the cardinal sin at Borlase's: "getting the swop" the young people called it. The rule of the place required that, on this emergency threatening, Mr. Borlase, or the temporary shop walker, must be called in. Three "swops" involved "the sack"; every one knew that: and it is wonderful what patience that knowledge imparted to the assistants at the various counters.

The grand rush of the week, however, came after tea on Saturday evening, when the shop grew hot and gassy even in January, and a vague odour of damp umbrellas pervaded everything. Customers waited, row upon row. It was not easy to move among them: and to keep them good humoured required endless resource and tact. The day's meridian was at nine o'clock. After that, the tide of purchasers would slacken, by degrees, until closing time. The night was inclement, but as the critical opportunity of Sunday morning chapel would soon be at hand, the rain could not keep folk at home. On one side of the door, the  
shop-window

shop-window was dull with drops. By some oversight, the grating overhead had not been opened on this side to let the steam out. Every one in the shop was damp, cross, and sticky at the fingers.

A stout inhabitant entered at ten, and spent a happy hour inspecting the entire stock of bonnet ribbons. She decided a dozen times on this or that: a dozen times she altered her mind, at the reflection that each colour of the solar spectrum failed to suit "her style." No, nothing would do. She must go somewhere else, that was all; if the young lady hadn't got what she wanted, it was no use of the young lady for to try for to put her off with something else. It was all very well, she added, to say they had shown her everything. If it was too much trouble to get it down (here the rotund lady raised her voice), why, better say so at once.

"Sign!" said the shop girl, wearily.

"What is it, Miss?"

"Lady wishes for a dark 'eliotrope ribbon, shot with cerise."  
(Such atrocities were common at Borlase's.)

"Well, haven't you shown the lady——?"

"We haven't the width." Hunt vainly endeavoured to still the rising storm: the customer was inexorable. No, she would go; it was quite plain they didn't *mean* to serve her; she had been kept waiting——"

"Very sorry we cannot suit you, Madam, now; but we shall be having some new ribbons in on Monday." The outraged dame departed.

At the door she encountered the swift eye of Borlase and Company, which at once detected something wrong. No, she was *not* suited. Mr. Borlase was quite sure if—— No, they had admitted they hadn't got it; it was no good wasting any more of her time. She would just be off.

"May

"May I ask who said that we were out of stock?" Mr. Borlase asked. The tone was suave, but the look dangerous.

"The young person at the counter said so; so did that shabby-looking man that signs the bills," he was answered. Mr. Borlase looked more dangerous still.

By this time the shutters were being put up by the junior assistants, the collars of their black coats turned up to keep off a little of the fine rain. Only the side door remained open, and a man stood by it to let the customers out, one by one. Hunt had slipped off to his desk and was already rapidly adding up counterfoils, before the lights were put out in the shop. Mr. Borlase rolled pompously into the little office about this time, and began to pay the staff, who were waiting, in a long *queue*, to file past him. He recited in the tone of a patron the pay of each assistant, as he shoved it through the little cash window, distracting Hunt's calculations horribly.

The latter was working rapidly. It was not easy to keep his mind on the figures. He was tired and anxious; as the time for going home came nearer, he grew even excited. Finally, the last book was made up, and the grand total, verified by comparison with the till, happily "came out" right. Mr. Borlase, who had lit a cigar, laid it cautiously down, and checked the money. Then he gave Hunt his forty shillings, and the drudge, buttoning up his shabby frockcoat, prepared to go. This operation attracting Mr. Borlase's attention, recalled the words of the angry customer. He called Hunt back and surveyed him coldly. The coat was faded and shiny. It dragged in creases at the buttonholes, and the buttons showed an edge of metal, where the cloth covering had worn out. The braid down the front was threadbare, and showed grey in places. Certainly his shop-walker was inexcusably shabby.

"How is it that your coat is so unsightly, Hunt?" Mr. Borlase

at

at length demanded, querulously. "It's a disgrace to my establishment, and customers remark upon it. Just look to it that you make yourself presentable. I can't have a scarecrow walking my shop; it reflects upon me—upon me, mind you!"

Hunt murmured something to the effect that the coat certainly *was* rather old; but his master interrupted him impatiently. "Old," he said; "of course it's old—much too old. If you can't dress yourself properly, I shall find some one who can. And, Hunt," he added, reminiscently, "another thing. I've once or twice noticed on week-days that you smell of tobacco—shag tobacco. That's another thing I must have mended. I can't have my customers disgusted by your filthy habits. Look to that also;" and he turned away, leaving Hunt to shuffle off homeward under an inefficient umbrella.

## II

Hunt paused on the doorstep of the little house in Denmark Street, and looked up, anxiously, at the first-floor window. All dark—and, so far, so good. He opened the door noiselessly with a latch-key and listened. Everything was quiet. The little wife had gone to bed then, and he made his way on tiptoe to the kitchen, lit a paraffin lamp, spread the discreditable coat wide open on two nails, that it might dry, and put on his slippers. A scratching at the back door, mingled with faint whines, made him step quickly across the kitchen, to admit a mongrel fox-terrier. "What, Joey!" he cried, in the high-pitched voice which some men use to dogs and children—"What, Joey! What the little bow-wow—didn't they let you in?" He sat down as the animal frisked around him, jumping at last into his lap, to lick his face,  
and

and nuzzle its cold nose against his neck, while he pulled its ears caressingly and tried to look into the eager, welcoming eyes. To a man humbled, lonely, and as yet childless, the demonstrative admiration of the dog was precious: this one living thing, and the tired woman upstairs, looked up to him, and he could not spare even the dog's homage.

Presently he turned to the deal table—spotless, and scrubbed until the harder fibres of the wood stood out in ridges where the softer parts had worn away. On one corner a piece of coarse tablecloth, oft darned, had been spread and turned over, to cover something that lay under it. He turned it back and began to eat his supper of bread and cheese, cutting off snips of rind to throw to the dog, sitting alert on its haunches with anticipatory wags. Supper finished, Hunt took his money, in a dirty canvas bag, from his pocket, and laid it out on the table. Seven shillings for the rent, three shillings to complete the guinea that was hoarding for a certain other purpose; that left thirty shillings. Two shillings for his own pocket; eighteen shillings, Mary's housekeeping money; two shillings for the old mother who lived down in Camberwell, to be near the workhouse, whence came a small weekly relief that helped to keep her. Eight shillings over: John thought he knew of a shop where a second-hand frockcoat (his strict official costume as shop-walker) was offered for ten shillings, but might be compassed, with discretion, for eight. He gathered up the money, and looked wistfully at the tin tobacco-box on the dresser shelf.

No; it was empty, he remembered. He had not been able to save the threepence halfpenny this week. Still—there might be a few grains of dust in it. He took down a blackened clay pipe, ran his little finger round the bowl, and shook the box tentatively. Something rustled within; he put his thumb nail to the lid. Half  
an



an ounce of shag screwed up in paper! So the little wife had thought of him, and prepared this surprise. Dear girl. The old man's eyes moistened—he *was* an old man, though only forty by the calendar—as he unwrapped the tobacco, carefully shaking particles of the dust from folds in the paper, and filled himself half a pipe. Then he smoked, fingering the dog's ears reflectively and mentally adding up afresh his scanty moneys. Certainly it was good that he should be able to put by the three shillings this Saturday: that guinea might be wanted, any day; and after that there would be at least half-a-crown a week, and beer-money, needed for the charwoman who was to "do for" the missus and give an eye to the house, presently.

## III

When he blew out the lamp, and crept, slippers in hand, upstairs, he was shivering a little. He stood a moment outside the bedroom door and lit a match for the candle, to avoid disturbing the sleeping wife. He undressed very quietly; but the woman moved at some slight sound, and sat up at once on seeing him, smiling, and holding out her arms. He put them down very gently.

"Careful, dearie," he said; "careful, you know," and took her head in his arm. "How have you been?"

"Oh, very bobbish. So you found the bit o' smoke?"—his breath being her informant.

"Yes, dear. But you oughtn't to scrape——"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Hush," she said, "you old stupid. I couldn't let you go without the only little bit of comfort. But look here," she added gravely; "look what's come."

She

She drew a folded buff paper from under the pillow. She had brought it upstairs in her hand, that the sight of it might not vex him before supper. It was a printed circular from the local police station, remarking that Mr. Hunt had taken out a license to keep one dog the year before, but had not renewed it this year at its expiration. If Mr. Hunt had now ceased to keep one dog, the circular politely concluded, this notice might be disregarded.

He looked blank. Seven-and-sixpence for Joey. The little doggy never appeared in the light of an extravagance except at license-time ; he was an economical quadruped, subsisting on the scraps, and such treasure-trove as he could pick up in the gutter. But the notice meant good-bye to the frock-coat, for the present week at least ; and Hunt knew that it might be long enough before he had eight shillings in his pocket again.

He brightened up, however, before the little woman had time to remark his depression.

“All right,” he said, cheerfully, “I’ve got seven-and-six over, old girl. I’ll go round to the post office and get the license, first thing on Monday morning.”

“You’d better let me get it ; you’ll be late if you go yourself. I can just as well pop round, in the morning.”

“Oh, I don’t like you to go out any more than you’re obliged to. I’ll start a little earlier. I dare say Miss King ’ll be in the shop.”

The idea of discarding the dog never for an instant occurred to either.

In the morning—Sunday—John slipped early out of bed, lit the fire below stairs, and was at his wife’s beside with a cup of tea when she awoke. In the meantime, he had been to a near chemist’s, where a painted tin plate proclaimed that medicines could be obtained on the Sabbath by ringing the bell, and procured

cured a pennyworth of ammonia—he called it “ahmonia”—from the grumbling apprentice. Then, laying the despised coat on the kitchen table, he had carefully brushed it, rubbed the pungent fluid into the cloth with a rag, and brushed yet again. Afterwards, using the handle of a pen, he inked the thread-bare places and the frayed buttonholes, spread the condemned garment on a clothes-line that the smell of the ammonia might evaporate, and stretched the sleeves and pulled the lappels, as well as he could, into better shape. This had been, in its time, a Sunday coat, purchased not secondhand but *new*, in some moment of temporary prosperity, though he had been obliged to depose it to every day wear long since, and had never replaced it. This half hour’s work would give it a fresh lease of life, he reflected, as he stepped back to contemplate the effect—if only the buttons didn’t happen to catch Borlase and Company’s eye. And later on, he would manage to get another.

## IV

Monday morning was a slack time at Borlase’s—a time devoted to putting in order stock which had been disturbed on Saturday night, and which was allowed, perforce, to be put away hurriedly in the hey-day of harvest. Ribbons had to be re-rolled in their paper interlining, and neatly secured with tiny pins. Calicoes had to be refolded in tighter bales: hat trimmings and artificial flowers to be dusted with a sort of overgrown paint-brush, and laid carefully in their shiny black boxes. A general overhauling of wares, in short, had to be done, in the intervals of serving a few early callers, until, after dinner, the ladies of the suburb began to arrive, and the shop to assume its afternoon bustle. John checked invoices, entered up the bought ledger, and verified the charges of  
city

city warehousemen for goods newly delivered, crossing the narrow deep shop to reach the warehouse behind in search of various consignments, which needed to be "passed" as correct and entered in the stock book, before being placed on the shelves for sale. Mr. Borlase was "signing" in the shop, as usual: this duty only devolved upon Hunt on the busy night of the seventh day.

Presently he detected an error in a piece of dress stuff, and drew his principal, by the eye, into the corner where it lay.

"Schweitzer and Brunn invoice this as three dozen and five," he said, "It's marked five dozen and three on the cover."

"Well, which is it?"

"Five three, I should think, sir. The mistake's more likely to be in the bill than in the goods."

"Well, take it out and measure it, can't you?"

"Very good, sir," Hunt replied. As he shuffled off, Mr. Borlase eyed his round shoulders and shining elbows with disapprobation. In the afternoon light, Hunt looked shabbier than ever. Customers would get the idea that he was underpaid. This must be looked to.

In a little while Hunt sought the master's eye again. "It's five dozen and three, right enough," he said: "five three, good measure. Will you have it cut, or send for a corrected invoice?"

Mr. Borlase glared. "*You've* nothing to do with the measure," he said, sharply: "what's it to do with you? All *you've* got to do is to see that it holds three dozen and five: stop there. I can't keep my books and Schweitzer's too. Mark it 'query over' in the Stock Book. Haven't you got enough to fill your time without wasting it on other people's blunders as well as your own?"

"And, Hunt," he added, sternly, "what about that coat of yours?"

yours? I told you on Saturday it wouldn't do. Why haven't you come in a better one?"

"I haven't got a better one, sir," Hunt faltered.

"You—haven't—got—a better one, sir," Borlase replied mocking him. "Then why the devil haven't you bought yourself a better one, sir?"

Hunt answered that there hadn't been time: and besides, he had not the money.

"You haven't the money? What do you mean by 'you haven't the money?' Weren't you paid on Saturday? 'Yes you know'—but yes, you don't know"—the temper of Borlase and Company rose, or was affected to rise, higher: "But yes, you don't know," said the outraged draper, "that you disgrace my shop."

"I'm very sorry, sir: I shall try what I can do next Saturday: but I have a good many expenses just now; and I've had the dog license to pay this morning, and my wife——"

"Dog license? What do you want with dog licenses? What do you want with dogs? Put the brute in a bucket of water—that's the way to pay dog licenses! Why—the coat's absolutely falling to pieces: look at the braid, look at the elbows." Mr. Borlase in his wrath, seized one of the lappels in his finger, and gave it a pull. The worn braid, accustomed to more tender usage, yielded and ripped a foot or more down the front, showing the frayed edges beneath.

The situation was plainly impossible. On the one hand, Hunt could not be made to buy himself new clothes if he had no money. On the other, he was as plainly an eyesore in the present coat—and Mr. Borlase had by his own act destroyed it. He was a man of quick decisions. "Come with me," he said. "Mr. Peters! Take the floor please," and he pushed Hunt by the elbow to the staircase which led to the upper storeys.

The

The first floor was occupied by Mr. Borlase and his family. At the end of a corridor was a wide hanging-cupboard, with sliding doors. Searching in this, Mr. Borlase found a long-discarded frock-coat of his own. "Put that on," he said sternly. "And don't let me see you disgracing my shop any more. How many men do you think would take the coat off their own backs to clothe you?"

Hunt broke into thanks: it is likely that this simple fellow was actually grateful for the thing thus flung to him. He walked homeward buoyantly at tea time, full of excitement and eager to show this great acquisition to Mary.

But something chilled him as he opened the door. Mary would have been in the passage at the first sound of his latch-key, ordinarily. The place was empty, now, and a strange hat hung on a walking-stick leaning against the casing of the parlour door.

So the hour had come, and the guinea was wanted already! He ran hurriedly upstairs to the bedroom. The doctor pushed him from the door, and came out on the landing with him. "You can't come in, just yet," he said.

"When was she 'taken'?" John asked.

"About two o'clock, I understand. The woman happened to be with her, and has just fetched me."

"How long——"

"Oh, an hour more yet I expect. All very nicely: no cause for alarm. Just keep quiet, and don't disturb her, there's a good fellow: it's all you can do."

He pushed the reluctant John to the stair-head and re-entered the bedroom with a quick movement. Hunt crept downstairs, and choked over his tea: then rushed back to the shop. He had brought the old coat on his arm, and laid it carefully over the stair-railing. It could still be mended, and would do for house wear.

He

He made several mistakes that night: but as this concerned only himself (who had to ferret out and rectify them) it had no other effect than to keep him a little later than nine o'clock before he could leave. He ran home, and arrived panting. The frowsy charwoman met him in the passage.

"There, it's a good job you've come," she said. "She's been a-askin' for you. It's a boy. You can come up and speak to her, a minute, but you mustn't stop long. She's got to have her sleep. Then you can go and get me my beer. There isn't a drop in the 'ouse."

Mary only lifted her eyes when he pressed his lips to her damp brow. She did not speak.

"Let me see him," he whispered.

She turned back a corner of the quilt, where a shapeless face, inconceivably small, inconceivably red, lay on her arms. John stooped and kissed the scant, silky, black hair. The child threw up a tiny open hand, seizing the finger with which he touched it. A great emotion mastered and silenced him, and he stooped to kiss the baby finger-nails. Mary smiled again and closed her eyes.

## V

Hunt fared irregularly during the next few days. His work, as it happened, was rather heavy—heavier than usual—and the accident saved him some anxious thoughts, for full hours are short hours. Every now and then, though, as he moved on some errand of his labour, came a new experience—the joy of sudden recollection. There was a baby! The remembrance gave him a fresh thrill of happiness each time that it recurred. An hour, each night, he sat alone with his wife in the bed-room, gazing silently at

at the little head, just hidden by the flannel it was wrapped in. They dared not speak, lest the child should rouse—and indeed, Mary was hardly strong enough to talk yet, though she described herself, in a whisper, as “getting on famous.”

The charwoman departed early in each evening, now, and John slept, secretly, on the landing, that he might hear his wife’s call, if she should need him in the night. He was supposed to lie on a couch in that mathematical-looking parlour, the use of which was so rigidly confined to Sunday afternoons: but this was a myth, loyally concealed by the charwoman, who was spared the trouble of a bed-making by the inscrutable whim of her patient’s husband. He caught a severe cold in the process, which was not surprising.

Mary’s progress did not satisfy the doctor. Ten days showed little or no recovery of strength. He ordered beef tea, and John provided it. But no success attended this time-honoured prescription. Possibly it was not skillfully prepared: anyway the patient grew worse. On Wednesday at dinner time, John found the doctor waiting for him. “I don’t like the looks of your wife, Mr. Hunt,” he said, bluntly. “She isn’t picking up as fast as we should wish. I should like her to have some beef essence—a small quantity, every two hours.”

“What, Liebig?” asked John.

“No, no, not Liebig: *essence*, not extract. It is a kind of jelly. You get it at the chemists: lot of nourishment in a small space—very easily assimilated, you know.”

John didn’t know, but he neglected his dinner and hurried to the drug stores. “Fifteen pence,” said the man at the counter; and John’s heart sank at the smallness of the tin that was handed him. On his return he met the landlord, demanding the rent. Three more visits to the chemists, at one and threepence, left him, by Thursday night, with an empty pocket; and there was only  
enough



enough food in the house for the charwoman's meals next day. At noon on Friday he found the doctor in the house again.

"She has had no beef to-day I find," said the man of science in reply to John's interrogative look. "And she is sinking, besides. She must have a teaspoonful of brandy every two hours, as well as the essence: if you can, give her a few grapes." He hurried off before John could recover his self-possession: for many shilling visits must be comprised in a day, by the small general practitioner who would make a living in Camberwell.

John sat down on the stairs in blank misery. He had not a farthing; and Mary was upstairs—perhaps—perhaps dying! He leaned on the wall for support—being weak with hunger himself—and his hat fell off. This reminded him that he was sitting on his coat tails, which would be creased, and he rose, unsteadily. The coat! It was his only removable asset; and Mary was dying. They had never used the pawnshop; but the coat had been a good one, and would certainly fetch a loan—half a sovereign, perhaps, thought the inexperienced John. He went into the kitchen, took down his old coat from its nail, and with needle and cotton hastily repaired the torn binding. Then he ran to the pawnbrokers, whence he emerged, after an interval rich in contumely, with three shillings (less a penny for the ticket) extracted with difficulty from the scornful Hebrew in the little box. But two and elevenpence produced two tins of beef, half a quarter of brandy, and a half-penny roll; the situation, for the moment, was saved.

He was late at the shop and was rebuked for it. Mr. Borlase had been awaiting him, having an official appointment to keep. He had to meet his fellow Guardians and the Watch Committee.

## VI

Mrs. Hunt had rallied a little by night fall, and was reported "decidedly better" by the doctor next morning. John began to be more hopeful; and he had breakfasted, also, the charwoman having brought in a loaf.

After dinner-time John took up his duties (this being Saturday) as shop walker, privately resolving to make the most of tea at Borlase's. Presently the customary rush of business set in, absorbing all his attention. He did not see that Mr. Borlase was eyeing him with a puzzled air, as if he missed something. He did not see either that the fat woman who had gone empty away a fortnight since, entered the shop, and that the sight of her woke up a sudden recollection in his proprietor, who looked over her substantial shoulders at John with a highly unfriendly eye.

## VII

A few hours later, he was at home, in the bare kitchen—his chin resting on one hand and his vacant glance fixed on the window opposite.

He had sat there an hour—his mind blank, save for the one dull impression of misery. The detail of his trouble was absent from his thoughts: only the dull, aching consequence of it remained.

Mr. Borlase has paid the assistants as usual, checked the cash and received the accounts in silence. But when the shop was empty and dark he had turned upon Hunt in fury.

"What the devil do you mean, by turning up on a Saturday again, in those scarecrow clothes?" he had asked. "Eh? What the  
the

the hell do you mean by it? Didn't I take my coat off my own back to give you, eh? And you, you ungrateful hound, you come to me that figure, to disgrace me! What do you mean by it? Where's my coat?"

"I'm very sorry, sir, I shall have it——"

"Where's my coat, I ask you?"

"If you'll let me explain, sir, I——you see my wife——"

"Where's my coat?"

"I was about to explain, sir. I——"

"Where's my coat?"

"I—I've put it away sir: I have pledged it."

Mr. Borlase staggered.

"You pledged it! You pledged *my coat!* You——"

"My wife was dying, sir: and I had to get——"

"You pledged my coat! The coat I *gave* you! . . . Not a word! Not a word! You have stolen my coat. That is what it amounts to. I've a great mind to give you into custody. It's a gross breach of confidence. A great many men *would* have given you into custody before this. Well, well! So it has come to this! Very well, Mr. Blasted Hunt. You have pawned my property; well, this is the end. You can take a week's notice, and go: go, you THIEF!" It was with difficulty that the angry Borlase abstained from physical assault.

Hunt had slunk away, the disgraceful epithet burning in his ears. But the scene, that he had lived over again and again in the interval, was almost forgotten now. In a week he would be out of work. In a week, Mary must starve; this was the one dull agony that obscured all other consciousness. A leaking gutter-spout outside dripped—dop—dop—dop—on the stones; the recurrent sound impressed itself dully on his brain. Even the questions: "How can I tell her? How long can I keep it from

her?" had passed away. His mind was empty of thought—it could only ache.

The dog crept up to him and licked his hand. He started up. Yes! In two weeks' time they would be parted; they would have to go into the workhouse.

And Mr. Borlase was a Guardian of the Poor.