

Brief summary of Ch. 4, bk. 2 (men and brothers)

Stephen is disciplined, behaving in a very controlled way, at a union meeting for refusing to support official union policy. Only Stephen refuses to join because he feels that a union strike would only increase tensions between employers and employees. Bitzer informs him that he is required by Bounderby.

Commentary:

New Character: Slackbridge is the spokesperson of the Hands, but rather he is a figment (sounds real but he is not) of worker's imagination; what is the meaning of this name?

Slackbridge's primary intention is apparently to stir up the workers' feelings until they are in an impassioned frenzy against their employers. Dickens's own feelings about labour unions, and about any attempt to right wrongs through hostility and conflict, are expressed through Stephen's views. Stephen immediately recognises that Slackbridge does not care so much about creating unity among workers as he does about creating tension between employers and employees. This tension, Stephen believes, will do nothing to aid the workers in their desire for better working conditions and pay. Thus, Stephen asks only to be allowed to make his living in peace. With his hardworking integrity, Stephen represents a very sentimental and idealized portrait of a poor worker, which Dickens wields to arouse our sympathy. Through the contrast between Slackbridge and Stephen, however, Dickens suggests that the working class contains both good and bad individuals, just like the rest of society.

'Mongrel dress': The mongrel, of course, a dog of no fixed breed and so Slackbridge is wearing a random mixture of clothes.

‘United Aggregate Tribunal’: This name is a reminder of the varied origins of the labour movement. One major source of trade unions was the clubs formed by working people in the eighteenth century on the basis of self-help, a small weekly deduction from wages going towards a general fund to deal with crises such as illness and injury. These gradually led to larger groupings, especially in areas of the labour force particularly exposed to danger, such as coal-mining, and where the organisation of working people was assisted by their being gathered together in large numbers in towns and cities, as in cotton manufacture. The political and social upheaval of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars led to the Combination Acts of 1799-1800 which banned, refused to allow all unions in Britain. The Acts were repealed in 1828 although many limitations on the freedom of the unions remained. The Trade Union Congress was formed in 1868 to facilitate the organisation and political acceptability of the union movement.

‘A mess of pottage’, soup or stew: Jacob¹ cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, your right as human being, when he came home and asked for food: ‘Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright’.

‘Judas Iscariot’: The story of the disciple who betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver is told in Bible.

‘Castlereagh’: Lord Castlereagh (1769-1822), an important statesman of the Napoleonic period, was hated by the poor and radicals as a tyrannical oppressor, especially for what was seen as his responsibility for the eleven

¹ We do not think that this story is true since we believe that Jacob is Messenger of Allah and the Messenger does not cheat.

people were killed and roughly four hundred injured in an attack by troops on a meeting in Manchester to demand Parliamentary reform.

‘With all his troubles on his head’: This is a favourite Dickens allusion and refers to Hamlet’s father who died ‘with all my perfections on my head’ (Act 1, sc. 5).

Brief summary of Ch. 5, bk. 2 (men and masters)

Bounderby interrogates Stephen about the union. Stephen defends his workmates, and is sacked, from the factory, by Bounderby. Simultaneously, the Hands prevented Stephen from the trade union as a result in searching for work; he will have to leave Coketown.

Commentary:

‘Combination’: The word was formerly used in a negative sense of those banding together for a common purpose and so came to be used of trade unions in the nineteenth century.

‘Transportation’: in the nineteenth century, and early, criminals were transported to then isolated parts of the world such as Botany Bay in Australia. The practice was abolished in 1867.

‘Norfolk Island’: a remote island in the Pacific Ocean to which criminals were transported between 1788 and 1805, and again between 1826 and 1855. Norfolk Island is about 900 miles north-east of New South Wales and its isolation made escape virtually impossible.