No view of the English working class in the first quarter of this century would be accurate if that class were shown merely as a great amalgam of artisan and labouring groups united by a common aim and culture. Life in reality was much more complex. Socially the unskilled workers and their families, who made up about 50 per cent of the population in our industrial cities, varied as much from the manual élite as did people in middle station from the aristocracy. Before 1914 skilled workers generally did not strive to join a higher rank; they were only too concerned to maintain position within their own stratum. Inside the working class as a whole there existed, I believe, a stratified form of society whose implications and consequences have hardly yet been fully explored. Born behind a general shop in an area which, sixty years before, Frederick Engels had called the ‘classic slum’, I grew up in what was perhaps an ideal position for viewing the English proletarian caste system in all its late flower.

All Salford [wrote Engels in 1844] is built in courts or narrow lanes, so narrow that they remind me of the narrowest I have ever seen, in the little lanes of Genoa. The average construction of Salford is, in this respect, much worse than that of Manchester and so, too, in respect of cleanliness. If, in Manchester, the police, from time to time, every six or ten years, makes a raid upon the working-people’s district, closes the worst dwellings, and causes the filthiest spots in these Augean stables to be cleaned, in Salford it seems to have done absolutely nothing.
The Classic Slum

For twenty years from 1850 Engels held interests in cotton mills on the western side of Manchester. This meant that on journeys between town and factory he had to pass through Salford; our 'village' lay the greatest slum en route. One of his early mills (Ermen and Engels) stood in Liverpool Street, which ran through the heart of it. This is how Engels described our area in 1844:

The working-men's dwellings between Oldfield Road and Cross Lane (Salford), where a mass of courts and alleys are to be found in the worst possible state, vie with the dwellings of the Old Town in filth and overcrowding. In this district I found a man, apparently sixty years old, living in a cow-stable. He had constructed a sort of chimney for his square pen, which had neither windows, floor nor ceiling, had obtained a bedstead and lived there, though the rain dripped through his rotten roof. This man was too old and weak for regular work, and supported himself by removing manure with a hand-cart; the dung heaps lay next door to his palace.

Through a familiarity so long and close, this district must have become for Engels the very epitome of all industrial ghettos, the 'classic slum' itself. He died in 1895 having seen that little world change, develop, 'prosper' even, yet stay in essence the same awful paradigm of what a free capitalist society could produce. By 1900 the area showed some improvement; his 'cow-stable' had doubtless been demolished together with many another noisome den, but much that was vile remained.

Our own family was in the slum but not, they felt, of it: we had 'connections'. Father, besides, was a skilled mechanic. During the '60s of the last century his mother, widowed early with four children, had had the foresight to bypass a mission hall near the alley where she lived and send her three good-looking daughters to a Wesleyan chapel on the edge of a middle-class suburb. Intelligent girls, they did their duty by God and mother, all becoming Sunday school teachers and each in turn marrying well above her station, one a journalist, another a traveller in sugar and a third a police inspector – an ill-favoured lot, the old lady grumbled, but 'you can't have everything'. The girls adapted themselves smoothly to their new milieu, paid mother a weekly dangelid and Carter's Court knew them no more. My father, years their junior, stayed working-class; it was, in fact, always harder for a man to break into the higher echelons. At the age of eight, he took up education and, twelve months later, put it down, despite the new-fangled 'Compulsion' Act, to find, his mother said, 'summat a sight better to do at the blacksmith's'. At twenty-one Father married a girl from a cotton mill.

As a child my mother had been something of a prodigy and was hawked from one local school to another to display her talents; but, her father dying, she got work, at nine, helping in a weaving shed. Happily her family had 'expectations'. When the £900 legacy arrived it was laid out with skill and duly improved status: one sister married a clerk, and two elder brothers opened little shops, which prospered. They were on the way up! My father, a man given to envy, felt the call of commerce too and came home one evening twelve months after marriage to announce in tipsy triumph that he had, on borrowed money, just bought a grocery store for £40. Horrified, my mother inspected his 'gold mine' – in the heart of a slum – and refused point blank to go. But he cajoled and persuaded. In two or three years, he said, they could build it up, sell it for hundreds of pounds and buy a nice place in the country. She looked at the dank little premises and the grim kitchen behind. 'Two years,' she told him, 'and no more! This is no place to bring up a family.' Solemnly he promised. In the little bedroom above the kitchen she bore him seven children and stayed thirty-two years – a life sentence.

1. Grandma indeed seemed a realist all round. When, for instance, her husband, like Charles II, stayed lingering over his demise, solicitous neighbours were met with a cool 'I don't care how soon he's either better or worse!' She herself reached the age of ninety-three and died only moderately lamented.
Every industrial city, of course, folds within itself a clutter of loosely defined overlapping 'villages'. Those in the Great Britain of seventy years ago were almost self-contained communities. Our own consisted of some thirty streets and alleys locked along the north and south by two railway systems a furlong apart. About twice that distance to the east lay another slum which turned on its farther side into a land of bonded warehouses and the city proper. West of us, well beyond the tramlines, lay the middle classes, bay-windowed and begardened. We knew them not.

In the city as a whole our village rated indubitably low. 'The children of this school', wrote one of King Edward VII's inspectors, commenting on our only seat of learning, 'are of the poorest class; so, too, is the teaching.' With cash, or on tick, our villagers, about three thousand in all, patronized fifteen beer-houses, a hotel and two off-licences, nine grocery and general shops, three greengrocers (for ever struggling against the street hawker), two tripe shops, three barbers, three cloggers, two cook shops, one fish and chip shop (déclassé), an old clothes store, a couple of pawnbrokers and two loan offices.

Religion was served by two chapels (Primitive Methodist and Congregationalist), one 'tin' mission (Church of England and one sinister character who held spiritualist séances in his parlour and claimed from the window to cure 'Female Bad Legs'. (Through overwork innumerable women suffered from burst varicose veins.) Culture, pleasure and need found outlet through one theatre (and, later, three cinemas), a dancing room ('low'), two coy brothels, eight bookmakers, and a private moneylender.

The first of our public buildings reared its dark bulk near the railway wall. Hyndman Hall, home of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), remained for us mysteriously aloof and through the years had, in fact, about as much political impact on the neighbourhood as the near-by gasworks. The second establishment, our Conservative Club, except for a few days at election times, didn't appear to meddle with politics at all. It was notable usually for a union jack in the window and a brewer's dray at the door.

Over one quarter of a mile industry stood represented by a dying brickworks and an iron foundry. Several gasholders on the south side polluted the air, sometimes for days together. Little would grow; even the valiant aspidistra pined. We possessed besides two coal yards, a corn store, a cattle wharf and perhaps as closed an urban society as any in Europe.

In our community, as in every other of its kind, each street had the usual social rating; one side or one end of that street might be classed higher than another. Weekly rents varied from 2s 6d for the back-to-back to 4s 6d for a 'two up and two down'. End houses often had special status. Every family, too, had a tacit ranking, and even individual members within it; neighbours would consider a daughter in one household as 'dead common' while registering her sister as 'refined', a word much in vogue. (Young women with incipient consumption were often thought 'refined'.) Class divisions were of the greatest consequence, though their implications remained unrealized: the many looked upon social and economic inequality as the law of nature.

Division in our own society ranged from an élite at the peak, composed of the leading families, through recognized strata to a social base whose members one damned as the 'lowest of the low', or simply 'no class'. Shopkeepers, publicans and

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4. To encourage the Adam in us our local park sold 'garden soil' at a penny a bucket. At home, expending two pence, we once tripped a window box 'for flowers' in the back-yard. A few blooms struggled up then collapsed. 'So!' said my mother, loud in her husband's hearing. 'You can rear a child, it seems, on coal gas, but it does for geraniums!'

3. The railway company which owned most of our streets kept its houses in a moderate state of disrepair. Two workmen haunted the properties, a crabby joiner and, trailing behind him with the handcart, his mate, a tall, frail consumptive. This pair were known to the neighbourhood unluckily as 'Scrooge' and 'Marley's Ghost'.

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Class Structure
skilled tradesmen occupied the premier positions, each family having its own sphere of influence. A few of these aristocrats, while sharing working-class culture, had aspirations. From their ranks the lower middle class, then clearly defined, drew most of its recruits - clerks and, in particular, schoolteachers (struggling hard at that time for social position). Well before translation those striving to 'get on' tried to ape what they believed were 'real' middle-class manners and customs. Publicans' and shopkeepers' daughters, for instance, set the fashion in clothes for a district. Some went to private commercial colleges in the city, took music lessons or perhaps studied elocution - that short cut, it was felt, to 'culture' - at two shillings an hour, their new 'twang' tried out later over the bar and counter, earning them a deal of covert ridicule. Top families generally stood ever on the look-out for any activity or 'nice' connection which might edge them, or at least their children, into a higher social ambience. But despite all endeavour, mobility between manual workers, small tradesmen and the genuine middle class remained slight, and no one needed to wonder why; before the masses rose an economic barrier that few men could ever hope to scale. At the end of the Edwardian period an adult male industrial worker earned £75 a year; the average annual salary of a man in the middle classes proper was £340.

4. Since the State educational system was doing little to train the mass of cheap female labour that commerce and the civil service drew upon after 1900, private 'colleges' sprang up in all the larger towns teaching shorthand, typing, book-keeping and foreign languages. One of these in the city, typical of many, opened in two small rooms, soared to prosperity through the inter-war years with more than a thousand students annually ('20 lessons, 20 shillings!'), then collapsed in the '60s when the State finally got round to providing commercial education for all who needed it.

In the years of mass unemployment after the first world war some of these private establishments used to 'guarantee' their students a post after training. Many, desperate for work, borrowed or used savings to pay fees, only to be offered in the end one of those numberless jobs in commerce always to be had at starvation salaries.

That wide section beyond the purely manual castes where incomes ranged between the two norms mentioned was considered by many to be no more than 'jumped-up working class', not to be confused with the true order above; but the striving sought it nevertheless, if not for themselves, at least for their children. The real social divide existed between those who, in earning daily bread, dirtied hands and face and those who did not.

The less ambitious among skilled workers had aims that seldom rose above saving enough to buy the ingoing of a beer-house, open a corner shop or get a boarding house at the seaside. By entering into any business at all a man and his family grew at once in economic status, though social prestige accrued much more slowly. Fiascos were common; again and again one noticed in the district pathetic attempts to set up shops in private houses by people who possessed only a few shillings' capital and no experience. After perhaps only three weeks one saw their hopes collapse, often to the secret satisfaction of certain neighbours who, in the phrase of the times, 'hated to see folk trying to get on'.

On the social ladder after tradesmen and artisans came the semi-skilled workers (still a small section) in regular employment, and then the various grades of unskilled labourers. These divisions could be marked in many public houses, where workers other than craftsmen would be frozen or flatly ordered out of those rooms in which journeymen forgathered. Each part of the tavern had its status rating; indeed, 'he's only a tap-room man' stood as a common slur. Nevertheless, whatever the job the known probity of a person conferred at once some social standing. 'She was poor but she was honest' we sang first in praise, not derision. I remember neighbours speaking highly of an old drudge,
The Classic Slum

‘poor but honest’, who had sought charring work with a flash publican new to the district. ‘I dunno,’ he told her, ‘but come tomorrer and fetch a “character”’. She returned the next day. ‘Well, yer brought it?’ he asked. ‘No,’ she said ‘I got yours an’ I won’t be startin’! ’

Many women and girl in the district worked in some branch of the textile industry. Of these, we accepted weavers as ‘top’ in their class, followed by winders and drawers-in. Then came spinners. They lacked standing on several counts: first, the trade contained a strong Irish Catholic element, and wages generally were lower than in other sections. Again, because of the heat and slippery floors, women worked barefoot, dressed in little more than calico shifts. These garments, the respectable believed, induced in female spinners a certain moral carelessness. They came home, too, covered in dust and fluff; all things which combined to depress their social prestige. Women employees of dye works, however, filled the lowest bracket: their work was dirty, wet and heavy and they paid due penalty for it. Clogs and shawls were, of course, standard wear for all. The girl who first defied this tradition in one of Lancashire’s largest mills remembered the ‘stares, skits and sneers’ of fellow workers sixty years afterwards. Her parents, urgently in need of money, had put her to weaving, where earnings for girls were comparatively good. They lived, however, in one of the newer suburbs with its parloured houses and small back gardens. To be seen in such a district returning from a mill in clogs and shawl would have meant instant social demotion for the whole family. She was sent to the weaving shed wearing coat and shoes and thereby shocked a whole establishment. Here was a ‘forward little bitch’, getting above herself. So clearly, in fact, did headwear denote class that, in Glasgow, separate clubs existed for ‘hat’ girls and ‘shawl’ girls. Nevertheless, before 1914 even, continued good wages in weaving and the consequent urge to bolster status had persuaded not a few to follow the lone teenager’s example. By the end of the war, in the big town cotton mills at least, coats and shoes could be worn without comment.

Unskilled workers split into plainly defined groups according to occupation, possessions and family connection, scavengers and night-soil men rating low indeed. Following these came a series of castes, some unknown and others, it seems, already withered into insignificance in Professor Hoggart’s Hunslet of the 1930s: first, the casual workers of all kinds – dockers in particular (who lacked prestige through the uncertainty of their calling), then the local street sellers of coal, lamp oil, tripe, crumpets, muffins and pikelets, fruit, vegetables and small-ware. Finally came the firewood choppers, bundlers and sellers and the rag and boners, often whole families. These people for some reason ranked rock-bottom among the genuine workers. It may have been that firewood sellers rated so very low socially because they competed in some districts with small teams of paupers who went about in charge of a uniformed attendant hawking firewood, chopped and bundled at the Union. Workhouse paupers hardly registered as human beings at all. Even late in the nineteenth century able-bodied men from some Northern poorhouses worked in public with a large P stamped on the seat of their trousers. This not only humiliated the wearer but prevented his ascending to a street market where he could have exchanged his good pants for a cheap pair – with cash adjustment. The theft of ‘workhouse property’ was a common offence among the destitute.

Forming the base of the social pyramid we had bookies’ runners, idlers, part-time beggars and petty thieves, together with all those known to have been in prison; whatever might be their ostensible economic or social standing. Into this group the community lumped any harlots, odd

6. The Uses of Literacy.
7. Who, among the lowest orders, had just gone into or come out of Strangeways was of course a common topic of shop and beer-house.
homosexuals, kept men and brothel keepers. Hunslet’s sympathy with a prostitute, mentioned in *The Uses of Literacy*, seems unusual even during the ‘30s. In the proletarian world of my youth, and long after, the active drab was generally condemned out of hand, certainly by ‘respectable’ women. Their menfolk agreed or remained uneasily silent. Nor did retirement lead to social acceptance. I recall one street walker, ten years after ceasing her trade, blamelessly married, with a ‘clean doorstep and a beautiful house of furniture’, who was still cold-shouldered by her neighbours. Drunk one day, she could stand it no longer and burst in passion through her doorway, half pleading, half enraged. ‘It’s not what I was!’ she screamed again and again, ‘it’s what I am now – a decent, clean-living woman.’ This, over a knot of startled children playing in the street, to rows of closed, condemnatory doors. The moralists found it hard to forgive and they never forgot. ‘I wonder,’ sniffed one old neighbour to another, after hearing of the outbreak of the second world war, ‘I wonder if Mrs J., with her husband away, will go on the game again, like what she did last time?’

I don’t recall, though, that any ‘lost women’ ever threw themselves off bridges in despair; as they grew older most found a complaisant male to marry or live with and dwelt, if not accepted, at least tolerated by most neighbours.

Drunkenness, rowing or fighting in the streets, except perhaps at weddings and funerals (when old scores were often paid off), Christmas or bank holidays could leave a stigma on a family already registered as ‘decent’ for a long time afterwards. Another household, for all its clean curtains and impeccable conduct, would remain uneasily aware that its rating had slumped since Grandma died in the workhouse or Cousin Alf did time. Still another family would be scorned loudly in a drunken tiff for marrying off its daughter to some ‘low Mick from the Bog’. With us, of course, as with many cities in the North, until the coming of the coloured people, Irish Roman Catholic immigrants, mostly illiterate, formed the lowest socio-economic stratum. A slum Protestant marrying into the milieu suffered a severe loss of face. Such unions seldom occurred.

At all times there were naturally many unsnobbish people in the working class who remained indifferent to the social effects of affluence or poverty on those about them and who judged others not at all by their place and possessions. On the whole, though, most families were well aware of their position within the community, and that without any explicit analyses. Many households strove by word, conduct and the acquisition of objects to enhance the family image and in so doing often overgraded themselves. Meanwhile their neighbours (acting in the same manner on their own behalf) tended to depreciate the pretensions of families around, allotting them a place in the register lower than that which, their rivals felt, connections, calling or possessions merited. In this lay much envy (envy was the besetting sin), bitterness and bad blood which, stored up and brooded over, burst on the community in drunken Saturday night brawls. Tiffs over children usually provided the opening skirmishes, but before the fighting proper began between the males, housewives shrieked abuse at one another, interspersed with ‘case/history’ examples aiming to prove to the world that the other party and its kindred were ‘low class’ or no class at all. One waved, for instance, a ‘clean’ rent book (that great status symbol of the times) in the air, knowing the indicted had fallen in arrears. Now manners and morals were arrayed before a massed public tribunal; innuendos long hinted at found blatant proof, and shame fought with
outraged honour screaming in the gutter; a class struggle indeed! Purse-lipped and censorious, the matriarchs surveyed the scene, soaking it all in, shocked by the vulgarity of it all, unless, of course, their own family was engaged. Then later, heads together and from evidence submitted, they made grim readjustments on the social ladder.

As a child before the first world war I hardly knew a weekend free from the sight of brawling adults and inter-family dispute. It was then one saw demonstrated how deeply many manual workers and their wives were possessed with ideas about class; with some, involvement almost reached obsession. Yet in examining the standards of the Edwardian lower orders one has always to bear in mind that street disturbers, gutter fighters and general destroyers of the peace came from a comparatively small section of the community. Nevertheless, in the 'dialogue' of street dissension one saw exposed all the social inhibitions of the more respectable.

One or two proletarian authors, writing about these times and of the slump between the wars, appear to me to sentimentalize the working class: even worse, by too often depicting its cruder and more moronic members they end by caricaturing the class as a whole. In general, women in the slums were far from being foul-mouthed sluts and harri-dans, sitting in semi-starvation at home in between trips to the pub and pawnshop, nor were most men boors and drunken braggarts. People en masse, it is true, had little education but the discerning of the time saw abundant evidence of intelligence, shrewdness, restraint and maturity. Of course, we had low 'characters' by the score, funny or revolting: so did every slum in Britain. Such types set no standards. In sobriety they knew their 'place' well enough. Very many families even in our 'low' district remained awesomely respectable over a lifetime. Despite poverty and appalling surroundings parents brought up their children to be decent, kindly and honourable and often lived long enough to see them occupy a higher place socially than they

had ever known themselves: the greatest satisfaction of all. It is such people and their children now who deny indignantly (and I believe rightly) that the slum life of the industrial North in this century, for all its horrors, was ever so mindless and uncouth as superficial play and novel would have a later generation believe.

Position in our Edwardian community was judged not only by what one possessed but also by what one pawned. Through agreement with the local broker the back room of our corner shop served as a depot for those goods pledged by the week which owners had been unable to redeem before nine o'clock on Saturday, when the local pawnshop closed. Our service gave women waiting on drunken or late-working husbands a few hours' grace in which to redeem shoes and clothing before the Sabbath, and so maintain their social stake in the English Sunday. Towards our closing time there was always a great scurrying shopwards to get the 'bundle'. Housewives after washday on Monday pledged what clean clothes could be spared until weekend and returned with cash to buy food. Often they stood in the shop and thanked God that they were not as certain others who, having no clothes but what they stood in, had sunk low enough to pawn ashpans, hearth rugs or even the 'pots off the table'. Other customers tut-tutted in disgust. News of domestic distress soon got around. Inability to redeem basic goods was a sure sign of a family's approaching destitution, and credit dried up fast in local tick shops. Naturally, the gulf between those households who patron-

9. Some professional inquirers into the past have persuaded the elderly both to reminisce and to complete lengthy questionnaires covering aspects of their lives in youth. This can of course yield valuable information, social and historical. But a certain caution is needed. During the '30s and '40s I often talked with people who were already mature by 1914. They criticized the then fairly recent past, faculties alert, with what seemed some objectivity. But by the '60s myths had developed, prejudices about the present had set hard; these same critics, in ripe old age, now saw the Edwardian era through a golden haze.
ized 'Uncle', even if only occasionally, and those who did not step wide. Some families would go hungry rather than pledge their belongings.

The interest charged on articles pawned was usually a penny in the shilling per week, one half being paid at pledging time (Monday) and the other on redemption of the goods (Saturday). Much trucking went on among neighbours, and this often led to dispute. One woman, as a favour, would make up a bundle of her clothing for another to pawn. The pledger would then gradually gear her household economy to the certainty of hocking the same bundle every Monday morning. But the boon would be withdrawn with 'I don't know whose clothes they are - mine or hers!' Then came bitterness, recrimination and even a 'stack-up' street fight.

The great bulk of pledged goods consisted of 'Sunday best' suits, boots and clean clothing. Their lying with Uncle provided not only cash but also convenient storage for households with next to no cupboards and where the word 'wardrobe' was yet unknown. Among that body of 'white slaves', the washerwomen, there was always one notorious for pledging the clothes she had laundered professionally. Bold with booze from the proceeds of her crime, she would then send her client (usually a publican or shopkeeper) the pawn ticket and a rude verbal message ending her contract for ever. But even in those days washerwomen were hard to come by and the good one, though occasionally dishonest, could always find labour at two shillings per diem.

Behind his cold eye and tight lip our local broker, it was said, had a heart of stone. Only one customer, he boasted, had ever 'bested' him. An Irish woman he knew as a 'good Catholic' had presented him with a large bundle containing exactly the same washing week after week for months on end. At last he ceased to open it and paid her 'on sight'. Suddenly she disappeared and left the goods unredeemed. Weeks after a revolting smell from the store room forced him to open her pledge. He found, rotting gently among rags, an outsize savoy cabbage.

Few shopkeepers indeed would lend cash. Women customers at our shop very seldom asked for a loan but their husbands, banking on a wife's good name, would send children from time to time - 'Can yer lend me father a shilling, an' he'll give yer one an' three at the week end?'

'Tell him this is a shop,' my mother would snap, 'not a loan office.'

This usually happened on the day of some big race. If the would-be punter's fancy won, he blamed Mother bitterly for robbing him of his gains.

Only those in dire straits, and with a certainty of cash cover to come, patronized the local blood sucker; he charged threepence in the shilling per week. To be known to be in his clutches was to lose caste altogether. Women would pawn to the limit, leaving the home utterly comfortless, rather than fall to that level.

Though the senior members of a household would try to uphold its prestige in every way, children in the streets had the reprehensible habit of making friends with anyone about their own age who happened to be around, in spite of the fact that parents, ever on the watch, had already announced what company they should keep. One would be warned off certain boys altogether. Several of us, for instance, had been strictly forbidden ever to be seen consorting with a lad whose mother, known elegantly as the She Nigger, was a woman of the lowest repute. Unfortunately we could find nothing 'low' in her son. A natural athlete (he modelled his conduct on Harry Wharton of the Magnet), a powerful whistler through his teeth, generous, unquarrelsome, Bill seemed the kind of friend any sensible lad would pick. We sought him out at every opportunity but took very good care to drop him well away from home base. He accepted our brush-off weekly, but in the end protested with a dignity which left the other three of us in the group deeply embarrassed. 'Why', he asked, 'won't you be seen with me in the street?'

We looked at one another: 'It's - it's your old lady,' I mumbled at last - 'You know!'
The Classic Slum

'I can't help what the old lady does, can I?' he asked.
'It's not us,' we explained lamely. 'It's them - you know - them at home . . .' He turned and walked away.
All of us were then within a few weeks of leaving school; no longer children. We went again to our common haunts but he came no more; the friendship was over.
Through our teens we saw him pass often, but he ignored us. The break would have come in any case, I told myself uneasily. He got a job after school as a mere chain horse lad; we had become apprentices of a sort; but a social barrier had risen for good.

The class struggle, as manual workers in general knew it, was apolitical and had place entirely within their own society. They looked upon it not in any way as a war against the employers but as a perpetual series of engagements in the battle of life itself. One family might be 'getting on' - two or three children out to work and the dream of early marriage days fulfilled at last. The neighbours noted it as they noted everything, with pleasure or envy. A second household would begin a slip downhill as father aged or children married. They watched, sympathetically perhaps, or with a touch of schadenfreude. All in all it was a struggle against the fates, and each family fought it out as best it could. Marxist 'ranters' from the Hall who paid fleeting visits to our street end insisted that we, the proletariat, stood locked in titanic struggle with some wicked master class. We were battling, they told us (from a vinegar barrel borrowed from our corner shop), to cast off our chains and win a whole world. Most people passed by; a few stood to listen, but not for long: the problems of the 'proletariat', they felt, had little to do with them.

Before 1914 the great majority in the lower working class were ignorant of Socialist doctrine in any form, whether 'Christian' or Marxist. Generally, those who did come into contact with such ideas showed either indifference or, more often, hostility. Had they been able to read a Times stricture of the day, most would have agreed heartily that 'Socialist is a title which carries in many minds summary and contemptuous condemnation'. They would have echoed too its pains protest on the iniquities of the doctrine. 'To take from the rich', said a leader in 1903, à propos a mild tax proposal, 'is all very well if they are to make some more money, but to take from the rich by methods that prevent them replacing what is taken is the way to national impoverishment from which the poor, in spite of all doles and Socialist theories, will be the greatest sufferers.'

Meanwhile, though the millennium for a socialist few might seem just around the corner, many gave up struggling. The suicide rate among us remained pretty high. There was Joe Kane, for instance, an unemployed labourer who was found by a neighbour blue in the face with a niffer tied about his neck. Some time previously he had taken carbolic acid and bungled that attempt too. But the magistrate didn't think much of Joe's efforts.

'If the prisoner', he said, 'is anxious to get to heaven, one would have thought he could have managed it by some better means than that. He could, now, have thrown himself into the river, or something else.'

The prisoner was discharged. But several months later Joe took up the magistrate's thoughtful suggestion and drowned himself in the canal.

Throughout a quarter of a century the population of our village remained generally immobile: the constant shifts of near-by country folk into industrial towns, so common during the previous century, had almost ceased; though our borough was still growing at a diminished rate. A man's work, of course, usually fixed the place where his family dwelt; but lesser factors were involved too: his links, for instance, with local kith and kin. Then again, he commonly held a certain social position at the near-by pub, modest, perhaps, but recognized, and a credit connection with the corner shop. Such relationships, once relinquished, might not easily be re-established. All these things, together with
fear of change, combined to keep poor families, if not in the same street, at least in the same neighbourhood for generations. There was of course some movement in and out, and naturally we had the odd ‘moonlight’ fitting when a whole household, to dodge its debts, would vanish overnight. Everybody laughed about it except the creditors. What newcomers we got were never the ‘country gorbies’ whom my grandfather remembered as the ‘butt of the workshops’ in his youth, but families on the way up or down from other slums of the city: yet new neighbours or old, all shared a common poverty.

Even with rapidly increasing literacy during the second half of the nineteenth century, years were needed, sometimes decades, before certain ideas common to the educated filtered through to the very poor. By 1900, however, those cherished principles about class, order, work, thrift and self-help, epitomized by Samuel Smiles and long taught and practised by the Victorian bourgeoisie, had moulded the minds of even the humblest. And slow to learn, they were slow to change. Whatever new urges might have roved abroad in early Edwardian England, millions among the poor still retained the outlook and thought patterns imposed by their Victorian mentors. For them the twentieth century had not begun. Docilely they accepted a steady decline in living standards and went on wishing for nothing more than to be ‘respectful’ and respected in the eyes of men. For

10. Harry Quelch, proletarian leader in the SDF, who knew the common people if ever a man did, called the English working class of that day the ‘most reverential to the master class’ of any in Europe. In London in 1889 at the time of the dockers' and gasworkers' strikes Engels wrote: ‘The most repulsive thing here is the bourgeois “respectability” which has grown deep into the bones of the workers. The division of society into innumerable strata, each recognized without question, each with its own pride, but also inborn respect for its “betters” and “superiors”, is so old and firmly established that the bourgeoisie find it fairly easy to get their bait accepted.

Engels seemed to find the workers' leaders little better. ‘Even Tom Mann,’ he complained, ‘whom I regard as the best of the lot, is fond