



Cleaning Up

Charlie sat by the river with his head in his hands. His short, dirty coat pulled up round him, showing its hard -worn patches. He was oblivious to all the familiar sounds and sights, the cries and smells around him. For the moment he was deaf to horses hoofs and metal banded wheels rattling across stones and cobbles in the street behind him. It was warm enough for open windows in these first days of summer and the clattering of the weaving machines in the mill interspersed with the loud shouts of the factory foremen filled the air. Anytime now the hooter would sound for lunch-time and when the women and boys came out he may just see someone who would share a crust of bread with him. The smell of baking biscuits, heavy on the air increased the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He sat staring at the waters of the Caldew, unaware of the tall man who had come up behind him. Later, Charlie recalled that he was dressed like his Dad, but was clean shaven and he didn't talk like Dad.

Hello lad. What's up?

Charlie turned suddenly, stretching his neck to look up at the man, who, without being invited, crouched down and then, pulling off his clogs, stretched out his legs across the walled river bank to sit beside him.

Not a pretty sight, he said, nodding towards the water of the Caldew river, which carried its usual load of waste from factories and houses all around.

They say it's a different colour every day! And the smell! How people sit here and eat food I can't imagine.

Where else would they go? Charlie snapped. *They've only got a small room to go to or they just sit by their machines and eat the dust with their bread.*

I know. My Dad told me. And it don't smell much better inside, he says, with hundreds of sweaty bodies and the grease from the machines.

Charlie felt quickly at ease with the man. He was sure he had seen him before. He was hopeful he might have something to eat. *Have you stopped for your bait?* he asked.

No, replied the man. *But I have just bought a pie.* He pulled a package out of the pocket of his rough tweed coat. *I don't think I could eat it all by this river, so why don't you help me?*

Charlie did not need to be asked twice. Hungrily, he stuffed a big piece into his mouth. Before he had finished chewing he said, *The river isn't always like this. My Dad took me a long way upstream to fish once. The water was so clear you could see the bottom, and the fish swimming in it. We caught an eel.*

The man smiled at Charlie. *It get's clean again,* he said, *when it runs out through the Eden and into the sea. It's like us and Jesus. Our lives start off clean and good. Then things go wrong and we get into all sorts of troubles. Our lives get murky like the river here, but when we know Jesus its like flowing into the sea to get all cleaned up again.*

Like having a bath, suggested Charlie scratching himself at the thought. *It's ages since I had one of them.* He turned to stare hard at the man. Now he knew who he was. He was the new preacher everyone was talking about. Hargreaves. That was his name, though most people just called him Jim or James.

You're the preacher man! Charlie blurted out. *You live in Broadguards and have meetings there in the old weavers' cottages!*

That's right, said James Hargreaves. *You know about me, but what about you? Where do you live?*

Oh just nearby you in Potters Place .. Charlie's voice tailed off and his head drooped ... *Or I used to live there. Till this morning!*

James gently prompted Charlie to tell him what was behind the statement, and soon the boy was telling him his story. Just recently a lot of men had lost their jobs at the mill. This week it was Dad's turn which meant they couldn't pay the rent they already owed, and yesterday the landlord had turned the whole family out. Dad had already gone away to find work down country. Mum and Charlie's four younger sisters moved in with his mother's sister. Charlie himself was to go to stay with another aunt. However, he had heard her telling a neighbour she didn't really want the boy and *Who was going to pay for another mouth to feed?* Charlie had not wanted to go and hated the thought of sharing a room with his cousins so he decided he would find work and look after himself.

He slept rough in an alley that night and set off to look for work first thing. But it wasn't so easy finding work. He spent all morning asking in every shop and workplace he could find. Nobody wanted a boy as young as Charlie when so many other people were out of work.

The minister listened without interrupting and then pulled himself up. Charlie jumped up too and Rev. Hargreaves put a hand on his shoulder. *Charlie, he said. I'll see if I can help you. Come and find me at the meeting tonight. You know where it is .. in the old weaver's cottage.*

Even if Charlie had not known where it was he would have had no difficulty finding the place. All along the street people sat on their doorsteps, listening to the singing. He pushed open the door, his eyes adjusting to the light and his nose to the smell of the oil-lamps. Inside the place was packed with women and men and children. Now they were all quiet listening to a little man whom Charlie recognised as one of Dad's pub mates.

There was no sign of James Hargreaves. He asked the woman who had opened the door for him where the preacher man was. *He's next door, she said. Come on I'll show you.* She led him out into the street again and to the cottage next door. It was like the first place. Just a bare room with a hand weaving loom pushed to one side and a few benches for people to sit on. But it was different. Men and boys sat on the benches. Some were holding pieces of slate and chalk. Others were looking at books. James was teaching them to read and write.

Rev. Hargreaves seemed pleased to see Charlie. *I thought you would be preaching and singing with the others, Charlie told him.* *I do. A lot of the time, the preacher replied. But you know I told you Jesus makes us clean and new like the river. Well he does it in all sorts of ways - through his followers - that's us. Sometimes he helps people by changing their lives completely; sometimes by making people feel good inside; sometimes by helping them get a better way of life; or by helping them sort out their problems .. which reminds me.* He took Charlie's arm and led him through to a little kitchen room off the main room.

Mrs. Anderson almost filled the room. Charlie knew her well. She had the little bakery shop on the corner of their street and was a friend of his mother. She had often given them bread when they couldn't pay for it. But more important she was cutting up a loaf now and there was a pot boiling over the fire with the most delicious smells coming from it.

Rev. Hargreaves saw Charlie's eyes settle on the pot. *That's another way Jesus helps people, through us,* he said. *Everyone who wants to will be coming for something to eat soon, and you're welcome to join us. We're one family really - Jesus' family.*

A lot more happened that evening. Charlie stared in disbelief when he saw his mother and sisters come in to join everyone for the food. He met his aunt and mumbled a sort of *I'm sorry'*, He was even more amazed when Mrs. Anderson said he could stay with her if he would help her in the bakery. *I can't pay you,* she said. *But I'll make sure you get enough to eat. And a bath perhaps?* added Rev. Hargreaves.



[The story is fiction, but Rev. Hargreaves was real and many people like Charlie became Christians through his church's work. It was the beginning of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Caldewgate, Carlisle, which was replaced by the church at Wigton Road]