

Escape from Angel Meadow

Mike Cockett

Thee'd a thowt from t' name it were a paradise on earth. It were 'ell. It stank of 'ell. It were a cesspit. There were one privie to four 'ouses and they overflowed into t'yards. Other end o' t'yard were a butcher's. So there were blood and guts thrown into t'yard an' all. There were the stink and there were the smoke. Gret chimneys belching smoke from t'factories an' down at t'end o' t'street there were the tanners and dyers. You could allus tell t'tanners and dyers. They stank o' t'raw animal skins they scraped and they were dyed brown to t'elbows and knees.

They cawd it a river. The river Irk but it were a movin' cesspit wi' dead cats floatin' down. An' rats. Me little sister were bitten by a rat. She died. They took her body to t'paupers cemetery but they hadn't got sixpence fer burial so they went back at night and heaved 'er over t'cemetery wall.

Me mam were put out of 'er 'ouse when they built t'railway. That were afore I were born. Built it on arches straight through Angel Meadow. Them trains went past belchin' more smoke an' steam. Some on us used t'railway line as a privie. Tha could see t'folk in t'carriages look down on us. I don't know what went on l'their 'eads. Must 'a thought we were like animals in a stinkin' zoo. Savages more like.

I never knew me dad. He could 'a been anyone. Me mam weren't that fussy. She 'ad a job as a bobbin carrier but it never paid much.

When we were owd enough she'd tek us to t'works and we'd be sent scavenging under t'machines fer cotton waste. The machines never stopped. There were a lad called Jimmy had 'is arm ripped off.

When we got too big for scavenging we were on our own, gang o' lads roaming and thieving what we could, dodging t'police. I did a good line in breech buzzin' and you'd sell 'andkerchiefs on fer a penny. We were always starving an' some died o' starvation, an' poisoned lungs an' septic sores. And then there was t'cholera. Cholera killed me mam an' me brothers. I were th'on'y one left. Well it were no use skriekin' you 'ad to carry on. Me old nan survived and I joined her in her cellar an' slep on straw in a corner.

You might ask, 'ow d'you get out o' all that. 'ow'd you come to be where y'are now. I'll tell ye 'ow. It were t'missionaries. That were what they called thessel's. I towd ye they thowt we were savages. They took on an old ware'ouse an' cawd it a school, a ragged school. They got ragged right. Well us lads would 'ave none o'that to begin wi'. We broke t'windows an' threw stones at 'em. I threw a dead cat at a preacher and knocked 'is 'at off. That were a laugh. Anyway, they kept coming back and t'message went round that you got soup and a bun on a Sunday if you put up wi'their preachin' an'teachin'. An' that got it all started.

Most o' t'lads were there fer t'food but I got caught by t'readin' I don't know what it were but fer me it were like a sort o' magic. I were quick. They said I were quick. Them black marks sort o' danced of t'page an' knew what they meant. O'course it were all bible and

religious stuff. I dint take to it but readin' is readin'. I used to go scavenging for old bits o' t' Manchester Evenin' News. If I were lucky one 'ud be thrown out o' a railway carriage an' I'd grab it before it were used fer wipin' bums. I could read it and it weren't all god an' Jesus. There were another world out there. I thought, 'that's where I want t' go'. But I never thowt I would.

Them missionaries got lads jobs. They got me mate Tommy blackin' shoes on Victoria Station. 'e 'ated it but the money was real an' you didn't get nicked.

There were this missionary, Miss Enright, She must a' taken a shine to me 'cause one day she said 'stay on after class will you?' If the lad's 'ad 'eard I a been for it but she spoke quiet. When t'others 'ad gone she said "George, I've been 'aving a word an' I've got you a place at Beehive mill" Well I were that surprised. They din't tek on lads like me. They thowt we were trouble.

"It's a chance." She said "Yer too bright fer shoe blackin'. An if you join them gangs, them scuttlers, fightin' and theivin' y'end up in gaol or in't work'ouse."

She were right there. I were lucky I'd grown up strong. I reckon I could 'a taken any one o' them scuttlers but I din't fancy it. It were a mugs game. And there were me Nan. If I could earn a bit I could get 'er out o' t'cellar.

So I turned up at t'mill. I could tell the gaffer were not keen but he'd bin told. They put me in t'windin' room. Getting' gret spindles o' cotton ready fer t'looms. It were 'eavy werk. I 'elped 'eavin t'spindles and 'eddles an' wheelin' em into to weavin' shed. First few times in t'weaving shed noise nearly killed ye. You felt yer ears ud burst an' fer a lot, they pretty well did. No good tryin' to shout in t' weavin' shed. No one could 'ear. They could all lip read an' y'ad te learn yersel'. Lots o' them needed it anyway cause lots of 'em ended up deaf. I'd stuff bits o' cotton waste i' me ears.

Well t'money weren't great but it were enough to get us out o' t'cellar an' into a room in an 'ouse. Ye still 'ad to share t'privie and the stink but that damp cellar were killin' us both.

Then came me second bit o' lucky. It were owd jim Standen. His job were threadin' t'eddies. Pullin' threads through t'eye 'oles in t'cords as lifted an' dropped warp fer t' shuttles te whip through. Ye needed good eyes yersel' stickin' yer little 'ook through t'eye and 'ooking through a thread, 'undreds on 'em. The problem fer Jim were is eyes were goin'. That's were I got me chance. I towd ye I were a quick learner. Well I took to 'eddie threadin' wi Jim teachin' me. 'e knew 'e were finished. Nowt I could do about that. They give me 'is job an' 'e ended in t'work'ouse. I felt bad but there were nowt I could do about it.

O' course the pay were better. I were doin' a skilled job like, an' t'other threaders din't want me undercuttin'. Anywy, I were soon as quick as they were.

That could a' been it. Still in Angel Meadow but wi' two rooms an' a kitchen. Mi' Nan still there. She were goin' on sixty or so she thowt. That were almost un'heard of.

It were around then that t'Irish started to arrive. Thousands of 'em it seemed. They set up in t'place they cawd New Town. It were t'worst o' Angel Meadow. They looked like walkin' skelingtons most on 'em. You could 'ardly tell what they were sayin' wi' there accent an' some on um didn't speak English at all. Well they set about begin' an' theivin' an' scratin' about fer anythin' they could find. You'd a' thowt there'd be a bit o' symphathy for 'em, us being dirt poor like them. But nah. They were Cathlics 'an' savages an' Angel meadow might not be much but it were ours, so most thought. The scuttlers 'ad someone else to fight not just another gang.

I stayed clear. I were doin' alright an' keepin' me 'ead down. That were till I met this girl. She were beggin'. I were sitting outside readin' t'Evenin' News an' she come up te me. I suppose she thowt if I were readin' I must 'ave a bit o' money. Anyway I started to send 'er away but she stood around fer a bit lookin' at me. I looked up. 'What ye gwawpin' at?' I said. She said, "When you've finished yer paper sir, would ye be good enough to be lettin' me have it?" I were surprised. It weren't what I expected. "What tha goin' a do wi' paper" a said. She said "I'd like to read it sir. I've had nothin' to read since we left Ireland an' I do so miss the reading" I looked at 'er again. I supposed I saw 'er fer t' first time. She were thin but she were pretty. 'But..' I started. "I know" she said "Ye think were all savages but my Da was a school teacher so he was and all his children learnt to read. I'm the only one left though. All gone, reading didn't feed ye when the blight came."

I tell ye it were a shock. I 'anded 'er t'paper an' said 'go on then read' and she did. She sat down next te me an' read out loud as clear as anythin'.

That's were it started. We 'ad a place she could come to where we couldn't be seen and I'd give her somat t'eat an' she'd read and then she started talkin' about Ireland an' the place she'd come from, Tipperary she cawed it. 'er name were Mary Ann an' Tipperary, she said, were green an' lovely until t'blight came and then there were no werk fer t'school teachers an' there own potato crop failed an' they set off fer England but she were t'on'y one as made it.

It were then me Nan died. She started coughin' an' then she just went one night. I woke up an' there she were dead. At least I could give 'er a proper funeral an' a grave te rest in. But then I were on me own. But then there were Mary Ann. Wi' me feedin' her I could see she were a young woman an' lovely. Well I don't 'av te tell what happens when a young fella and girl get together. I'd watched it 'appen. Lads gettin' t'girls into trouble an' then 'avin to marry an' then they can't stand the skriekin' baby and their girls started yellin' an' afore long they'd tek their money down t'pub an' spend it on ale.

I tell ye I were ready fer it wi' Mary Ann but she'd ave none. She were Cathlic an' she were firm."I love ye George" she said "But ye get no more than a kiss till we're wed." I said "right we get wed then." But that's were a problem an' all. 'cause she were Cathlic an' I were Protestant. Neither t'vicar or t' Catholic priest 'ud marry us. "I'll turn Cathlic then" I said. I weren't that fussy. "And what do ye think would happen then." She said. "If the word gets out you turned Catholic. What chance is there of keepin' yer job and the scuttlers would be round to beat the daylights out of you."

She were right there. "So what can we do?" I said. She said "leave." I tell ye I 'ated Angel Meadow an' I'd dreamt of leavin' but it were all I knew. The thought o' leavin' scared me te death. "Were'd we go I said." "Oh anywhere," she said. "You've got some money. You've seen it in the paper so you have. Angel Meadow isn't the only place in the universe. You're a skilled man are you not? You'll get work."

Well as you might 'ave guessed . That what we did. We just packed a few things in a bundle and we just walked out of Angel Meadow. We'd no idea where we were goin' but we wandered an' afore long we were in fields and then towns an' then more fields an fer a while we just let the stink of Angel Meadow fade away. But the money ran out an' I weren't fer begin' so we ended up in this place cawd Claton Le Moors. It sounds posh but it weren't. I got a job labourin' at t'brick werks. Then I 'eard o' jobs going at a cotton Mill. Palatine mill. It wer' across t' fields in a place cawd Great 'arwood but I could walk there from Clayton le Moors. When I showed 'em I could thread an 'eddie that were it. They were short an' I got t' job.

I sort of became a Cathlic. Mary Ann took me to church an' after a while we asked the priest te marry us. 'E was an old Irshman an 'e took a shine to Mary Ann so he din't ask too many questions. O' course the bairns started comin' an' it were 'ard but it were nowt like Angel Meadow an although ye were still livin in t'smoke an' grime o' t'Mills ye could walk out into t'fields an up t'ills an' breath.

© Michael Cockett September 2017