

### Excerpt from Chapter 8, Three Hundred a Year!

One Monday morning in mid-April, Owen arrived at his factory and opened the doors as usual. As he exchanged greetings with his workers, one of the men asked, "Did you hear Mr. Owen? Mr. Lee has left Mr. Drinkwater, and he's advertised for a new manager?"

"No, I didn't hear. Where did you learn this?"

"It was in the Manchester paper on Saturday," replied the spinner, surprised that Mr. Owen had not seen the advertisement.

"Hmm," mused Owen, "I wonder what he'll do?"

Owen returned to his office and sat there for a brief moment. Then, almost as quickly, he got up, put on his hat, and left without saying a word. He proceeded to Mr. Peter Drinkwater's counting house at 29 York Street without any understanding of why he felt compelled into action.

"I'm here to see Mr. Drinkwater."

"You'll have to wait in line," replied the clerk. "There are five other gentlemen ahead of you." The clerk eyed the young man, then asked, "What business do you have with Mr. Drinkwater?"

"I'm here to apply for the situation as manager of his mill. Do you have a copy of the newspaper with the advertisement in it?"

Owen took his place in line and poured over the advertisement. He had not considered why he was sitting outside Mr. Drinkwater's office, ready to apply for a situation for which he had little experience and almost no knowledge. If he had taken time to have second thoughts, he would have seen the folly of his actions.

After waiting more than an hour, it was his turn. When he entered the office, Drinkwater was standing behind the somewhat cluttered desk. The figure silhouetted by the window peered at him over the top edge of reading glasses. His manner of peering over the reading glasses reminded Owen of Mr. McGuffog, which was somewhat reassuring, although he stopped just a foot or two inside the door.

“What can I do for you, young man?” asked Drinkwater.

Replying with an authoritative but respectful tone, he answered, “I’m here to apply for the situation as manager of your mill.”

Drinkwater was surprised at the maturity of his voice. He had not expected such confidence from the boyish figure standing before him. “You’re too young,” declared Drinkwater.

Owen was years younger than any of the other applicants and looked even younger than he was. Not to be deterred by this unexpected start, Owen replied, “That, sir, was an objection made to me four or five years ago, but I did not expect it to be made to me now.”

Drinkwater contemplated the young man’s poised response. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be twenty-one next month.”

Drinkwater placed the papers he was holding on his desk and folded his arms across his chest. “How often do you get drunk in the week?”

Owen’s face blushed scarlet at the unexpected question, but he answered confidently. “Sir, I was never drunk in my life.”

The question was not trivial. It was a common habit among too many residents of Manchester and Lancashire during this period to get uncontrollably drunk. Owen’s answer and the manner in which he made it struck a responsive cord with Drinkwater. His next question was less provoking. “What salary do you ask?”

Without hesitating, Owen answered, "Three hundred a year."

Drinkwater's mouth dropped, his eyes sprang open, and his folded arms fell to his sides. He looked over his reading glasses directly at this audacious young man. "What? Three hundred a year?" Drinkwater paused but quickly regained his composure. "I have had this morning I know not how many seeking this situation, and I do not think all their askings together would amount to what you require."

"Sir, I cannot be governed by what others ask, and I cannot take less. I am now making that sum in my own business."

"Can you prove that to me?" asked Drinkwater, as he removed his reading glasses and moved closer.

"Yes, and I will show you the business and my books."

Drinkwater eyed Owen from top to bottom, stunned at what he heard coming from one who looked more like an errand boy than a manager. Finally, he straightened himself and said, "Good! Then I will go with you now. You can show them to me."

Drinkwater reached for his hat and pointed Owen toward the door. In the outer office, the clerks rose to their feet, as did the other applicants who were now queued outside the door. "I'll be back later," he barked.

Drinkwater was favourably impressed with what he saw. Owen explained the nature of his business and showed him the mill and his books. The factory was neat and clean, and the spinning room was well organized and efficiently run. Owen's records were meticulous and up to date as of the close of business on Friday. The entire business was a model of efficiency.

"Who keeps the books for you?" asked Drinkwater.

"I keep them myself."

"Hmm. . . . Who keeps an eye on things when you're away?"

“No one, sir. My workmen know their duties, and they know what to do if I’m absent.”

“Hmm,” answered Drinkwater once again. “What references as to past character can you give me?”

Owen gave him the names of Mr. Satterfield, Mr. Palmer, and Mr. McGuffog. He offered Mr. Heptinstall and Mr. Moore as references, but Drinkwater was mainly interested in his three principal employers.

“Come to see me on Wednesday morning, next week, and you shall have my answer.”

Owen thanked him, and Drinkwater departed. He returned to his office, put away the books, and breathed a sigh of relief. “What if I actually got the situation?” he thought. He had never seen the inside of a factory larger than his own, but the thought of running an enterprise so vast was both exhilarating and frightening.