

Chapter 20

The Forty Thieves. The Battle: Brigands versus Bandits

This is an even more unusually dull and uninteresting chapter, and introduces several matters that may appear to have nothing to do with the case. The reader is nevertheless entreated to peruse it, because it contains certain information necessary to an understanding of this history.

The town of Mugsborough was governed by a set of individuals called the Municipal Council. Most of these 'representatives of the people' were well-to-do or retired tradesmen. In the opinion of the inhabitants of Mugsborough, the fact that a man had succeeded in accumulating money in business was a clear demonstration of his fitness to be entrusted with the business of the town.

Consequently, when that very able and successful man of business Mr George Rushton was put up for election to the Council he was returned by a large majority of the votes of the working men who thought him an ideal personage...

These Brigands did just as they pleased. No one ever interfered with them. They never consulted the ratepayers in any way. Even at election time they did not trouble to hold meetings: each one of them just issued a kind of manifesto setting forth his many noble qualities

and calling upon the people for their votes: and the latter never failed to respond. They elected the same old crew time after time...

The Brigands committed their depredations almost unhindered, for the voters were engaged in the Battle of Life. Take the public park for instance. Like so many swine around a trough--they were so busily engaged in this battle that most of them had no time to go to the park, or they might have noticed that there were not so many costly plants there as there should have been. And if they had inquired further they would have discovered that nearly all the members of the Town Council had very fine gardens. There was reason for these gardens being so grand, for the public park was systematically robbed of its best to make them so.

There was a lake in the park where large numbers of ducks and geese were kept at the ratepayers' expense. In addition to the food provided for these fowl with public money, visitors to the park used to bring them bags of biscuits and bread crusts. When the ducks and geese were nicely fattened the Brigands used to carry them off and devour them at home. When they became tired of eating duck or goose, some of the Councillors made arrangements with certain butchers and traded away the birds for meat.

One of the most energetic members of the Band was Mr Jeremiah Didlum, the house-furnisher, who did a large hire system trade. He had an extensive stock of second-hand furniture that he had resumed possession of when the unfortunate would-be purchasers failed to pay the

instalments regularly. Other of the second-hand things had been purchased for a fraction of their real value at Sheriff's sales or from people whom misfortune or want of employment had reduced to the necessity of selling their household possessions.

Another notable member of the Band was Mr Amos Grinder, who had practically monopolized the greengrocery trade and now owned nearly all the fruiterers' shops in the town. As for the other shops, if they did not buy their stocks from him--or, rather, the company of which he was managing director and principal shareholder--if these other fruiterers and greengrocers did not buy their stuff from his company, he tried to smash them by opening branches in their immediate neighbourhood and selling below cost. He was a self-made man: an example of what may be accomplished by cunning and selfishness.

Then there was the Chief of the Band--Mr Adam Sweater, the Mayor. He was always the Chief, although he was not always Mayor, it being the rule that the latter 'honour' should be enjoyed by all the members of the Band in turn. A bright 'honour', forsooth! to be the first citizen in a community composed for the most part of ignorant semi-imbeciles, slaves, slave-drivers and psalm-singing hypocrites. Mr Sweater was the managing director and principal shareholder of a large drapery business in which he had amassed a considerable fortune. This was not very surprising, considering that he paid none of his workpeople fair wages and many of them no wages at all. He employed a great number of girls and young women who were supposed to be learning dressmaking, mantle-making or millinery. These were all indentured apprentices,

some of whom had paid premiums of from five to ten pounds. They were 'bound' for three years. For the first two years they received no wages: the third year they got a shilling or eightpence a week. At the end of the third year they usually got the sack, unless they were willing to stay on as improvers at from three shillings to four and sixpence per week.

They worked from half past eight in the morning till eight at night, with an interval of an hour for dinner, and at half past four they ceased work for fifteen minutes for tea. This was provided by the firm--half a pint for each girl, but they had to bring their own milk and sugar and bread and butter.

Few of the girls ever learned their trades thoroughly. Some were taught to make sleeves; others cuffs or button-holes, and so on. The result was that in a short time each one became very expert and quick at one thing; and although their proficiency in this one thing would never enable them to earn a decent living, it enabled Mr Sweater to make money during the period of their apprenticeship, and that was all he cared about.

Occasionally a girl of intelligence and spirit would insist on the fulfilment of the terms of her indentures, and sometimes the parents would protest. If this were persisted in those girls got on better: but even these were turned to good account by the wily Sweater, who induced the best of them to remain after their time was up by paying them what appeared--by contrast with the others girls' money--good

wages, sometimes even seven or eight shillings a week! and liberal promises of future advancement. These girls then became a sort of reserve who could be called up to crush any manifestation of discontent on the part of the leading hands.

The greater number of the girls, however, submitted tamely to the conditions imposed upon them. They were too young to realize the wrong that was being done them. As for their parents, it never occurred to them to doubt the sincerity of so good a man as Mr Sweater, who was always prominent in every good and charitable work.

At the expiration of the girl's apprenticeship, if the parents complained of her want of proficiency, the pious Sweater would attribute it to idleness or incapacity, and as the people were generally poor he seldom or never had any trouble with them. This was how he fulfilled the unctuous promise made to the confiding parents at the time the girl was handed over to his tender mercy--that he would 'make a woman of her'.

This method of obtaining labour by false pretences and without payment, which enabled him to produce costly articles for a mere fraction of the price for which they were eventually sold, was adopted in other departments of his business. He procured shop assistants of both sexes on the same terms. A youth was indentured, usually for five years, to be 'Made a Man of and 'Turned out fit to take a Position in any House'. If possible, a premium, five, ten, or twenty pounds--according to their circumstances--would be extracted from the parents. For the first

three years, no wages: after that, perhaps two or three shillings a week.

At the end of the five years the work of 'Making a Man of him' would be completed. Mr Sweater would then congratulate him and assure him that he was qualified to assume a 'position' in any House but regret that there was no longer any room for him in his. Business was so bad. Still, if the Man wished he might stay on until he secured a better 'position' and, as a matter of generosity, although he did not really need the Man's services, he would pay him ten shillings per week!

Provided he was not addicted to drinking, smoking, gambling or the Stock Exchange, or going to theatres, the young man's future was thus assured. Even if he were unsuccessful in his efforts to obtain another position he could save a portion of his salary and eventually commence business on his own account.

However, the branch of Mr Sweater's business to which it is desired to especially direct the reader's attention was the Homeworkers Department. He employed a large number of women making ladies' blouses, fancy aprons and children's pinafores. Most of these articles were disposed of wholesale in London and elsewhere, but some were retailed at 'Sweaters' Emporium' in Mugsborough and at the firm's other retail establishments throughout the county. Many of the women workers were widows with children, who were glad to obtain any employment that did not take them away from their homes and families.

The blouses were paid for at the rate of from two shillings to five shillings a dozen, the women having to provide their own machine and cotton, besides calling for and delivering the work. These poor women were able to clear from six to eight shillings a week: and to earn even that they had to work almost incessantly for fourteen or sixteen hours a day. There was no time for cooling and very little to cook, for they lived principally on bread and margarine and tea. Their homes were squalid, their children half-starved and raggedly clothed in grotesque garments hastily fashioned out of the cast-off clothes of charitable neighbours.

But it was not in vain that these women toiled every weary day until exhaustion compelled them to cease. It was not in vain that they passed their cheerless lives bending with aching shoulders over the thankless work that barely brought them bread. It was not in vain that they and their children went famished and in rags, for after all, the principal object of their labour was accomplished: the Good Cause was advanced. Mr Sweater waxed rich and increased in goods and respectability.

Of course, none of those women were COMPELLED to engage in that glorious cause. No one is compelled to accept any particular set of conditions in a free country like this. Mr Trafaim--the manager of Sweater's Homework Department--always put the matter before them in the plainest, fairest possible way. There was the work: that was the figure! And those who didn't like it could leave it. There was no compulsion.

Sometimes some perverse creature belonging to that numerous class who are too lazy to work DID leave it! But as the manager said, there were plenty of others who were only too glad to take it. In fact, such was the enthusiasm amongst these women--especially such of them as had little children to provide for--and such was their zeal for the Cause, that some of them have been known to positively beg to be allowed to work!

By these and similar means Adam Sweater had contrived to lay up for himself a large amount of treasure upon earth, besides attaining undoubted respectability; for that he was respectable no one questioned. He went to chapel twice every Sunday, his obese figure arrayed in costly apparel, consisting--with other things--of grey trousers, a long garment called a frock-coat, a tall silk hat, a quantity of jewellery and a morocco-bound gilt-edged Bible. He was an official of some sort of the Shining Light Chapel. His name appeared in nearly every published list of charitable subscriptions. No starving wretch had ever appealed to him in vain for a penny soup ticket.

Small wonder that when this good and public-spirited man offered his services to the town--free of charge--the intelligent working men of Mugsborough accepted his offer with enthusiastic applause. The fact that he had made money in business was a proof of his intellectual capacity. His much-advertised benevolence was a guarantee that his abilities would be used to further not his own private interests, but the interests of every section of the community, especially those of

the working classes, of whom the majority of his constituents was composed.

As for the shopkeepers, they were all so absorbed in their own business--so busily engaged chasing their employees, adding up their accounts, and dressing themselves up in feeble imitation of the 'Haristocracy'--that they were incapable of taking a really intelligent interest in anything else. They thought of the Town Council as a kind of Paradise reserved exclusively for jerry-builders and successful tradesmen. Possibly, some day, if they succeeded in making money, they might become town councillors themselves! but in the meantime public affairs were no particular concern of theirs. So some of them voted for Adam Sweater because he was a Liberal and some of them voted against him for the same 'reason'.

Now and then, when details of some unusually scandalous proceeding of the Council's leaked out, the townspeople--roused for a brief space from their customary indifference--would discuss the matter in a casual, half-indignant, half-amused, helpless sort of way; but always as if it were something that did not directly concern them. It was during some such nine days' wonder that the title of 'The Forty Thieves' was bestowed on the members of the Council by their semi-imbecile constituents, who, not possessing sufficient intelligence to devise means of punishing the culprits, affected to regard the manoeuvres of the Brigands as a huge joke.

There was only one member of the Council who did not belong to the

Band--Councillor Weakling, a retired physician; but unfortunately he also was a respectable man. When he saw something going forwards that he did not think was right, he protested and voted against it and then--he collapsed! There was nothing of the low agitator about HIM. As for the Brigands, they laughed at his protests and his vote did not matter.

With this one exception, the other members of the band were very similar in character to Sweater, Rushton, Didlum and Grinder. They had all joined the Band with the same objects, self-glorification and the advancement of their private interests. These were the real reasons why they besought the ratepayers to elect them to the Council, but of course none of them ever admitted that such was the case. No! When these noble-minded altruists offered their services to the town they asked the people to believe that they were actuated by a desire to give their time and abilities for the purpose of furthering the interests of Others, which was much the same as asking them to believe that it is possible for the leopard to change his spots.

Owing to the extraordinary apathy of the other inhabitants, the Brigands were able to carry out their depredations undisturbed. Daylight robberies were of frequent occurrence.

For many years these Brigands had looked with greedy eyes upon the huge profits of the Gas Company. They thought it was a beastly shame that

those other bandits should be always raiding the town and getting clear away with such rich spoils.

At length--about two years ago--after much study and many private consultations, a plan of campaign was evolved; a secret council of war was held, presided over by Mr Sweater, and the Brigands formed themselves into an association called 'The Mugsborough Electric Light Supply and Installation Coy. Ltd.', and bound themselves by a solemn oath to do their best to drive the Gas Works Bandits out of the town and to capture the spoils at present enjoyed by the latter for themselves.

There was a large piece of ground, the property of the town, that was a suitable site for the works; so in their character of directors of the Electric Light Coy. they offered to buy this land from the Municipality--or, in other words, from themselves--for about half its value.

At the meeting of the Town Council when this offer was considered, all the members present, with the solitary exception of Dr Weakling, being shareholders in the newly formed company, Councillor Rushton moved a resolution in favour of accepting it. He said that every encouragement should be given to the promoters of the Electric Light Coy., those public-spirited citizens who had come forward and were willing to risk their capital in an undertaking that would be a benefit to every class of residents in the town that they all loved so well. (Applause.) There could be no doubt that the introduction of the electric light

would be a great addition to the attractions of Mugsborough, but there was another and more urgent reason that disposed him to do whatever he could to encourage the Company to proceed with this work.

Unfortunately, as was usual at that time of the year (Mr Rushton's voice trembled with emotion) the town was full of unemployed. (The Mayor, Alderman Sweater, and all the other Councillors shook their heads sadly; they were visibly affected.) There was no doubt that the starting of that work at that time would be an inestimable boon to the working-classes. As the representative of a working-class ward he was in favour of accepting the offer of the Company. (Hear. Hear.)

Councillor Didlum seconded. In his opinion, it would be nothing short of a crime to oppose anything that would provide work for the unemployed.

Councillor Weakling moved that the offer be refused. (Shame.) He admitted that the electric light would be an improvement to the town, and in view of the existing distress he would be glad to see the work started, but the price mentioned was altogether too low. It was not more than half the value of the land. (Derisive laughter.)

Councillor Grinder said he was astonished at the attitude taken up by Councillor Weakling. In his (Grinder's) opinion it was disgraceful that a member of the council should deliberately try to wreck a project which would do so much towards relieving the unemployed.

The Mayor, Alderman Sweater, said that he could not allow the amendment

to be discussed until it was seconded: if there were no seconder he would put the original motion.

There was no seconder, because everyone except Weakling was in favour of the resolution, which was carried amid loud cheers, and the representatives of the ratepayers proceeded to the consideration of the next business.

Councillor Didlum proposed that the duty on all coal brought into the borough be raised from two shillings to three shillings per ton.

Councillor Rushton seconded. The largest consumer of coal was the Gas Coy., and, considering the great profits made by that company, they were quite justified in increasing the duty to the highest figure the Act permitted.

After a feeble protest from Weakling, who said it would only increase the price of gas and coal without interfering with the profits of the Gas Coy., this was also carried, and after some other business had been transacted, the Band dispersed.

That meeting was held two years ago, and since that time the Electric Light Works had been built and the war against the gasworks carried on vigorously. After several encounters, in which they lost a few customers and a portion of the public lighting, the Gasworks Bandits retreated out of the town and entrenched themselves in a strong position beyond the borough boundary, where they erected a number of

gasometers. They were thus enabled to pour gas into the town at long range without having to pay the coal dues.

This masterly stratagem created something like a panic in the ranks of the Forty Thieves. At the end of two years they found themselves exhausted with the protracted campaign, their movements hampered by a lot of worn-out plant and antiquated machinery, and harassed on every side by the lower charges of the Gas Coy. They were reluctantly constrained to admit that the attempt to undermine the Gasworks was a melancholy failure, and that the Mugsborough Electric Light and Installation Coy. was a veritable white elephant. They began to ask themselves what they should do with it; and some of them even urged unconditional surrender, or an appeal to the arbitration of the Bankruptcy Court.

In the midst of all the confusion and demoralization there was, however, one man who did not lose his presence of mind, who in this dark hour of disaster remained calm and immovable, and like a vast mountain of flesh reared his head above the storm, whose mighty intellect perceived a way to turn this apparently hopeless defeat into a glorious victory. That man was Adam Sweater, the Chief of the Band.