

## Chapter 35

### Facing the 'Problem'

Nearly every other firm in the town was in much the same plight as Rushton & Co.; none of them had anything to speak of to do, and the workmen no longer troubled to go to the different shops asking for a job. They knew it was of no use. Most of them just walked about aimlessly or stood talking in groups in the streets, principally in the neighbourhood of the Wage Slave Market near the fountain on the Grand Parade. They congregated here in such numbers that one or two residents wrote to the local papers complaining of the 'nuisance', and pointing out that it was calculated to drive the 'better-class' visitors out of the town. After this two or three extra policemen were put on duty near the fountain with instructions to 'move on' any groups of unemployed that formed. They could not stop them from coming there, but they prevented them standing about.

The processions of unemployed continued every day, and the money they begged from the public was divided equally amongst those who took part. Sometimes it amounted to one and sixpence each, sometimes it was a little more and sometimes a little less. These men presented a terrible spectacle as they slunk through the dreary streets, through the rain or the snow, with the slush soaking into their broken boots, and, worse still, with the bitterly cold east wind penetrating their rotten clothing and freezing their famished bodies.

The majority of the skilled workers still held aloof from these processions, although their haggard faces bore involuntary testimony to their sufferings. Although privation reigned supreme in their desolate homes, where there was often neither food nor light nor fire, they were too 'proud' to parade their misery before each other or the world. They secretly sold or pawned their clothing and their furniture and lived in semi-starvation on the proceeds, and on credit, but they would not beg. Many of them even echoed the sentiments of those who had written to the papers, and with a strange lack of class-sympathy blamed those who took part in the processions. They said it was that sort of thing that drove the 'better class' away, injured the town, and caused all the poverty and unemployment. However, some of them accepted charity in other ways; district visitors distributed tickets for coal and groceries. Not that that sort of thing made much difference; there was usually a great deal of fuss and advice, many quotations of Scripture, and very little groceries. And even what there was generally went to the least-deserving people, because the only way to obtain any of this sort of 'charity' is by hypocritically pretending to be religious: and the greater the hypocrite, the greater the quantity of coal and groceries. These 'charitable' people went into the wretched homes of the poor and--in effect--said: 'Abandon every particle of self-respect: cringe and fawn: come to church: bow down and grovel to us, and in return we'll give you a ticket that you can take to a certain shop and exchange for a shilling's worth of groceries. And, if you're very servile and humble we may give you another one next week.'

They never gave the 'case' the money. The ticket system serves three purposes. It prevents the 'case' abusing the 'charity' by spending the money on drink. It advertises the benevolence of the donors: and it enables the grocer--who is usually a member of the church--to get rid of any stale or damaged stock he may have on hand.

When these visiting ladies' went into a workman's house and found it clean and decently furnished, and the children clean and tidy, they came to the conclusion that those people were not suitable 'cases' for assistance. Perhaps the children had had next to nothing to eat, and would have been in rags if the mother had not worked like a slave washing and mending their clothes. But these were not the sort of cases that the visiting ladies assisted; they only gave to those who were in a state of absolute squalor and destitution, and then only on condition that they whined and grovelled.

In addition to this district visitor business, the well-to-do inhabitants and the local authorities attempted--or rather, pretended--to grapple with the poverty 'problem' in many other ways, and the columns of the local papers were filled with letters from all sorts of cranks who suggested various remedies. One individual, whose income was derived from brewery shares, attributed the prevailing distress to the drunken and improvident habits of the lower orders. Another suggested that it was a Divine protest against the growth of Ritualism and what he called 'fleshly religion', and suggested a day of humiliation and prayer. A great number of well-fed persons thought

this such an excellent proposition that they proceeded to put it into practice. They prayed, whilst the unemployed and the little children fasted.

If one had not been oppressed by the tragedy of Want and Misery, one might have laughed at the farcical, imbecile measures that were taken to relieve it. Several churches held what they called 'Rummage' or 'jumble' sales. They sent out circulars something like this:

#### JUMBLE SALE

in aid of the Unemployed.

If you have any articles of any description which are of no further use to you, we should be grateful for them, and if you will kindly fill in annexed form and post it to us, we will send and collect them.

On the day of the sale the parish room was transformed into a kind of Marine Stores, filled with all manner of rubbish, with the parson and the visiting ladies grinning in the midst. The things were sold for next to nothing to such as cared to buy them, and the local rag-and-bone man reaped a fine harvest. The proceeds of these sales were distributed in 'charity' and it was usually a case of much cry and little wool.

There was a religious organization, called 'The Mugsborough Skull and Crossbones Boys', which existed for the purpose of perpetuating the

great religious festival of Guy Fawkes. This association also came to the aid of the unemployed and organized a Grand Fancy Dress Carnival and Torchlight Procession. When this took place, although there was a slight sprinkling of individuals dressed in tawdry costumes as cavaliers of the time of Charles I, and a few more as highwaymen or footpads, the majority of the processionists were boys in women's clothes, or wearing sacks with holes cut in them for their heads and arms, and with their faces smeared with soot. There were also a number of men carrying frying-pans in which they burnt red and blue fire. The procession--or rather, mob--was headed by a band, and the band was headed by two men, arm in arm, one very tall, dressed to represent Satan, in red tights, with horns on his head, and smoking a large cigar, and the other attired in the no less picturesque costume of a bishop of the Established Church.

This crew paraded the town, howling and dancing, carrying flaring torches, burning the blue and red fire, and some of them singing silly or obscene songs; whilst the collectors ran about with the boxes begging for money from people who were in most cases nearly as poverty-stricken as the unemployed they were asked to assist. The money thus obtained was afterwards handed over to the Secretary of the Organized Benevolence Society, Mr Sawney Grinder.

Then there was the Soup Kitchen, which was really an inferior eating-house in a mean street. The man who ran this was a relative of the secretary of the OBS. He cadged all the ingredients for the soup from different tradespeople: bones and scraps of meat from butchers:

pea meal and split peas from provision dealers: vegetables from greengrocers: stale bread from bakers, and so on. Well-intentioned, charitable old women with more money than sense sent him donations in cash, and he sold the soup for a penny a basin--or a penny a quart to those who brought jugs.

He had a large number of shilling books printed, each containing thirteen penny tickets. The Organized Benevolence Society bought a lot of these books and resold them to benevolent persons, or gave them away to 'deserving cases'. It was this connection with the OBS that gave the Soup Kitchen a semi-official character in the estimation of the public, and furnished the proprietor with the excuse for cadging the materials and money donations.

In the case of the Soup Kitchen, as with the unemployed processions, most of those who benefited were unskilled labourers or derelicts: with but few exceptions the unemployed artisans--although their need was just as great as that of the others--avoided the place as if it were infected with the plague. They were afraid even to pass through the street where it was situated lest anyone seeing them coming from that direction should think they had been there. But all the same, some of them allowed their children to go there by stealth, by night, to buy some of this charity-tainted food.

Another brilliant scheme, practical and statesmanlike, so different from the wild projects of demented Socialists, was started by the Rev. Mr Boshier, a popular preacher, the Vicar of the fashionable Church of

the Whited Sepulchre. He collected some subscriptions from a number of semi-imbecile old women who attended his church. With some of this money he bought a quantity of timber and opened what he called a Labour Yard, where he employed a number of men sawing firewood. Being a clergyman, and because he said he wanted it for a charitable purpose, of course he obtained the timber very cheaply--for about half what anyone else would have had to pay for it.

The wood-sawing was done piecework. A log of wood about the size of a railway sleeper had to be sawn into twelve pieces, and each of these had to be chopped into four. For sawing and chopping one log in this manner the worker was paid ninepence. One log made two bags of firewood, which were sold for a shilling each--a trifle under the usual price. The men who delivered the bags were paid three half-pence for each two bags.

As there were such a lot of men wanting to do this work, no one was allowed to do more than three lots in one day--that came to two shillings and threepence--and no one was allowed to do more than two days in one week.

The Vicar had a number of bills printed and displayed in shop windows calling attention to what he was doing, and informing the public that orders could be sent to the Vicarage by post and would receive prompt attention and the fuel could be delivered at any address--Messrs Rushton & Co. having very kindly lent a handcart for the use of the men employed at the Labour Yard.

As a result of the appearance of this bill, and of the laudatory notices in the columns of the Ananias, the Obscurer, and the Chloroform--the papers did not mind giving the business a free advertisement, because it was a charitable concern--many persons withdrew their custom from those who usually supplied them with firewood, and gave their orders to the Yard; and they had the satisfaction of getting their fuel cheaper than before and of performing a charitable action at the same time.

As a remedy for unemployment this scheme was on a par with the method of the tailor in the fable who thought to lengthen his cloth by cutting a piece off one end and sewing it on to the other; but there was one thing about it that recommended it to the Vicar--it was self-supporting. He found that there would be no need to use all the money he had extracted from the semi-imbecile old ladies for timber, so he bought himself a Newfoundland dog, an antique set of carved ivory chessmen, and a dozen bottles of whisky with the remainder of the cash.

The reverend gentleman hit upon yet another means of helping the poor. He wrote a letter to the Weekly Chloroform appealing for cast-off boots for poor children. This was considered such a splendid idea that the editors of all the local papers referred to it in leading articles, and several other letters were written by prominent citizens extolling the wisdom and benevolence of the profound Boshier. Most of the boots that were sent in response to this appeal had been worn until they needed repair--in a very large proportion of instances, until they were beyond



repair. The poor people to whom they were given could not afford to have them mended before using them, and the result was that the boots generally began to fall to pieces after a few days' wear.

This scheme amounted to very little. It did not increase the number of cast-off boots, and most of the people who 'cast off' their boots generally gave them to someone or other. The only difference it can have made was that possibly a few persons who usually threw their boots away or sold them to second-hand dealers may have been induced to send them to Mr Boshier instead. But all the same nearly everybody said it was a splendid idea: its originator was applauded as a public benefactor, and the pettifogging busybodies who amused themselves with what they were pleased to term 'charitable work' went into imbecile ecstasies over him.