

Chapter 36

The OBS

One of the most important agencies for the relief of distress was the Organized Benevolence Society. This association received money from many sources. The proceeds of the fancy-dress carnival; the collections from different churches and chapels which held special services in aid of the unemployed; the weekly collections made by the employees of several local firms and business houses; the proceeds of concerts, bazaars, and entertainments, donations from charitable persons, and the subscriptions of the members. The society also received large quantities of cast-off clothing and boots, and tickets of admission to hospitals, convalescent homes and dispensaries from subscribers to those institutions, or from people like Rushton & Co., who had collecting-boxes in their workshops and offices.

Altogether during the last year the Society had received from various sources about three hundred pounds in hard cash. This money was devoted to the relief of cases of distress.

The largest item in the expenditure of the Society was the salary of the General Secretary, Mr Sawney Grinder--a most deserving case--who was paid one hundred pounds a year.

After the death of the previous secretary there were so many candidates

for the vacant post that the election of the new secretary was a rather exciting affair. The excitement was all the more intense because it was restrained. A special meeting of the society was held: the Mayor, Alderman Sweater, presided, and amongst those present were Councillors Rushton, Didlum and Grinder, Mrs Starvem, Rev. Mr Boshier, a number of the rich, semi-imbecile old women who had helped to open the Labour Yard, and several other 'ladies'. Some of these were the district visitors already alluded to, most of them the wives of wealthy citizens and retired tradesmen, richly dressed, ignorant, insolent, overbearing frumps, who--after filling themselves with good things in their own luxurious homes--went flouncing into the poverty-stricken dwellings of their poor 'sisters' and talked to them of 'religion', lectured them about sobriety and thrift, and--sometimes--gave them tickets for soup or orders for shillingsworths of groceries or coal. Some of these overfed females--the wives of tradesmen, for instance--belonged to the Organized Benevolence Society, and engaged in this 'work' for the purpose of becoming acquainted with people of superior social position--one of the members was a colonel, and Sir Graball D'Encloeland--the Member of Parliament for the borough--also belonged to the Society and occasionally attended its meetings. Others took up district visiting as a hobby; they had nothing to do, and being densely ignorant and of inferior mentality, they had no desire or capacity for any intellectual pursuit. So they took up this work for the pleasure of playing the grand lady and the superior person at a very small expense. Other of these visiting ladies were middle-aged, unmarried women with small private incomes--some of them well-meaning, compassionate, gentle creatures who did this work because they

sincerely desired to help others, and they knew of no better way. These did not take much part in the business of the meetings; they paid their subscriptions and helped to distribute the cast-off clothing and boots to those who needed them, and occasionally obtained from the secretary an order for provisions or coal or bread for some poverty-stricken family; but the poor, toil-worn women whom they visited welcomed them more for their sisterly sympathy than for the gifts they brought. Some of the visiting ladies were of this character--but they were not many. They were as a few fragrant flowers amidst a dense accumulation of noxious weeds. They were examples of humility and kindness shining amidst a vile and loathsome mass of hypocrisy, arrogance, and cant.

When the Chairman had opened the meeting, Mr Rushton moved a vote of condolence with the relatives of the late secretary whom he eulogized in the most extraordinary terms.

'The poor of Mugsborough had lost a kind and sympathetic friend', 'One who had devoted his life to helping the needy', and so on and so forth. (As a matter of fact, most of the time of the defunct had been passed in helping himself, but Rushton said nothing about that.)

Mr Didlum seconded the vote of condolence in similar terms, and it was carried unanimously. Then the Chairman said that the next business was to elect a successor to the departed paragon; and immediately no fewer than nine members rose to propose a suitable person--they each had a noble-minded friend or relative willing to sacrifice himself for the good of the poor.

The nine Benevolent stood looking at each other and at the Chairman with sickly smiles upon their hypocritical faces. It was a dramatic moment. No one spoke. It was necessary to be careful. It would never do to have a contest. The Secretary of the OBS was usually regarded as a sort of philanthropist by the outside public, and it was necessary to keep this fiction alive.

For one or two minutes an awkward silence reigned. Then, one after another they all reluctantly resumed their seats with the exception of Mr Amos Grinder, who said he wished to propose his nephew, Mr Sawney Grinder, a young man of a most benevolent disposition who was desirous of immolating himself upon the altar of charity for the benefit of the poor--or words to that effect.

Mr Didlum seconded, and there being no other nomination--for they all knew that it would give the game away to have a contest--the Chairman put Mr Grinder's proposal to the meeting and declared it carried unanimously.

Another considerable item in the expenditure of the society was the rent of the offices--a house in a back street. The landlord of this place was another very deserving case.

There were numerous other expenses: stationery and stamps, printing, and so on, and what was left of the money was used for the purpose for which it had been given--a reasonable amount being kept in hand for

future expenses. All the details were of course duly set forth in the Report and Balance Sheet at the annual meetings. No copy of this document was ever handed to the reporters for publication; it was read to the meeting by the Secretary; the representatives of the Press took notes, and in the reports of the meeting that subsequently appeared in the local papers the thing was so mixed up and garbled together that the few people who read it could not make head or tail of it. The only thing that was clear was that the society had been doing a great deal of good to someone or other, and that more money was urgently needed to carry on the work. It usually appeared something like this:

HELPING THE NEEDY

Mugsborough Organized Benevolence Society

Annual Meeting at the Town Hall

A Splendid record of Miscellaneous and Valuable Work.

The annual meeting of the above Society was held yesterday at the Town Hall. The Mayor, Alderman Sweater, presided, and amongst those present were Sir Graball D'Encloeland, Lady D'Encloeland, Lady Slumrent. Rev. Mr Boshier, Mr Cheeseman, Mrs Bilder, Mrs Grosare, Mrs Daree, Mrs Butcher, Mrs Taylor, Mrs Baker, Mrs Starvem, Mrs Slodging, Mrs M. B. Sile, Mrs Knobrane, Mrs M. T. Head, Mr Rushton, Mr Didlum, Mr Grinder and (here followed about a quarter of a column of names of other charitable persons, all subscribers to the Society).

The Secretary read the annual report which contained the following amongst other interesting items:

During the year, 1,972 applications for assistance have been received, and of this number 1,302 have been assisted as follows:

Bread or grocery orders, 273. Coal or coke orders, 57.

Nourishment 579. (Applause.) Pairs of boots granted, 29.

Clothing, 105. Crutch granted to poor man, 1. Nurses provided,

2. Hospital tickets, 26. Sent to Consumption Sanatorium, 1.

Twenty-nine persons, whose cases being chronic, were referred to the Poor Law Guardians. Work found for 19 persons. (Cheers.)

Pedlar's licences, 4. Dispensary tickets, 24. Bedding redeemed,

1. Loans granted to people to enable them to pay their rent, 8.

(Loud cheers.) Dental tickets, 2. Railway fares for men who were

going away from the town to employment elsewhere, 12. (Great

cheering.) Loans granted, 5. Advertisements for employment, 4--

and so on.

There was about another quarter of a column of these details, the reading of which was punctuated with applause and concluded with: 'Leaving 670 cases which for various reasons the Society was unable to assist'. The report then went on to explain that the work of inquiring into the genuineness of the applications entailed a lot of labour on the part of the Secretary, some cases taking several days. No fewer than 649 letters had been sent out from the office, and 97 postcards. (Applause.) Very few cash gifts were granted, as it was most necessary

to guard against the Charity being abused. (Hear, hear.)

Then followed a most remarkable paragraph headed 'The Balance Sheet', which--as it was put--'included the following'. 'The following' was a jumbled list of items of expenditure, subscriptions, donations, legacies, and collections, winding up with 'the general summary showed a balance in hand of £178.4.6'. (They always kept a good balance in hand because of the Secretary's salary and the rent of the offices.)

After this very explicit financial statement came the most important part of the report: 'Thanks are expressed to Sir Graball D'Encloeland for a donation of 2 guineas. Mrs Grosare, 1 guinea. Mrs Starvem, Hospital tickets. Lady Slumrent, letter of admission to Convalescent Home. Mrs Knobrane, 1 guinea. Mrs M.B. Sile, 1 guinea. Mrs M.T. Head, 1 guinea. Mrs Sledging, gifts of clothing--and so on for another quarter of a column, the whole concluding with a vote of thanks to the Secretary and an urgent appeal to the charitable public for more funds to enable the Society to continue its noble work.

Meantime, in spite of this and kindred organizations the conditions of the under-paid poverty stricken and unemployed workers remained the same. Although the people who got the grocery and coal orders, the 'Nourishment', and the cast-off clothes and boots, were very glad to have them, yet these things did far more harm than good. They humiliated, degraded and pauperized those who received them, and the existence of the societies prevented the problem being grappled with in a sane and practical manner. The people lacked the necessaries of

life: the necessaries of life are produced by Work: these people were willing to work, but were prevented from doing so by the idiotic system of society which these 'charitable' people are determined to do their best to perpetuate.

If the people who expect to be praised and glorified for being charitable were never to give another farthing it would be far better for the industrious poor, because then the community as a whole would be compelled to deal with the absurd and unnecessary state of affairs that exists today--millions of people living and dying in wretchedness and poverty in an age when science and machinery have made it possible to produce such an abundance of everything that everyone might enjoy plenty and comfort. It if were not for all this so-called charity the starving unemployed men all over the country would demand to be allowed to work and produce the things they are perishing for want of, instead of being--as they are now--content to wear their masters' cast-off clothing and to eat the crumbs that fall from his table.