

## Chapter 37

### A Brilliant Epigram

All through the winter, the wise, practical, philanthropic, fat persons whom the people of Mugsborough had elected to manage their affairs--or whom they permitted to manage them without being elected--continued to grapple, or to pretend to grapple, with the 'problem' of unemployment and poverty. They continued to hold meetings, rummage and jumble sales, entertainments and special services. They continued to distribute the rotten cast-off clothing and boots, and the nourishment tickets. They were all so sorry for the poor, especially for the 'dear little children'. They did all sorts of things to help the children. In fact, there was nothing that they would not do for them except levy a halfpenny rate. It would never do to do that. It might pauperize the parents and destroy parental responsibility. They evidently thought that it would be better to destroy the health or even the lives of the 'dear little children' than to pauperize the parents or undermine parental responsibility. These people seemed to think that the children were the property of their parents. They did not have sense enough to see that the children are not the property of their parents at all, but the property of the community. When they attain to manhood and womanhood they will be, if mentally or physically inefficient, a burden on the community; if they become criminals, they will prey upon the community, and if they are healthy, educated and brought up in good surroundings, they will become useful citizens, able

to render valuable service, not merely to their parents, but to the community. Therefore the children are the property of the community, and it is the business and to the interest of the community to see that their constitutions are not undermined by starvation. The Secretary of the local Trades Council, a body formed of delegates from all the different trades unions in the town, wrote a letter to the Obscurer, setting forth this view. He pointed out that a halfpenny rate in that town would produce a sum of £800, which would be more than sufficient to provide food for all the hungry schoolchildren. In the next issue of the paper several other letters appeared from leading citizens, including, of course, Sweater, Rushton, Didlum and Grinder, ridiculing the proposal of the Trades Council, who were insultingly alluded to as 'pothouse politicians', 'beer-sodden agitators' and so forth. Their right to be regarded as representatives of the working men was denied, and Grinder, who, having made inquiries amongst working men, was acquainted with the facts, stated that there was scarcely one of the local branches of the trades unions which had more than a dozen members; and as Grinder's statement was true, the Secretary was unable to contradict it. The majority of the working men were also very indignant when they heard about the Secretary's letter: they said the rates were quite high enough as it was, and they sneered at him for presuming to write to the papers at all:

'Who the bloody 'ell was 'e?' they said. 'E was not a Gentleman! 'E was only a workin' man the same as themselves--a common carpenter! What the 'ell did 'e know about it? Nothing. 'E was just trying to make 'isself out to be Somebody, that was all. The idea of one of the likes

of them writing to the papers!

One day, having nothing better to do, Owen was looking at some books that were exposed for sale on a table outside a second-hand furniture shop. One book in particular took his attention: he read several pages with great interest, and regretted that he had not the necessary sixpence to buy it. The title of the book was: Consumption: Its Causes and Its Cure. The author was a well-known physician who devoted his whole attention to the study of that disease. Amongst other things, the book gave rules for the feeding of delicate children, and there were also several different dietaries recommended for adult persons suffering from the disease. One of these dietaries amused him very much, because as far as the majority of those who suffer from consumption are concerned, the good doctor might just as well have prescribed a trip to the moon:

'Immediately on waking in the morning, half a pint of milk--this should be hot, if possible--with a small slice of bread and butter.

'At breakfast: half a pint of milk, with coffee, chocolate, or oatmeal: eggs and bacon, bread and butter, or dry toast.

'At eleven o'clock: half a pint of milk with an egg beaten up in it or some beef tea and bread and butter.

'At one o'clock: half a pint of warm milk with a biscuit or sandwich.

'At two o'clock: fish and roast mutton, or a mutton chop, with as much fat as possible: poultry, game, etc., may be taken with vegetables, and milk pudding.

'At five o'clock: hot milk with coffee or chocolate, bread and butter, watercress, etc.

'At eight o'clock: a pint of milk, with oatmeal or chocolate, and gluten bread, or two lightly boiled eggs with bread and butter.

'Before retiring to rest: a glass of warm milk.

'During the night: a glass of milk with a biscuit or bread and butter should be placed by the bedside and be eaten if the patient awakes.'

Whilst Owen was reading this book, Crass, Harlow, Philpot and Easton were talking together on the other side of the street, and presently Crass caught sight of him. They had been discussing the Secretary's letter re the halfpenny rate, and as Owen was one of the members of the Trades Council, Crass suggested that they should go across and tackle him about it.

'How much is your house assessed at?' asked Owen after listening for about a quarter of an hour to Crass's objection.

'Fourteen pound,' replied Crass.

'That means that you would have to pay sevenpence per year if we had a halfpenny rate. Wouldn't it be worth sevenpence a year to you to know that there were no starving children in the town?'

'Why should I 'ave to 'elp to keep the children of a man who's too lazy to work, or spends all 'is money on drink?' shouted Crass. 'Ow are yer goin' to make out about the likes o' them?'

'If his children are starving we should feed them first, and punish him afterwards.'

'The rates is quite high enough as it is,' grumbled Harlow, who had four children himself.

'That's quite true, but you must remember that the rates the working classes at present pay are spent mostly for the benefit of other people. Good roads are maintained for people who ride in motor cars and carriages; the Park and the Town Band for those who have leisure to enjoy them; the Police force to protect the property of those who have something to lose, and so on. But if we pay this rate we shall get something for our money.'

'We gets the benefit of the good roads when we 'as to push a 'andcart with a load o' paint and ladders,' said Easton.

'Of course,' said Crass, 'and besides, the workin' class gets the benefit of all the other things too, because it all makes work.'

'Well, for my part,' said Philpot, 'I wouldn't mind payin' my share towards a 'appeny rate, although I ain't got no kids o' me own.'

The hostility of most of the working men to the proposed rate was almost as bitter as that of the 'better' classes--the noble-minded philanthropists who were always gushing out their sympathy for the 'dear little ones', the loathsome hypocrites who pretended that there was no need to levy a rate because they were willing to give sufficient money in the form of charity to meet the case: but the children continued to go hungry all the same.

'Loathsome hypocrites' may seem a hard saying, but it was a matter of common knowledge that the majority of the children attending the local elementary schools were insufficiently fed. It was admitted that the money that could be raised by a halfpenny rate would be more than sufficient to provide them all with one good meal every day. The charity-mongers who professed such extravagant sympathy with the 'dear little children' resisted the levying of the rate 'because it would press so heavily on the poorer ratepayers', and said that they were willing to give more in voluntary charity than the rate would amount to: but, the 'dear little children'--as they were so fond of calling them--continued to go to school hungry all the same.

To judge them by their profession and their performances, it appeared that these good kind persons were willing to do any mortal thing for the 'dear little children' except allow them to be fed.

If these people had really meant to do what they pretended, they would not have cared whether they paid the money to a rate-collector or to the secretary of a charity society and they would have preferred to accomplish their object in the most efficient and economical way.

But although they would not allow the children to be fed, they went to church and to chapel, glittering with jewellery, their fat carcasses clothed in rich raiment, and sat with smug smiles upon their faces listening to the fat parsons reading out of a Book that none of them seemed able to understand, for this was what they read:

'And Jesus called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, and said: Whosoever shall receive one such little child in My name, receiveth Me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

'Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones, for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father.'

And this: 'Then shall He say unto them: Depart from me, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was an hungered and ye gave Me no meat: I was thirsty and ye gave Me no drink: I was a stranger and ye took Me not in; naked, and ye clothed Me not.

"Then shall they answer: "Lord, when saw we Thee an hungered or athirst or a stranger or naked, or sick, and did not minister unto Thee?" and He shall answer them, "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me."

These were the sayings that the infidel parsons mouthed in the infidel temples to the richly dressed infidel congregations, who heard but did not understand, for their hearts were become gross and their ears dull of hearing. And meantime, all around them, in the alley and the slum, and more terrible still--because more secret--in the better sort of streets where lived the respectable class of skilled artisans, the little children became thinner and paler day by day for lack of proper food, and went to bed early because there was no fire.

Sir Graball D'Encloeland, the Member of Parliament for the borough, was one of the bitterest opponents of the halfpenny rate, but as he thought it was probable that there would soon be another General Election and he wanted the children's fathers to vote for him again, he was willing to do something for them in another way. He had a ten-year-old daughter whose birthday was in that month, so the kind-hearted Baronet made arrangements to give a Tea to all the school children in the town in honour of the occasion. The tea was served in the schoolrooms and each child was presented with a gilt-edged card on which was a printed portrait of the little hostess, with 'From your loving little friend, Honoria D'Encloeland', in gold letters. During the evening the little girl, accompanied by Sir Graball and Lady D'Encloeland, motored round to all the schools where the tea was being



consumed: the Baronet made a few remarks, and Honoria made a pretty little speech, specially learnt for the occasion, at each place, and they were loudly cheered and greatly admired in response. The enthusiasm was not confined to the boys and girls, for while the speechmaking was going on inside, a little crowd of grown-up children were gathered round outside the entrance, worshipping the motor car: and when the little party came out the crowd worshipped them also, going into imbecile ecstasies of admiration of their benevolence and their beautiful clothes.

For several weeks everybody in the town was in raptures over this tea--or, rather, everybody except a miserable little minority of Socialists, who said it was bribery, an electioneering dodge, that did no real good, and who continued to clamour for a halfpenny rate.

Another specious fraud was the 'Distress Committee'. This body--or corpse, for there was not much vitality in it--was supposed to exist for the purpose of providing employment for 'deserving cases'. One might be excused for thinking that any man--no matter what his past may have been--who is willing to work for his living is a 'deserving case': but this was evidently not the opinion of the persons who devised the regulations for the working of this committee. Every applicant for work was immediately given a long job, and presented with a double sheet of foolscap paper to do it with. Now, if the object of the committee had been to furnish the applicant with material for the manufacture of an appropriate headdress for himself, no one could reasonably have found fault with them: but the foolscap was not to be

utilized in that way; it was called a 'Record Paper', three pages of it were covered with insulting, inquisitive, irrelevant questions concerning the private affairs and past life of the 'case' who wished to be permitted to work for his living, and all these had to be answered to the satisfaction of Messrs D'Encloeland, Boshier, Sweater, Rushton, Didlum, Grinder and the other members of the committee, before the case stood any chance of getting employment.

However, notwithstanding the offensive nature of the questions on the application form, during the five months that this precious committee was in session, no fewer than 1,237 broken-spirited and humble 'lion's whelps' filled up the forms and answered the questions as meekly as if they had been sheep. The funds of the committee consisted of £500, obtained from the Imperial Exchequer, and about £250 in charitable donations. This money was used to pay wages for certain work--some of which would have had to be done even if the committee had never existed--and if each of the 1,237 applicants had had an equal share of the work, the wages they would have received would have amounted to about twelve shillings each. This was what the 'practical' persons, the 'business-men', called 'dealing with the problem of unemployment'. Imagine having to keep your family for five months with twelve shillings!

And, if you like, imagine that the Government grant had been four times as much as it was, and that the charity had amounted to four times as much as it did, and then fancy having to keep your family for five months with two pounds eight shillings!

It is true that some of the members of the committee would have been very glad if they had been able to put the means of earning a living within the reach of every man who was willing to work; but they simply did not know what to do, or how to do it. They were not ignorant of the reality of the evil they were supposed to be 'dealing with'--appalling evidences of it faced them on every side, and as, after all, these committee men were human beings and not devils, they would have been glad to mitigate it if they could have done so without hurting themselves: but the truth was that they did not know what to do!

These are the 'practical' men; the monopolists of intelligence, the wise individuals who control the affairs of the world: it is in accordance with the ideas of such men as these that the conditions of human life are regulated.

This is the position:

It is admitted that never before in the history of mankind was it possible to produce the necessaries of life in such abundance as at present.

The management of the affairs of the world--the business of arranging the conditions under which we live--is at present in the hands of Practical, Level-headed, Sensible Business-men.

The result of their management is, that the majority of the people find

it a hard struggle to live. Large numbers exist in perpetual poverty:  
a great many more periodically starve: many actually die of want:  
hundreds destroy themselves rather than continue to live and suffer.

When the Practical, Level-headed, Sensible Business-men are asked why  
they do not remedy this state of things, they reply that they do not  
know what to do! or, that it is impossible to remedy it!

And yet it is admitted that it is now possible to produce the  
necessaries of life, in greater abundance than ever before!

With lavish kindness, the Supreme Being had provided all things  
necessary for the existence and happiness of his creatures. To suggest  
that it is not so is a blasphemous lie: it is to suggest that the  
Supreme Being is not good or even just. On every side there is an  
overflowing superfluity of the materials requisite for the production  
of all the necessaries of life: from these materials everything we need  
may be produced in abundance--by Work. Here was an army of people  
lacking the things that may be made by work, standing idle. Willing to  
work; clamouring to be allowed to work, and the Practical,  
Level-headed, Sensible Business-men did not know what to do!

Of course, the real reason for the difficulty is that the raw materials  
that were created for the use and benefit of all have been stolen by a  
small number, who refuse to allow them to be used for the purposes for  
which they were intended. This numerically insignificant minority  
refused to allow the majority to work and produce the things they need;

and what work they do graciously permit to be done is not done with the object of producing the necessaries of life for those who work, but for the purpose of creating profit for their masters.

And then, strangest fact of all, the people who find it a hard struggle to live, or who exist in dreadful poverty and sometimes starve, instead of trying to understand the causes of their misery and to find out a remedy themselves, spend all their time applauding the Practical, Sensible, Level-headed Business-men, who bungle and mismanage their affairs, and pay them huge salaries for doing so. Sir Graball D'Encloeland, for instance, was a 'Secretary of State' and was paid £5,000 a year. When he first got the job the wages were only a beggarly £2,000, but as he found it impossible to exist on less than £100 a week he decided to raise his salary to that amount; and the foolish people who find it a hard struggle to live paid it willingly, and when they saw the beautiful motor car and the lovely clothes and jewellery he purchased for his wife with the money, and heard the Great Speech he made--telling them how the shortage of everything was caused by Over-production and Foreign Competition, they clapped their hands and went frantic with admiration. Their only regret was that there were no horses attached to the motor car, because if there had been, they could have taken them out and harnessed themselves to it instead.

Nothing delighted the childish minds of these poor people so much as listening to or reading extracts from the speeches of such men as these; so in order to amuse them, every now and then, in the midst of all the wretchedness, some of the great statesmen made 'great speeches'

full of cunning phrases intended to hoodwink the fools who had elected them. The very same week that Sir Graball's salary was increased to £5,000 a year, all the papers were full of a very fine one that he made. They appeared with large headlines like this:

GREAT SPEECH BY SIR GRABALL D'ENCLOSELAND

Brilliant Epigram!

None should have more than they need, whilst any have less than they need!

The hypocrisy of such a saying in the mouth of a man who was drawing a salary of five thousand pounds a year did not appear to occur to anyone. On the contrary, the hired scribes of the capitalist Press wrote columns of fulsome admiration of the miserable claptrap, and the working men who had elected this man went into raptures over the 'Brilliant Epigram' as if it were good to eat. They cut it out of the papers and carried it about with them: they showed it to each other: they read it and repeated it to each other: they wondered at it and were delighted with it, grinning and gibbering at each other in the exuberance of their imbecile enthusiasm.

The Distress Committee was not the only body pretending to 'deal' with the poverty 'problem': its efforts were supplemented by all the other agencies already mentioned--the Labour Yard, the Rummage Sales, the Organized Benevolence Society, and so on, to say nothing of a most

benevolent scheme originated by the management of Sweater's Emporium, who announced in a letter that was published in the local Press that they were prepared to employ fifty men for one week to carry sandwich boards at one shilling--and a loaf of bread--per day.

They got the men; some unskilled labourers, a few old, worn out artisans whom misery had deprived of the last vestiges of pride or shame; a number of habitual drunkards and loafers, and a non-descript lot of poor ragged old men--old soldiers and others of whom it would be impossible to say what they had once been.

The procession of sandwich men was headed by the Semi-drunk and the Besotted Wretch, and each board was covered with a printed poster: 'Great Sale of Ladies' Blouses now Proceeding at Adam Sweater's Emporium.'

Besides this artful scheme of Sweater's for getting a good advertisement on the cheap, numerous other plans for providing employment or alleviating the prevailing misery were put forward in the columns of the local papers and at the various meetings that were held. Any foolish, idiotic, useless suggestion was certain to receive respectful attention; any crafty plan devised in his own interest or for his own profit by one or other of the crew of sweaters and landlords who controlled the town was sure to be approved of by the other inhabitants of Mugsborough, the majority of whom were persons of feeble intellect who not only allowed themselves to be robbed and exploited by a few cunning scoundrels, but venerated and applauded them

for doing it.