

## Chapter 39

### The Brigands at Work

The next day, at the meeting of the Town Council, Mr Wireman's report concerning the Electric Light Works was read. The expert's opinion was so favourable--and it was endorsed by the Borough Engineer, Mr Oyley Sweater--that a resolution was unanimously carried in favour of acquiring the Works for the town, and a secret committee was appointed to arrange the preliminaries. Alderman Sweater then suggested that a suitable honorarium be voted to Mr Wireman for his services. This was greeted with a murmur of approval from most of the members, and Mr Didlum rose with the intention of proposing a resolution to that effect when he was interrupted by Alderman Grinder, who said he couldn't see no sense in giving the man a thing like that. 'Why not give him a sum of money?'

Several members said 'Hear, hear,' to this, but some of the others laughed.

'I can't see nothing to laugh at,' cried Grinder angrily. 'For my part I wouldn't give you tuppence for all the honorariums in the country. I move that we pay 'im a sum of money.'

'I'll second that,' said another member of the Band--one of those who had cried 'Hear, Hear.'

Alderman Sweater said that there seemed to be a little misunderstanding and explained that an honorarium WAS a sum of money.

'Oh, well, in that case I'll withdraw my resolution,' said Grinder. 'I thought you wanted to give 'im a 'luminated address or something like that.'

Didlum now moved that a letter of thanks and a fee of fifty guineas be voted to Mr Wireman, and this was also unanimously agreed to. Dr Weakling said that it seemed rather a lot, but he did not go so far as to vote against it.

The next business was the proposal that the Corporation should take over the drain connecting Mr Sweater's house with the town main. Mr Sweater--being a public-spirited man--proposed to hand this connecting drain--which ran through a private road--over to the Corporation to be theirs and their successors for ever, on condition that they would pay him the cost of construction--£55--and agreed to keep it in proper repair. After a brief discussion it was decided to take over the drain on the terms offered, and then Councillor Didlum proposed a vote of thanks to Alderman Sweater for his generosity in the matter: this was promptly seconded by Councillor Rushton and would have been carried nem. con., but for the disgraceful conduct of Dr Weakling, who had the bad taste to suggest that the amount was about double what the drain could possibly have cost to construct, that it was of no use to the Corporation at all, and that they would merely acquire the liability to

keep it in repair.

However, no one took the trouble to reply to Weakling, and the Band proceeded to the consideration of the next business, which was Mr Grinder's offer--on behalf of the 'Cosy Corner Refreshment Company'--to take the Kiosk on the Grand Parade. Mr Grinder submitted a plan of certain alterations that he would require the Corporation to make at the Kiosk, and, provided the Council agreed to do this work he was willing to take a lease of the place for five years at £20 per year.

Councillor Didlum proposed that the offer of the 'Cosy Corner Refreshment Co. Ltd' be accepted and the required alterations proceeded with at once. The Kiosk had brought in no rent for nearly two years, but, apart from that consideration, if they accepted this offer they would be able to set some of the unemployed to work. (Applause.)

Councillor Rushton seconded.

Dr Weakling pointed out that as the proposed alterations would cost about £175--according to the estimate of the Borough Engineer--and, the rent being only £20 a year, it would mean that the Council would be £75 out of pocket at the end of the five years; to say nothing of the expense of keeping the place in repair during all that time.

(Disturbance.) He moved as an amendment that the alterations be made, and that they then invite tenders, and let the place to the highest bidder. (Great uproar.)

Councillor Rushton said he was disgusted with the attitude taken up by that man Weakling. (Applause.) Perhaps it was hardly right to call him a man. (Hear! Hear!) In the matter of these alterations they had had the use of Councillor Grinder's brains: it was he who first thought of making these improvements in the Kiosk, and therefore he--or rather the company he represented--had a moral right to the tenancy. (Loud cheers.)

Dr Weakling said that he thought it was understood that when a man was elected to that Council it was because he was supposed to be willing to use his brains for the benefit of his constituents. (Sardonic laughter.)

The Mayor asked if there was any seconder to Weakling's amendment, and as there was not the original proposition was put and carried.

Councillor Rushton suggested that a large shelter with seating accommodation for about two hundred persons should be erected on the Grand Parade near the Kiosk. The shelter would serve as a protection against rain, or the rays of the sun in summer. It would add materially to the comfort of visitors and would be a notable addition to the attractions of the town.

Councillor Didlum said it was a very good idear, and proposed that the Surveyor be instructed to get out the plans.

Dr Weakling opposed the motion. (Laughter.) It seemed to him that the

object was to benefit, not the town, but Mr Grinder. (Disturbance.) If this shelter were erected, it would increase the value of the Kiosk as a refreshment bar by a hundred per cent. If Mr Grinder wanted a shelter for his customers he should pay for it himself. (Uproar.) He (Dr Weakling) was sorry to have to say it, but he could not help thinking that this was a Put-up job. (Loud cries of 'Withdraw' 'Apologize' 'Cast 'im out' and terrific uproar.)

Weakling did not apologize or withdraw, but he said no more. Didlum's proposition was carried, and the 'hand' went on to the next item on the agenda, which was a proposal by Councillor Didlum to increase the salary of Mr Oyley Sweater, the Borough Engineer, from fifteen pounds to seventeen pounds per week.

Councillor Didlum said that when they had a good man they ought to appreciate him. (Applause.) Compared with other officials, the Borough Engineer was not fairly paid. (Hear, hear.) The magistrates' clerk received seventeen pounds a week. The Town Clerk seventeen pounds per week. He did not wish it to be understood that he thought those gentlemen were overpaid--far from it. (Hear, hear.) It was not that they got too much but that the Engineer got too little. How could they expect a man like that to exist on a paltry fifteen pounds a week? Why, it was nothing more or less than sweating! (Hear, hear.) He had much pleasure in moving that the Borough Engineer's salary be increased to seventeen pounds a week, and that his annual holiday be extended from a fortnight to one calendar month with hard la--he begged pardon--with full pay. (Loud cheers.)

Councillor Rushton said that he did not propose to make a long speech--it was not necessary. He would content himself with formally seconding Councillor Didlum's excellent proposition. (Applause.)

Councillor Weakling, whose rising was greeted with derisive laughter, said he must oppose the resolution. He wished it to be understood that he was not actuated by any feeling of personal animosity towards the Borough Engineer, but at the same time he considered it his duty to say that in his (Dr Weakling's) opinion, that official would be dear at half the price they were now paying him. (Disturbance.) He did not appear to understand his business, nearly all the work that was done cost in the end about double what the Borough Engineer estimated it could be done for. (Liar.) He considered him to be a grossly incompetent person (uproar) and was of opinion that if they were to advertise they could get dozens of better men who would be glad to do the work for five pounds a week. He moved that Mr Oyley Sweater be asked to resign and that they advertise for a man at five pounds a week. (Great uproar.)

Councillor Grinder rose to a point of order. He appealed to the Chairman to squash the amendment. (Applause.)

Councillor Didlum remarked that he supposed Councillor Grinder meant 'quash': in that case, he would support the suggestion.

Councillor Grinder said it was about time they put a stopper on that

feller Weakling. He (Grinder) did not care whether they called it squashing or quashing; it was all the same so long as they nipped him in the bud. (Cheers.) The man was a disgrace to the Council; always interfering and hindering the business.

The Mayor--Alderman Sweater--said that he did not think it consistent with the dignity of that Council to waste any more time over this scurrilous amendment. (Applause.) He was proud to say that it had never even been seconded, and therefore he would put Mr Didlum's resolution--a proposition which he had no hesitation in saying reflected the highest credit upon that gentleman and upon all those who supported it. (Vociferous cheers.)

All those who were in favour signified their approval in the customary manner, and as Weakling was the only one opposed, the resolution was carried and the meeting proceeded to the next business.

Councillor Rushton said that several influential ratepayers and employers of labour had complained to him about the high wages of the Corporation workmen, some of whom were paid sevenpence-halfpenny an hour. Sevenpence an hour was the maximum wage paid to skilled workmen by private employers in that town, and he failed to see why the Corporation should pay more. (Hear, hear.) It had a very bad effect on the minds of the men in the employment of private firms, tending to make them dissatisfied with their wages. The same state of affairs prevailed with regard to the unskilled labourers in the Council's employment. Private employers could get that class of labour for

fourpence-halfpenny or fivepence an hour, and yet the corporation paid fivepence-halfpenny and even sixpence for the same class of work. (Shame.) It was not fair to the ratepayers. (Hear, hear.) Considering that the men in the employment of the Corporation had almost constant work, if there was to be a difference at all, they should get not more, but less, than those who worked for private firms. (Cheers.) He moved that the wages of the Corporation workmen be reduced in all cases to the same level as those paid by private firms.

Councillor Grinder seconded. He said it amounted to a positive scandal. Why, in the summer-time some of these men drew as much as 35/- in a single week! (Shame.) and it was quite common for unskilled labourers--fellers who did nothing but the very hardest and most laborious work, such as carrying sacks of cement, or digging up the roads to get at the drains, and such-like easy jobs--to walk off with 25/- a week! (Sensation.) He had often noticed some of these men swaggering about the town on Sundays, dressed like millionaires and cigared up! They seemed quite a different class of men from those who worked for private firms, and to look at the way some of their children was dressed you'd think their fathers was Cabinet Minstrels! No wonder the ratepayers complained of the high rates. Another grievance was that all the Corporation workmen were allowed two days' holiday every year, in addition to the Bank Holidays, and were paid for them! (Cries of 'shame', 'Scandalous', 'Disgraceful', etc.) No private contractor paid his men for Bank Holidays, and why should the Corporation do so? He had much pleasure in seconding Councillor Rushton's resolution.



Councillor Weakling opposed the motion. He thought that 35/- a week was little enough for a man to keep a wife and family with (Rot), even if all the men got it regularly, which they did not. Members should consider what was the average amount per week throughout the whole year, not merely the busy time, and if they did that they would find that even the skilled men did not average more than 25/- a week, and in many cases not so much. If this subject had not been introduced by Councillor Rushton, he (Dr Weakling) had intended to propose that the wages of the Corporation workmen should be increased to the standard recognized by the Trades Unions. (Loud laughter.) It had been proved that the notoriously short lives of the working people--whose average span of life was about twenty years less than that of the well-to-do classes--their increasingly inferior physique, and the high rate of mortality amongst their children was caused by the wretched remuneration they received for hard and tiring work, the excessive number of hours they have to work, when employed, the bad quality of their food, the badly constructed and insanitary homes their poverty compels them to occupy, and the anxiety, worry, and depression of mind they have to suffer when out of employment. (Cries of 'Rot', 'Bosh', and loud laughter.) Councillor Didlum said, 'Rot'. It was a very good word to describe the disease that was sapping the foundations of society and destroying the health and happiness and the very lives of so many of their fellow countrymen and women. (Renewed merriment and shouts of 'Go and buy a red tie.') He appealed to the members to reject the resolution. He was very glad to say that he believed it was true that the workmen in the employ of the Corporation were a little better off than those in the employ of private contractors, and if it

were so, it was as it should be. They had need to be better off than the poverty-stricken, half-starved poor wretches who worked for private firms.

Councillor Didlum said that it was very evident that Dr Weakling had obtained his seat on that Council by false pretences. If he had told the ratepayers that he was a Socialist, they would never have elected him. (Hear, hear.) Practically every Christian minister in the country would agree with him (Didlum) when he said that the poverty of the working classes was caused not by the 'wretched remuneration they receive as wages', but by Drink. (Loud applause.) And he was very sure that the testimony of the clergy of all denominations was more to be relied upon than the opinion of a man like Dr Weakling. (Hear, hear.)

Dr Weakling said that if some of the clergymen referred to or some of the members of the council had to exist and toil amid the same sordid surroundings, overcrowding and ignorance as some of the working classes, they would probably seek to secure some share of pleasure and forgetfulness in drink themselves! (Great uproar and shouts of 'Order', 'Withdraw', 'Apologize'.)

Councillor Grinder said that even if it was true that the haverage lives of the working classes was twenty years shorter than those of the better classes, he could not see what it had got to do with Dr Weakling. (Hear, hear.) So long as the working class was contented to die twenty years before their time, he failed to see what it had got to

do with other people. They was not runnin' short of workers, was they? There was still plenty of 'em left. (Laughter.) So long as the workin' class was satisfied to die orf--let 'em die orf! It was a free country. (Applause.) The workin' class adn't arst Dr Weakling to stick up for them, had they? If they wasn't satisfied, they would stick up for theirselves! The working men didn't want the likes of Dr Weakling to stick up for them, and they would let 'im know it when the next election came round. If he (Grinder) was a wordly man, he would not mind betting that the workin' men of Dr Weakling's ward would give him 'the dirty kick out' next November. (Applause.)

Councillor Weakling, who knew that this was probably true, made no further protest. Rushton's proposition was carried, and then the Clerk announced that the next item was the resolution Mr Didlum had given notice of at the last meeting, and the Mayor accordingly called upon that gentleman.

Councillor Didlum, who was received with loud cheers, said that unfortunately a certain member of that Council seemed to think he had a right to oppose nearly everything that was brought forward.

(The majority of the members of the Band glared malignantly at Weakling.)

He hoped that for once the individual he referred to would have the decency to restrain himself, because the resolution he (Didlum) was about to have the honour of proposing was one that he believed no

right-minded man--no matter what his politics or religious opinions--could possibly object to; and he trusted that for the credit of the Council it would be entered on the records as an unopposed motion. The resolution was as follows:

'That from this date all the meetings of this Council shall be opened with prayer and closed with the singing of the Doxology.' (Loud applause.)

Councillor Rushton seconded the resolution, which was also supported by Mr Grinder, who said that at a time like the present, when there was such a lot of infidels about who said that we all came from monkeys, the Council would be showing a good example to the working classes by adopting the resolution.

Councillor Weakling said nothing, so the new rule was carried nem. con., and as there was no more business to be done it was put into operation for the first time there and then. Mr Sweater conducting the singing with a roll of paper--the plan of the drain of 'The Cave'--and each member singing a different tune.

Weakling withdrew during the singing, and afterwards, before the Band dispersed, it was agreed that a certain number of them were to meet the Chief at the Cave, on the following evening to arrange the details of the proposed raid on the finances of the town in connection with the sale of the Electric Light Works.