

Chapter 41

The Easter Offering. The Beano Meeting

By the beginning of April, Rushton & Co. were again working nine hours a day, from seven in the morning till five-thirty at night, and after Easter they started working full time from 6 A.M. till 5.30 P.M., eleven and a half hours--or, rather, ten hours, for they had to lose half an hour at breakfast and an hour at dinner.

Just before Easter several of the men asked Hunter if they might be allowed to work on Good Friday and Easter Monday, as, they said, they had had enough holidays during the winter; they had no money to spare for holiday-making, and they did not wish to lose two days' pay when there was work to be done. Hunter told them that there was not sufficient work in to justify him in doing as they requested: things were getting very slack again, and Mr Rushton had decided to cease work from Thursday night till Tuesday morning. They were thus prevented from working on Good Friday, but it is true that not more than one working man in fifty went to any religious service on that day or on any other day during the Easter festival. On the contrary, this festival was the occasion of much cursing and blaspheming on the part of those whose penniless, poverty-stricken condition it helped to aggravate by enforcing unprofitable idleness which they lacked the means to enjoy.

During these holidays some of the men did little jobs on their own account and others put in the whole time--including Good Friday and Easter Sunday--gardening, digging and planting their plots of allotment ground.

When Owen arrived home one evening during the week before Easter, Frankie gave him an envelope which he had brought home from school. It contained a printed leaflet:

CHURCH OF THE WHITED SEPULCHRE,
MUGSBOROUGH

Easter 19--

Dear Sir (or Madam),

In accordance with the usual custom we invite you to join with us in presenting the Vicar, the Rev. Habbakuk Boshier, with an Easter Offering, as a token of affection and regard.

Yours faithfully,

A. Cheeseman }

W. Taylor } Churchwardens

Mr Boshier's income from various sources connected with the church was over six hundred pounds a year, or about twelve pounds per week, but as that sum was evidently insufficient, his admirers had adopted this

device for supplementing it. Frankie said all the boys had one of these letters and were going to ask their fathers for some money to give towards the Easter offering. Most of them expected to get twopence.

As the boy had evidently set his heart on doing the same as the other children, Owen gave him the twopence, and they afterwards learned that the Easter Offering for that year was one hundred and twenty-seven pounds, which was made up of the amounts collected from the parishioners by the children, the district visitors and the verger, the collection at a special Service, and donations from the feeble-minded old females elsewhere referred to.

By the end of April nearly all the old hands were back at work, and several casual hands had also been taken on, the Semi-drunk being one of the number. In addition to these, Misery had taken on a number of what he called 'lightweights', men who were not really skilled workmen, but had picked up sufficient knowledge of the simpler parts of the trade to be able to get over it passably. These were paid fivepence or fivepence-halfpenny, and were employed in preference to those who had served their time, because the latter wanted more money and therefore were only employed when absolutely necessary. Besides the lightweights there were a few young fellows called improvers, who were also employed because they were cheap.

Crass now acted as colourman, having been appointed possibly because he knew absolutely nothing about the laws of colour. As most of the work

consisted of small jobs, all the paint and distemper was mixed up at the shop and sent out ready for use to the various jobs.

Sawkins or some of the other lightweights generally carried the heavier lots of colour or scaffolding, but the smaller lots of colour or such things as a pair of steps or a painter's plank were usually sent by the boy, whose slender legs had become quite bowed since he had been engaged helping the other philanthropists to make money for Mr Rushton.

Crass's work as colourman was simplified, to a certain extent, by the great number of specially prepared paints and distempers in all colours, supplied by the manufacturers ready for use. Most of these new-fangled concoctions were regarded with an eye of suspicion and dislike by the hands, and Philpot voiced the general opinion about them one day during a dinner-hour discussion when he said they might appear to be all right for a time, but they would probably not last, because they was mostly made of kimicles.

One of these new-fashioned paints was called 'Petrifying Liquid', and was used for first-coating decaying stone or plaster work. It was also supposed to be used for thinning up a certain kind of patent distemper, but when Misery found out that it was possible to thin the latter with water, the use of 'Petrifying Liquid' for that purpose was discontinued. This 'Petrifying Liquid' was a source of much merriment to the hands. The name was applied to the tea that they made in buckets on some of the jobs, and also to the four-ale that was supplied by certain pubs.

One of the new inventions was regarded with a certain amount of indignation by the hands: it was a white enamel, and they objected to it for two reasons--one was because, as Philpot remarked, it dried so quickly that you had to work like greased lightning; you had to be all over the door directly you started it.

The other reason was that, because it dried so quickly, it was necessary to keep closed the doors and windows of the room where it was being used, and the smell was so awful that it brought on fits of dizziness and sometimes vomiting. Needless to say, the fact that it compelled those who used it to work quickly recommended the stuff to Misery.

As for the smell, he did not care about that; he did not have to inhale the fumes himself.

It was just about this time that Crass, after due consultation with several of the others, including Philpot, Harlow, Bundy, Slyme, Easton and the Semi-drunk, decided to call a meeting of the hands for the purpose of considering the advisability of holding the usual Beano later on in the summer. The meeting was held in the carpenter's shop down at the yard one evening at six o'clock, which allowed time for those interested to attend after leaving work.

The hands sat on the benches or carpenter's stools, or reclined upon heaps of shavings. On a pair of tressels in the centre of the workshop stood a large oak coffin which Crass had just finished polishing.

When all those who were expected to turn up had arrived, Payne, the foreman carpenter--the man who made the coffins--was voted to the chair on the proposition of Crass, seconded by Philpot, and then a solemn silence ensued, which was broken at last by the chairman, who, in a lengthy speech, explained the object of the meeting. Possibly with a laudable desire that there should be no mistake about it, he took the trouble to explain several times, going over the same ground and repeating the same words over and over again, whilst the audience waited in a deathlike and miserable silence for him to leave off.

Payne, however, did not appear to have any intention of leaving off, for he continued, like a man in a trance, to repeat what he had said before, seeming to be under the impression that he had to make a separate explanation to each individual member of the audience. At last the crowd could stand it no longer, and began to shout 'Hear, hear' and to bang bits of wood and hammers on the floor and the benches; and then, after a final repetition of the statement, that the object of the meeting was to consider the advisability of holding an outing, or beanfeast, the chairman collapsed on to a carpenter's stool and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Crass then reminded the meeting that the last year's Beano had been an unqualified success, and for his part he would be very sorry if they did not have one this year. Last year they had four brakes, and they

went to Tubberton Village.

It was true that there was nothing much to see at Tubberton, but there was one thing they could rely on getting there that they could not be sure of getting for the same money anywhere else, and that was--a good feed. (Applause.) Just for the sake of getting on with the business, he would propose that they decide to go to Tubberton, and that a committee be appointed to make arrangements--about the dinner--with the landlord of the Queen Elizabeth's Head at that place.

Philpot seconded the motion, and Payne was about to call for a show of hands when Harlow rose to a point of order. It appeared to him that they were getting on a bit too fast. The proper way to do this business was first to take the feeling of the meeting as to whether they wished to have a Beano at all, and then, if the meeting was in favour of it, they could decide where they were to go, and whether they would have a whole day or only half a day.

The Semi-drunk said that he didn't care a dreadful expression where they went: he was willing to abide by the decision of the majority. (Applause.) It was a matter of indifference to him whether they had a day, or half a day, or two days; he was agreeable to anything.

Easton suggested that a special saloon carriage might be engaged, and they could go and visit Madame Tussaud's Waxworks. He had never been to that place and had often wished to see it. But Philpot objected that if they went there, Madame Tussaud's might be unwilling to let

them out again.

Bundy endorsed the remarks that had fallen from Crass with reference to Tubberton. He did not care where they went, they would never get such a good spread for the money as they did last year at the Queen Elizabeth. (Cheers.)

The chairman said that he remembered the last Beano very well. They had half a day--left off work on Saturday at twelve instead of one--so there was only one hour's wages lost--they went home, had a wash and changed their clothes, and got up to the Cricketers, where the brakes was waiting, at one. Then they had the two hours' drive to Tubberton, stopping on the way for drinks at the Blue Lion, the Warrior's Head, the Bird in Hand, the Dewdrop Inn and the World Turned Upside Down. (Applause.) They arrived at the Queen Elizabeth at three-thirty, and the dinner was ready; and it was one of the finest blow-outs he had ever had. (Hear, hear.) There was soup, vegetables, roast beef, roast mutton, lamb and mint sauce, plum duff, Yorkshire, and a lot more. The landlord of the Elizabeth kept as good a drop of beer as anyone could wish to drink, and as for the teetotallers, they could have tea, coffee or ginger beer.

Having thus made another start, Payne found it very difficult to leave off, and was proceeding to relate further details of the last Beano when Harlow again rose up from his heap of shavings and said he wished to call the chairman to order. (Hear, hear.) What the hell was the use of all this discussion before they had even decided to have a Beano

at all! Was the meeting in favour of a Beano or not? That was the question.

A prolonged and awkward silence followed. Everyone was very uncomfortable, looking stolidly on the ground or staring straight in front of them.

At last Easton broke the silence by suggesting that it would not be a bad plan if someone was to make a motion that a Beano be held. This was greeted with a general murmur of 'Hear, hear,' followed by another awkward pause, and then the chairman asked Easton if he would move a resolution to that effect. After some hesitation, Easton agreed, and formally moved: 'That this meeting is in favour of a Beano.'

The Semi-drunk said that, in order to get on with the business, he would second the resolution. But meantime, several arguments had broken out between the advocates of different places, and several men began to relate anecdotes of previous Beanos. Nearly everyone was speaking at once and it was some time before the chairman was able to put the resolution. Finding it impossible to make his voice heard above the uproar, he began to hammer on the bench with a wooden mallet, and to shout requests for order, but this only served to increase the din. Some of them looked at him curiously and wondered what was the matter with him, but the majority were so interested in their own arguments that they did not notice him at all.

Whilst the chairman was trying to get the attention of the meeting in

order to put the question, Bundy had become involved in an argument with several of the new hands who claimed to know of an even better place than the Queen Elizabeth, a pub called 'The New Found Out', at Mirkfield, a few miles further on than Tubberton, and another individual joined in the dispute, alleging that a house called 'The Three Loggerheads' at Slushton-cum-Dryditch was the finest place for a Beano within a hundred miles of Mugsborough. He went there last year with Pushem and Driver's crowd, and they had roast beef, goose, jam tarts, mince pies, sardines, blancmange, calves' feet jelly and one pint for each man was included in the cost of the dinner. In the middle of the discussion, they noticed that most of the others were holding up their hands, so to show there was no ill feeling they held up theirs also and then the chairman declared it was carried unanimously.

Bundy said he would like to ask the chairman to read out the resolution which had just been passed, as he had not caught the words.

The chairman replied that there was no written resolution. The motion was just to express the feeling of this meeting as to whether there was to be an outing or not.

Bundy said he was only asking a civil question, a point of information: all he wanted to know was, what was the terms of the resolution? Was they in favour of the Beano or not?

The chairman responded that the meeting was unanimously in favour.

(Applause.)

Harlow said that the next thing to be done was to decide upon the date. Crass suggested the last Saturday in August. That would give them plenty of time to pay in.

Sawkins asked whether it was proposed to have a day or only half a day. He himself was in favour of the whole day. It would only mean losing a morning's work. It was hardly worth going at all if they only had half the day.

The Semi-drunk remarked that he had just thought of a very good place to go if they decided to have a change. Three years ago he was working for Dauber and Botchit and they went to 'The First In and the Last Out' at Bashford. It was a very small place, but there was a field where you could have a game of cricket or football, and the dinner was A1 at Lloyds. There was also a skittle alley attached to the pub and no charge was made for the use of it. There was a bit of a river there, and one of the chaps got so drunk that he went orf his onion and jumped into the water, and when they got him out the village policeman locked him up, and the next day he was took before the beak and fined two pounds or a month's hard labour for trying to commit suicide.

Easton pointed out that there was another way to look at it: supposing they decided to have the Beano, he supposed it would come to about six shillings a head. If they had it at the end of August and started paying in now, say a tanner a week, they would have plenty of time to

make up the amount, but supposing the work fell off and some of them got the push?

Crass said that in that case a man could either have his money back or he could leave it, and continue his payments even if he were working for some other firm; the fact that he was off from Rushton's would not prevent him from going to the Beano.

Harlow proposed that they decide to go to the Queen Elizabeth the same as last year, and that they have half a day.

Philpot said that, in order to get on with the business, he would second the resolution.

Bundy suggested--as an amendment--that it should be a whole day, starting from the Cricketers at nine in the morning, and Sawkins said that, in order to get on with the business, he would second the amendment.

One of the new hands said he wished to move another amendment. He proposed to strike out the Queen Elizabeth and substitute the Three Loggerheads.

The Chairman--after a pause--inquired if there were any seconder to this, and the Semi-drunk said that, although he did not care much where they went, still, to get on with the business, he would second the amendment, although for his own part he would prefer to go to the

'First In and Last Out' at Bashford.

The new hand offered to withdraw his suggestion re the Three Loggerheads in favour of the Semi-drunks proposition, but the latter said it didn't matter; it could go as it was.

As it was getting rather late, several men went home, and cries of 'Put the question' began to be heard on all sides; the chairman accordingly was proceeding to put Harlow's proposition when the new hand interrupted him by pointing out that it was his duty as chairman to put the amendments first. This produced another long discussion, in the course of which a very tall, thin man who had a harsh, metallic voice gave a long rambling lecture about the rules of order and the conduct of public meetings. He spoke very slowly and deliberately, using very long words and dealing with the subject in an exhaustive manner. A resolution was a resolution, and an amendment was an amendment; then there was what was called an amendment to an amendment; the procedure of the House of Commons differed very materially from that of the House of Lords--and so on.

This man kept on talking for about ten minutes, and might have continued for ten hours if he had not been rudely interrupted by Harlow, who said that it seemed to him that they were likely to stay there all night if they went on like they were going. He wanted his tea, and he would also like to get a few hours' sleep before having to resume work in the morning. He was getting about sick of all this talk. (Hear, hear.) In order to get on with the business, he would

withdraw his resolution if the others would withdraw their amendments. If they would agree to do this, he would then propose another resolution which--if carried--would meet all the requirements of the case. (Applause.)

The man with the metallic voice observed that it was not necessary to ask the consent of those who had moved amendments: if the original proposition was withdrawn, all the amendments fell to the ground.

'Last year,' observed Crass, 'when we was goin' out of the room after we'd finished our dinner at the Queen Elizabeth, the landlord pointed to the table and said, "There's enough left over for you all to 'ave another lot.'" (Cheers.)

Harlow said that he would move that it be held on the last Saturday in August; that it be for half a day, starting at one o'clock so that they could work up till twelve, which would mean that they would only have to lose one hour's pay: that they go to the same place as last year--the Queen Elizabeth. (Hear, hear.) That the same committee that acted last year--Crass and Bundy--be appointed to make all the arrangements and collect the subscriptions. (Applause.)

The tall man observed that this was what was called a compound resolution, and was proceeding to explain further when the chairman exclaimed that it did not matter a dam' what it was called--would anyone second it? The Semi-drunk said that he would--in order to get on with the business.

Bundy moved, and Sawkins seconded, as an amendment, that it should be a whole day.

The new hand moved to substitute the Loggerheads for the Queen Elizabeth.

Easton proposed to substitute Madame Tussaud's Waxworks for the Queen Elizabeth. He said he moved this just to test the feeling of the meeting.

Harlow pointed out that it would cost at least a pound a head to defray the expenses of such a trip. The railway fares, tram fares in London, meals--for it would be necessary to have a whole day--and other incidental expenses; to say nothing of the loss of wages. It would not be possible for any of them to save the necessary amount during the next four months. (Hear, hear.)

Philpot repeated his warning as to the danger of visiting Madame Tussaud's. He was certain that if she once got them in there she would never let them out again. He had no desire to pass the rest of his life as an image in a museum.

One of the new hands--a man with a red tie--said that they would look well, after having been soaked for a month or two in petrifying liquid, chained up in the Chamber of Horrors with labels round their necks--'Specimens of Liberal and Conservative upholders of the

Capitalist System, 20 century'.

Crass protested against the introduction of politics into that meeting.

(Hear, hear.) The remarks of the last speakers were most uncalled-for.

Easton said that he would withdraw his amendment.

Acting under the directions of the man with the metallic voice, the chairman now proceeded to put the amendment to the vote. Bundy's proposal that it should be a whole day was defeated, only himself, Sawkins and the Semi-drunk being in favour. The motion to substitute the Loggerheads for the Queen Elizabeth was also defeated, and the compound resolution proposed by Harlow was then carried nem. con.

Philpot now proposed a hearty vote of thanks to the chairman for the very able manner in which he had conducted the meeting. When this had been unanimously agreed to, the Semi-drunk moved a similar tribute of gratitude to Crass for his services to the cause and the meeting dispersed.