

We all know that the Guilds which, in the middle ages, took the place of the Trades Unions and the Friendly Societies rolled into one, were, even more than their modern successors, the guardians of the welfare of their own particular trade or calling. They regulated the number of apprentices a man might receive, to prevent overcrowding in their particular trade. They judged a man's "masterpiece" (hence the word) to decide whether he were a good enough workman to be a full member of the Guild, and they were more than severe on those who attempted to carry on their calling outside the Guilds. But they also founded rest-houses for the travelling journeyman of those days, almshouses for decayed masters and masters' wives, they championed the grievances of the Guild and extorted or bought their privileges from the City Fathers or other overlords. The skilled and deserving workman was well looked after in the old days according to the conditions of those times. But outside the bounds of the Guild workman, and of the serf or agricultural labourer, who also had his fixed place in the scheme of things, there always lay the fringe of the casual labourer, the unemployed or the unemployable, who looms so largely nowadays and has always been such a difficult matter to deal with throughout the many generations of settled English life. It is a mistake to suppose that no attempt was made to deal with him before our own day. There are endless enactments in the Plantagenet and even earlier days dealing with the masterless man and the strong rogue in a very firm and decided spirit, whilst the religious houses relieved destitution and sickness in a more kindly manner. The problem of poverty was always there, always a vexed, often a dangerous one.

And the workman and the peasant were no more always contented with their lot than to-day, and fierce peasant risings, constant and endless "rows" between the artizan Guilds—the "Zünfte" as they were called in Germany—and the City Fathers or the Patrician merchant families in continental towns who were generally the town rulers, were frequent and common, as history tells.

But in Tudor times, with the dissolution of the religious houses the problem of the unemployed, the poor, became more acute, and, as you all know, the groundwork of our poor-law system was laid, that system which lasted practically unchanged until about the middle of last century, when the poor-law reform that founded the Poor Law service as we know it, took place.

In the meantime the Guilds had died out with the altered conditions of commerce and trade, and nothing came to take their place. It is an open question as to whether the ordinary workman did not sink to his lowest level during the Georgian and early Victorian days. He had not learnt to combine, in some cases he was not allowed to combine, to protect his own interests, and it was nobody's special business to look after them for him. He had, it is true, the Poor Law at his back, but as that showered its doubtful blessings on the deserving and undeserving alike, it was no real stimulus or protection. You have only to read Besant's "London under the Georges" to learn how appallingly drunkenness increased during that age, partly, he thinks, owing to the introduction of gin. In 1736, he says, there were 7,644 gin shops in London—one house in six—and 3,200 alehouses where gin was secretly sold. None of his descriptions are more interesting and instructive. The individualistic feeling became very strong. No one should interfere in the contracts made between individuals, the contracts made between the working man and his employer, the conditions under which work was carried on. Whilst this led to the formation of many extraordinarily fine individual characters, it also led to a terrible amount of abuse, especially after the introduction of machinery opened the door to the employment of large quantities of unskilled cheap labour.

The employment of children, often almost infants, who worked incredible hours and died like flies, went on unnoticed and uncared for for years. I think I am right in saying that it is only sixty years ago since children were employed to do the work that pit ponies do now, dragging the underground trollies in mines.

It needed the emotional outburst of a woman to bring matters to a head. Those who read her "Cry of the Children" nowadays can hardly realise what it meant then with her appeal to England: "Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart?"

Wages were ground down to starvation point. Many factories and workshops were deathtraps for lack of sanitation and ordinary proper precautions against accidents and ignorance of the poisonous nature of many chemical preparations used.

But all this is too well known to need elaboration, and I only mention it because about that time out of a chaos of cruel and brutal strikes, of great industries struggling often with doubtful means to great developments and very

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