



CHAPTER FOURTEEN - WELFARE

Not only does National Insurance cover our health, in many ways it covers old age and welfare, welfare even before we are born, for expectant mothers can get help and advice which takes many of the worries and fears that at one time were stark facts at that critical time of child-birth, such as extra money to pay for the hundred and one extras attendant at such times.

In early years, Baby is constantly watched by the many workers at the infant Welfare Clinic, a service which without doubt has saved hundreds of young lives. Other fairly recent benefits for children have been the supply of cheap milk and when there is more than one in the family, Family Allowances. What a difference this has made, especially to the older brother and sister, who in days gone by just had to earn a little as soon as they could to help keep them all.

As young people get older at school to-day, if they show any ability worth while, there are all kinds of grants and scholarships to help with their development, whereas with their parents and grandparents the use of good brains was often lost through lack of opportunity.

There are still many children with no normal home. In an earlier chapter I have already spoken of the "Union Kids" and the change-over to County Council Homes. As well as these there are numbers of institutions still run by various organizations, all of which do their best to bring their charges up as ordinary young people, and not make it plain to everybody that they are in poor circumstances. The once common word - pauper - has now almost completely disappeared.

A few years ago, a tramp was walking through the High Street and I had not taken any notice of him, until I heard a boy of ten or twelve years of age ask, "What's that man, Mummy?" and when his mother answered, "Why, he is a tramp!" the child still has no idea what she meant.

How different from the days of the depression in the twenties and early thirties, when the casual wards of our country were full to overflowing. Very few young people of to-day have ever heard of a casual ward, and let us hope that they will only read of them in such a story as this.

They were the quarters in the Union or Workhouse where the casual inmate was sheltered and fed for two nights and a day in most cases. Sometimes when the numbers were great, certain ones would have to move on each day, but the normal procedure was for the gathering together at the Union gate of all kinds and conditions of homeless wanderers, dressed in rags and tatters, with usually a stick and bundle which contained all their worldly possessions, including their billy-can used for drinking purposes. They would wait for six o'clock, the hour of admission, and some before going in, if they happened to have a copper or two, or a little tobacco, would hide these treasures in the hedge or ditch, for they were supposed to be quite destitute, ready to be picked up again when they came out.

On being admitted they were given a meal, a wash and a bed of sorts for the night and the next day they were given work of some kind to help pay for their bed and food. For men this mostly meant work in the garden or breaking stones for road making, while the women did clearing or making mail bags. The second night was spent as the first and at eight o'clock next morning they were given a small parcel of food and let out to tramp the twelve to fourteen miles to the next "Spike" as these institutions were commonly known.

One continual source of worry to these knights of the road was shoe leather. Most of them would call at bootmaker's shops and collect the pieces the snob had pulled off his repair jobs, then with the help of two stones for a hammer and last, they managed to keep going.

Many are the stories of this fraternity, about their secret signs marked on roads and gates which told if a house was a good one to beg from or not, or if there was a dog to be wary of. Some places were well known for their hospitality, like the Convent where none are ever turned away. You may still see the odd one there with a can of tea and packet of food.

For years three maiden ladies of some means, lived at the side of the village green and they had an arrangement with the baker whereby any beggar who called at the house was given a ticket for which the baker would give them a pennyworth of food. This house was rarely missed by the outward bound from the spike. It was sometimes given the go-by, by the first one along if he knew the place well, for he would make a beeline for the pub a little further on, where the landlady always put out the cigarette ends that she had swept up, by the fence. They were always cleared up.

The gipsy, tramp and beggar who have roamed our roads for centuries, mostly from necessity, have in the few short years since the introduction of the National Insurance Scheme almost disappeared. I feel that those that remain must carry on by choice, for the aim of the whole scheme is that there should be no one in need or distress.

What of the infirm inmates of the Union? These poor old people really knew what the word "poor" meant, for they were nearly always alone in the world as far as friends and relations were concerned. Most old people in those days finished their lives with a son or daughter. It is true that few lived to the great ages which many now reach and therefore the proportion needing care and attention was less.

A number of those outside the Union who needed relief or help received a small weekly sum, known as Parish Pay, or Parish Relief. Once a week the Registrar and Relieving Officer visited a cottage in the village, where he hired the front room as an office for an hour, when he would pay out a small sum to the poor and register any births or deaths which had occurred in the previous week.

The expenses of all these services were covered by a special Poor Rate. The last time that this was levied in this district, it was eightpence in the pound.

As well as change of attitude in most people about life in general, perhaps even greater changes have taken place with death and things pertaining to it, especially in the matter of official mourning. Fifty years ago if anyone died, the ritual of tolling the Church bell was never left out, done as soon after the decease as possible. The sexton was warned and he would ring a double note for a man, or a treble for a woman, followed by a single stroke for each year of the age, at approximately one stroke a minute, and for this service his fee was one shilling. To-day this tolling usually takes place just before the funeral service, if at all.

I have already said that my mother died when I was quite young, but I well remember going with my father and grandfather, all three to be fitted out in black, the two men with black suits, socks and boots, and a bowler hat with ever such a wide crepe band, but what about me? A black Norfolk jacket. If you don't know what these were like I am afraid you will have to find some old pictures, for it is ages since I saw one, and I don't think I could describe one if I tried. The breeches buttoned at the knees, with long black stockings drawn over them to complete the outfit. I had black boots and cap, which I am sure could have held at least two pounds of potatoes.

My sisters, who were younger than I, had I believe, everything black except perhaps their vests.

When a man dies, a respectable widow wore a long train on her hat, known as widow's weeds. Near relatives kept strictly to this deep mourning for months and often widows had their weeds for years.

Not only did clothing proclaim a state of mourning, stationery was used with black edges on both paper and envelopes, made in three

different widths, the heaviest being used for the first month, followed by the medium for a further three months and the narrow one mostly went on for a year after the loss.

I am sorry to say that even on such sad occasions as funerals, which all at sometime or other have something to do with, class distinction was very pronounced. If the deceased was wealthy, a wonderful glass hearse, drawn by four black horses, with plumes and trimmings would be used, and the bearers would walk alongside, dressed in top hats and frock coats. For the not quite so rich, only two horses and no trimmings, and for the poor, a hand bier drawn by the bearers, who if it was a funeral being paid for by the parish, would wear an ordinary suit and bowler hat.

Undoubtedly the higher standard of education has changed most people's views and thoughts on this matter and often nowadays, those who can least afford it, spend most on these occasions and the ever increasing use of cremation is another proof of new ideas and outlook.

All of these great improvements have made things much easier for nearly everybody. If there is any drawback at all, it is from the fact that so many more are living longer and therefore more are needing care and attention and great efforts are made to provide for them. We all know that there is no place like your own and many authorities are now building small flats with a resident warden to fulfil this desire as far as possible.

For those who cannot do for themselves, many big houses are taken over and used as old people's homes, most of which are wonderful places.

I suppose this is also the place to make note of the almost universal holiday with pay. Many things have gone into making this much looked for time possible for so many, for since the last war the numbers taking holiday and those who cannot, has just about reversed itself.

In the first place the employment situation has also turned right round the other way and so the worker looks for the job which offers the most advantages including holidays. Often the most tied people to-day are the self employed, one of the penalties for being your own boss.

Easy travel of all kinds and to all places, has made it so simple for those who wish, not only to see our own country, but also many parts of the outside world. The man who delivers our groceries goes to the continent every year, and thoroughly enjoys himself, but I doubt if his father ever thought of going further than Hastings for the day.

The only holiday I remember as a child, was to that town, for ten days. My father had had a serious accident, mother had had a long trying time nursing him back to health and his employer paid for this break for the whole family, and I know our friends and neighbours thought what a grand fellow he was and how lucky we were.

At that period, our Vicar would give a magic lantern show of pictures taken on his holiday and to many people this was a thrill to see where he and his wife had been, but of course to-day they go to see the same places themselves.

Two things have grown with this fashion, unknown to our grandparents, are holiday camps and caravan sites, the popularity of which seem to be increasing every year.

I expect before long we shall be able to hire our own aeroplanes and go to Australia for a fortnight, the thought of which leads me to another aspect of welfare which I am very pleased to see, and that is the noticeable spread of better conditions to other nations.

More and more people visit our land and see many things which we enjoy and which they have not got. We can all see and understand the great amount of tension and unrest that this is causing and I am afraid will cause for a long time. The old policy of keeping down the masses never did work very well and soon it won't work at all. What can our often so called one-eyed village do about it? Not much, but it has got a lively branch of United Nations Association at work and it is the many littles that make a lot and with help of other organizations great things are being done.