

HARD TIMES

I was alone in the house when the bailiffs came. I say bailiffs, though I remember only the one, who spoke, who refused to leave. Perhaps his short stature, in spite of his toughness, had prevented his getting into the Police Force. Now he was a Council official in Dickensian disguise. After he had handed me his card, he opened a black case importantly and took out a file of papers. I had asked him into the hall. It was a bitter morning. He took off his bowler, laid it proprietorially on the massive Victorian sideboard. I saw his eyes slide surreptitiously over the morning's post neatly sorted there.

"I've come about the rates." I knew that we had been unable to pay on time.

"Not paid - much overdue." He glared at me under bushed brows.

"I'm sorry - they will be paid - temporary difficulty"

"That won't do. I'm here to collect them." He consulted a paper in his file. "Quite a large amount." He sounded gratified, expectant.

"Yes, I'm sorry. We are still assessed as for a gentleman's private house - not been that for several years." His expression, meant to intimidate, made me wonder if he had handcuffs in his pocket - a revolver...

"So you see ..."

"No. I don't see. Who's in charge here? Who's the owner?" My answering his ring in duffle coat and woollen mitts must have foxed him. The cold outside seemed to have seeped into this great gothic pile.

"Well - I am - at the moment - in charge, I mean. There isn't one owner.

"A joint affair? Husband and wife? Family?"

"Well, no. It isn't an ordinary private house. It's"

"It says here ..."

"It's a community. It's a ..."

He waved a dismissive paw. "The point is, am I going to get the amount due?"

"I'm afraid it's not possible just now - every intention - so sorry -journey for nothing." This last galvanised him. He all but stamped. His voice rose with excitement, a peculiar pleasure in anticipation.

"Then I shall have to distraint ... effects ..."

"Effects?"

"Furniture, fittings - to the value of ..."

"Oh, I don't think you can do that - you see ..."

"Indeed I can. I've got my orders.". He took a fat notebook from a side pocket and licked his pencil. "I shall have to make a list,"

"A list ..." I was sounding like a stupefied parrot.

"Yes, a list. This piece now - ": he gave the dignified sideboard a smart rap with his pencil. "This must be worth quite a bit ..."

"If you'd let me try to explain..."

"It's quite straightforward.. Monies overdue - legal offence - effects to the value of ..."

"Yes, but it isn't - they aren't - all the things here are from different people. Look - here's a label: 'This chest belongs to H Fawsitt and may not be removed without permission from her or the Sensory Committee' so you see, it's not at all straightforward."

He sank into one of the carved corner chairs. He still meant to get what he'd come for and must have been cursing me for holding out on him.

"If I give you some leaflets - what we do here - all voluntary- Friendly Society -Social Research - no grants - own living - hard times - you could give a report to whoever..."

"Oh no. They don't accept excuses - my instructions to go back with the money or an order to distrain goods to the amount of - "

"Please - just have a look at these papers. We are both in a dilemma over this -and I'll go and make you a cup of tea - unless you prefer coffee." I had a sudden qualm. There might not be any coffee. We only had it at weekends and Harvey Bradfield's didn't deliver it till tomorrow. Still, he looked like a tea man.

"Tea -" He might have been ordering - a mug - at a transport cafe. He was shuffling the course programmes with distaste, pausing now at the "Aims" leaflet. It had a picture.

"Sugar?"

"Two - I can't..."

But I left him to get the tea. When I got back, he was still sitting like a toad in a mousetrap.

"Look here - somebody must own the place - be responsible."

"Yes - a group - it's a Trust - and we are all responsible. It's just that, for the moment, things are a little difficult. We obviously don't fit into any of your categories. It would really be more sensible if you left. It will be late afternoon before anyone else comes. It's Dr Glaister's London day."

He was onto the professional title at once, pupils focused.

"Doctor - is he the owner?"

"No - I told you - do believe me. Better if you left." I still hadn't fed the hens.

"No - I can't leave - against all the rules." He put his empty cup on the floor. He was deflated but not defeated. I felt sorry for him.

"You mean you - all day?"

"Yes, if need be. Nothing else for it. See this Doctor." He got up suddenly and went to the front door and looked out for a moment at the glazed green of the front park.

"You'd be more comfortable in the inner hall - arm-chair (he shook his head) -and I should keep your overcoat on - we have no heating during the week. If you want me, just come through to the office."

He made a growling sound through which I caught the word 'irregular' - and I left him. I had to get on. There was no newspaper to offer him and I didn't like to suggest any of the philosophical heavies in our embryo library. He didn't look like a book man, anyway, and the course programmes had defeated him.

I inspected my visitor at regular intervals. He sat stoically through the tedious morning and into the darkening afternoon. At lunchtime, I brought him soup and a cheese sandwich; at tea-time, yet more tea and two of my own digestive biscuits. When the clock in the inner hall struck five, he took out a fat silver watch on a chain and regarded it mournfully.

"I should knock off at five - home." How he must have longed to be at home, own fireside, warm slippers.

"They shouldn't be long now - unless the train is late," I sat down on the matching chair at the opposite side of the inner hall door. We must have looked like those little wooden figures in a toy weather-house, he always gloomily "IN", I mostly "OUT", imitating a ray of sunshine. Nothing I could say altered his settled blackness and apprehension, though he opened up a chink when I asked him about the curiosities of his job. It obviously gave him a great sense of power, in this case badly frustrated. He would have a tale to add to others, to be told and retold, dramatised, to cronies when, if ever, he managed to make his getaway. I had begun to consider which of the dozen bedrooms I might have to put him in.

I couldn't tell whether the bailiff-man was reassured by the eventual appearance of Norman and Bonnie, looking tired, then surprised. It was so dark indoors by now that I had lit an oil lamp in the hall. He had regarded this operation with disbelief.

"No mains electricity - make our own - weekends."

I introduced them, with a brief explanation in regard to our visitor, and went to get a meal for the travellers. Bonnie joined me in the kitchen, full of excited questions and sympathy, hugging the cosy Aga.

Norman had his twinkling look when I helped him on with his warm house coat. The man had gone.

"You seem to have done well," was all Norman said to me.

And although Braziers had a Court summons for non-payment of rates, an allowance was made on this occasion for the amount to be paid in instalments. Later, thanks to a friendly neighbour conversant with the ways of District Councils and legal niceties, the rates were belatedly reduced to a sum more suitable, though still much for Braziers to find, until things got better, which they did, slowly, and with much hard work, mental and physical, over the years.

I never saw my bailiff again, but did not forget his visit on that remote, wintry day. Nor, I guess, did he. I hoped that his boss did not crown his day with a severe telling-off : "All day and nothing to show for it? What the devil were you doing alone with a woman all that time?"

For what, after all, was due not only to our impecunious state, but to a naiveness inherent in Braziers' earliest days, a part of the high aspiration and the somewhat suppressive hard work at all levels, required to bring alive the unique idea at the heart of the venture.

And I had a passing vision of a future, not soon, but sometime in the years ahead when, a proper innocence maintaining, there could come into being, imperceptibly but surely, a new unit of mutual human consciousness, painstakingly wrought out of a perfected integration between the mental sensory and motor elements of a group of devotees: providing for its own foolproof wellbeing and having live extension even into the world of bureaucracy, business and bailiffs.

Honor
