EDWARDS GEORGE

FROM CROW-SCARING TO WESTMINSTER: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

George Edwards

From Crow-Scaring to Westminster: An Autobiography

Edwards G.

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Содержание

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FOREWORD

By the

Right Honourable LORD AILWYN OF HONINGHAM, P.C

(Ex-Minister of Agriculture)

(Chairman of the Norfolk County Council)

Norfolk has produced many men of whom it may be proud and among them is the author of this book.

I am glad to know that his friends have induced Mr. George Edwards to write the story of his life, and it is with great pleasure that I have assented to his request to write a few introductory words, as I have known him for a number of years and been associated with him in a great deal of public work.

On many subjects George Edwards and I may not agree, but on two points at least we are united – in love for Norfolk and in devotion to the interests of agriculture.

Born at Marsham in 1850, the son of a farm worker, George Edwards is a notable example of the way in which adverse circumstances may be overcome by determination and natural ability. The greater part of his life has been devoted to efforts to improve the conditions of the class to which he belongs.

He may, on looking back in the light of experience, reflect – as most men on reaching his age must reflect – that he has made some mistakes, but all who know him will agree that if he has done so, they have been mistakes of the head and not of the heart.

His honesty of purpose and sincerity of aim, his straightforwardness and conscientiousness, his strong religious principles, are recognized by all who have the pleasure of his acquaintance.

He is a valued member of the Norfolk County Council and a respected Justice of the Peace.

As one of the representatives of Norfolk in the House of Commons, he enjoys the confidence and respect of men of all classes, including many who do not share his political views.

It is with sincere pleasure and the most hearty goodwill that I commend to all who appreciate the record of a strenuous career spent in the pursuit of worthy aims this self-told story of the life of a distinguished Norfolk man.

AILWYN.

August 1922.

INTRODUCTION

This book is more than the record of an adventurous and useful life. It is an outline of the conditions of labour in our greatest national industry during the last seventy years. It is the story of years of struggle to raise the status and standard of life of the agricultural workers of England from a state of feudal serfdom to the relatively high level now reached, mainly through the organization of the Agricultural Labourers' Union. In that long struggle no single person has done more disinterested, solid and self-sacrificing work than my old friend and colleague George Edwards. The Union which he founded some sixteen years ago and in the ranks of which, at the age of seventy-two, he still plays a vigorous and important part, is but the latest fruit of generations of effort at the organization and education of the workers of rural England.

Born in Norfolk in 1850 George Edwards commenced farm work at the age of six. His long life of struggle against tremendous odds should be, and I am certain will be, an encouragement and an inspiration to many whose opportunities and means of social service are greater than his have been. And surely no greater service can be rendered in our time to the cause of national well-being than work devoted to the establishment of labour conditions in the field of British agriculture in keeping with the vital importance of that great industry.

It would be an unprofitable speculation to try to think of what the author of this book might have achieved had his early life been spent under happier conditions. Poverty, servitude, oppression, the lack of what is regarded as education, as well as the active hostility of those who sought in order to protect their menaced interests to crush him, have all been factors in the life of George Edwards. But in spite of adverse circumstances, and it may be because of adverse circumstances, some men are capable of self-expression and refuse to be conquered. George Edwards is such a man. And he has lived to see tangible results of his life-devotion to the cause of the class to which he belonged.

I think of the author of this book as I met him first, thirty years ago, when he was conducting a campaign on behalf of the persecuted and exploited farm labourers of Norfolk. It is not perhaps easy for those who dwell in towns and cities to appreciate the difficulties that had to be encountered in the conduct of such a campaign; the fear of victimization and perhaps the indifference of those on whose behalf the fight was being waged, as well as the prejudice and hostility of those in authority. It is no exaggeration to say that the man who dared to raise his voice on behalf of the agricultural labourer at that time was in imminent danger of suffering injury to purse and person. A born fighter, George Edwards never counted the cost to himself of his agitations and propagandist activity. Never had any body of workers a more devoted or loyal servant. I have cycled with him, twenty miles or more, to meetings in various parts of Norfolk, attended by thousands of men, women and children from the surrounding districts, and even in his later years I have listened to him as he spoke with that vigour and enthusiasm and real eloquence which only strong conviction and deep human feeling can command.

Like Arch, his co-worker in the cause of the agricultural labourer, George Edwards inherited his fighting spirit and independence of mind from his mother. And from his wife, in his early manhood, he acquired the rudiments of the elementary education which was to equip him for the business side of his life-work.

A true record of the life of George Edwards would not only be a record of deep human interest on its personal side. He is the most lovable of the many lovable men it has been my privilege to know. But the main public interest and value of this book lies, I think, in the fact that it will give readers a glimpse of the conditions of agricultural England during the last seventy years, and some idea of the ideals and objects of those who have laboured to bring the country worker into line with other workers in the fight for democratic rights and political and economic freedom.

Wellnigh seventy years have passed since George Edwards, the Norfolk farmer's boy of six, entered on his life-work. In that time he has been continually in harness. He is an ex-General Secretary

of the Agricultural Labourers' Union. Early in the war period he was elected an alderman of the Norfolk County Council, of which he is a member. He reached in 1920 the goal on which I believe his mind was fixed. In that year he was returned to the House of Commons as the representative of South Norfolk, the constituency in which a great part of his life had been spent and which he had unsuccessfully contested in 1918. In the House of Commons his contributions to debates on agricultural questions are listened to with the respect they deserve, and I can sincerely say that I share the feeling of all who know him, that George Edwards, O.B.E., M.P., J.P., is not only a worthy representative of the great cause with which he is associated, but a man whom I am proud to count amongst my dearest friends.

WALTER R. SMITH.

CHAPTER I
THE HUNGRY FORTIES

In the middle of the nineteenth century there lived in the parish of Marsham, Norfolk, (a little village about ten miles from Norwich and one and a half miles from Aylsham), a couple of poor people by the name of Thomas and Mary Edwards. Thomas Edwards was the second husband of Mary Edwards, whose first husband was Robert Stageman. He died in consumption and left her with three little children to support. In due course she married Thomas Edwards, by whom she had four children, the entire family numbering seven. Thomas Edwards enlisted in His Majesty's Army, served ten years, was sent over to Spain, and fought in the interests of the young Queen Isabel.

In those days a man who had been a soldier was looked upon as being an inefficient workman, no matter what his experience had been before enlistment, and further, he was looked upon by the general public as a rather undesirable character, no matter what his record might have been whilst in the Army, and was considered fit only to be thrown on the scrapheap. Such was the experience of Thomas Edwards.

Before his enlistment he was an experienced agricultural labourer. Nothing was known against his character and during his ten years' service in His Majesty's Army he bore a most exemplary character. When the Civil War broke out in Spain this country decided to render help to the Queen. Thomas Edwards was sent over with the 60th Rifles. The war lasted about eighteen months and our troops suffered the greatest privations. Few of the troops returned to tell the tale. Of those that were not killed in action, many died of disease.

These heroes were made to believe that although they were fighting in a foreign country, they were fighting for their own King and Country, and were promised that at the conclusion of the war each man that returned should receive a bounty of £9. This promise was never fulfilled, so far as Thomas Edwards was concerned, nor anyone else so far as he knew.

Thomas, on being discharged from the Army, returned to his native village penniless. The Army pay was only 1s. 1d. per day, and on being discharged he expected that a grateful country would assist him to make a start again in civilian life. But no such good fortune awaited him. On returning to his village he sought to obtain work as an agricultural labourer, but no such employment could he find. For weeks he walked the roads in search of work, but could not find any.

At this period there was a great depression in trade, especially in agriculture. It was in the years 1830 to 1833. It is on record that more than half of the people were receiving poor relief in some shape or form. Bread was 1s. 6d. per 4 lb. loaf. Married men received a wage of 9s. per week, single men 6s. per week. The Guardians adopted a system of supplementary wages by giving meal money according to the number in family, and by so doing enabled the farmers to pay a scandalously low wage. The poor-rate rose to 22s. in the pound, unemployment was most acute. In a large number of villages half the men were without work.

Thus this hero, like many others, was workless. The unemployed grew restless and on November 6, 1833, a village meeting was held to demand food. The inhabitants of the parish of Marsham held a meeting which was largely attended, the unemployed turning up in strong force and showing a very threatening attitude. The meeting, however, commenced with the repetition of the Lord's Prayer. Following some very angry words, a resolution was moved demanding work and better wages. To the resolution were added the words: "The labourer is worthy of his hire."

This resolution was moved by Thomas Edwards, and a farmer who was present told him he might go and pluck blackberries again or starve, for he should have no work, and he kept his word.

What this threat meant was soon discovered. My father on his return home penniless, unable to get work, and without food, was forced to pick blackberries from the hedges to eat. One day this

particular farmer caught him in his field and ordered him off, telling him he would have no – tramps in his field picking blackberries.

So insult was added to injustice to this honest man who had fought, he was told, for his country.

Before Christmas in that year he sought shelter in the workhouse, which was then at Buxton. There he remained all the winter. In the following spring he took himself out and got work as a brickmaker.

The summer being over, he obtained employment as a cattle-feeder, but at 1s. per week less than other labourers; and although he had to work seven days, he received the noble sum of 8s. per week. The reason given for paying this low wage was that he had been in the Army and was not an able-bodied workman. No more unjust treatment could be meted out to anyone.

It was in the year of 1840 – the year of Queen Victoria's marriage – that Thomas Edwards married the young widow, Mary Stageman. She had been left with three little children, and had herself been an inmate of the workhouse during her late husband's illness.

The first child born to this couple was a son, whom they named Joseph, the second was named John, and the third was a girl, whom they named Harriet. Between this child and the next to live there was a period of five years. All of this family are now dead with the exception of my sister and myself. As the family increased, their poverty increased. Wages were decreased, and had it not been for the fact that my mother was able to add a little to her husband's wages by hand-loom weaving (which was quite a village industry at that time), the family would have been absolutely starved. Hand-loom weaving was a most sweated industry. One man in the village would go to Norwich and fetch the raw material from the factory and take the finished work back. This weaving was principally done by women, who were paid for it by the piece, that is, so many yards to the piece at so much per piece. A certain sum was deducted to pay the man for the time spent in carrying the work backward and forward to Norwich. If there was any defect in the weaving, then another sum was deducted from the price which should have been paid, and the employers never lost an opportunity of doing this. Poor sweated workers were robbed at every turn.

I have known my mother to be at the loom sixteen hours out of the twenty-four, and for these long hours she would not average more than 4s. a week, and very often less than that.

It was on October 5, 1850, that Mary Edwards bore her last baby boy.

The cottage in which the child was born was a miserable one of but two bedrooms, in which had to sleep father, mother, and six children. At this time my father's wage had been reduced to 7s. per week. The family at this time was in abject poverty. When lying in bed with the infant the mother's only food was onion gruel. As a result of the bad food, or, properly speaking, the want of food, she was only able to feed the child at her breast a week. After the first week he had to be fed on bread soaked in very poor skimmed milk. As soon as my mother was able to get about again she had to take herself again to the loom, and the child was left during the day to the care of his little sister, who was only five years his senior, and many a shaking did she give him when he cried.

At the christening the parents named the child George, a record of which can be found in the register of the Parish Church, Marsham.

Whether my mother had any presentiment that this child had a career marked out for him different from the rest of the family, I am unable to say, but I sometimes think she had. That this was indeed so has been lately brought to my knowledge.

I have recently revisited the scenes of my childhood days, and met in the village an old man who declares that my mother often said that one day her son George would be a Member of Parliament! What gift of vision this mother must have possessed, for in those days it was never imagined that the doors of Westminster would open to the child of such humble parentage! Her prophecy was partly fulfilled in her lifetime, for she lived to see me a member of a Board of Guardians and Rural District Council, and chairman of the first Parish Council for the village in which I then lived.

At the time of my birth my father was again a bullock feeder, working seven days a week, leaving home in the morning before it was light, and not returning in the evening until it was dark. He never saw his children at this time, except for a little while on the Sunday, as they were always put to bed during the winter months before his return from work. The condition of the family grew worse, for, although the Corn Laws were repealed in 1849, the price of food did not decrease to any great extent, but wages did go down. Married men's wages were reduced from 9s. to 8s. per week, and single, men's wages from 7s. to 6s. per week. It was the rule in those days that the single men should work for 2s. per week less than the married men. Before the repeal of the Corn Laws had the effect of reducing the cost of living to any great extent, the great Crimean War broke out. This, it will be remembered, was in 1854. Food rose to famine prices. The price of bread went up to 1s. per 4 lb. loaf, sugar to 8d. per lb., tea to 6d. per oz., cheese rose from 7d. per lb. to 1s. 6d. per lb. – in fact, every article of food rose to almost prohibitive figures. The only article of food that did not rise to such a proportionately high figure was meat, but that was an article of food which rarely entered a poor man's home, except a little piece of pork occasionally which would weigh about 1½ lb., and this would have to last a family of nine for a week! Very often this small amount could not be obtained – in fact it can be truly said that in those days meat never entered my father's house more than once or twice a year!

The only thing which did not rise to any great extent was wages. True, able-bodied married men's wages did rise again in Norfolk to 9s. per week. Single men did not share in the rise. My father at this time was taking 8s. per week of seven days.

I was then four years of age, and the hardships of those days will never be erased from my memory. My father's wages were not sufficient to buy bread alone for the family by 4s. per week. My eldest brother Joseph, who was twelve years old, was at work for 1s. 6d. per week, my second brother John, ten years old, was working for 1s. 2d. per week. My sister worked filling bobbins by the aid of a rough hand machine to assist my mother in weaving. My step-brothers apprenticed themselves to the carpentering and joinery trade by the aid of a little money which was left them by their late father's brother, who died in South America. My other stepbrother went to sea.

In order to save the family from actual starvation my father, night by night, took a few turnips from his master's field. These were boiled by my mother for the children's supper. The bread we had to eat was meal bread of the coarsest kind, and of this we had not half enough.

We children often used to ask this loving mother for another slice of bread, and she, with tears in her eyes, was compelled to say she had no more to give.

As the great war proceeded the condition of the family got worse. My sister and I went to bed early on Saturday nights so that my mother might be able to wash and mend our clothes, and we have them clean and tidy for the Sunday. We had no change of clothes in those days. This work kept my mother up nearly all the Saturday night, but she would be up early on the Sunday morning to get our scanty breakfast ready in time for us to go to Sunday-school.

This was the only schooling I ever had!

From my earliest days, as soon as I could be, I was sent to Sunday-school to receive the teaching of the principles of religion and goodness. My father used to keep our little boots in the best state of repair he could. God alone knows or ever knew how my parents worked and wept and the sufferings and privations they had to undergo. I particularly refer to my mother. I have seen both faint through overwork and the lack of proper food.

I owe all I am and have to my saintly father and mother. It was they who taught me the first principles of righteousness.

CHAPTER II
A WAGE EARNER

It was in the year 1855 when I had my first experience of real distress. On my father's return home from work one night he was stopped by a policeman who searched his bag and took from it five turnips, which he was taking home to make his children an evening meal. There was no bread in the house. His wife and children were waiting for him to come home, but he was not allowed to do so.

He was arrested, taken before the magistrates next day, and committed to prison for fourteen days' hard labour for the crime of attempting to feed his children! The experience of that night I shall never forget.

The next morning we were taken into the workhouse, where we were kept all the winter. Although only five years old, I was not allowed to be with my mother.

On my father's release from prison he, of course, had also to come into the workhouse. Being branded as a thief, no farmer would employ him. But was he a thief? I say no, and a thousand times no! A nation that would not allow my father sufficient income to feed his children was responsible for any breach of the law he might have committed.

In the spring my father took us all out of the workhouse and we went back to our home. My father obtained work at brickmaking in the little village of Alby, about seven miles from Marsham. He was away from home all the week, and the pay for his work was 4s. per thousand bricks made, and he had to turn the clay with which the bricks were made three times. He was, however, by the assistance of one of my brothers, able to bring home to my mother about 13s. per week, which appeared almost a godsend. In the villages during the war hand-loom weaving was brought to a standstill, and thus my mother was unable to add to the family income by her own industry.

On coming out of the workhouse in March 1856 I secured my first job. It consisted of scaring crows from the fields of a farmer close to the house. I was then six years of age, and I was paid 1s. for a seven-day week. My first pay-day made me feel as proud as a duke. On receiving my wage I hastened home, made straight for my mother and gave her the whole shilling. To her I said:

"Mother, this is my money. Now we shall not want bread any more, and you will not have to cry again. You shall always have my money. I will always look after you."

In my childish innocence I thought my shilling would be all she needed. It was not long, however, before I discovered my mistake, but my wage proved a little help to her. I am glad to recall in these days that I did keep my promise to her always to look after her, and my wife had the unspeakable pleasure of taking her to our home, and we looked after her for six years out of my 15s. a week, without receiving a penny from anyone, the Board of Guardians refusing to allow her anything in the nature of poor relief. My wife's mother also lived with us for sixteen years, and died at our house, and for twenty-two years of my married life I maintained these two old people.

My troubles began in the second week of my employment. Having to work long hours, I had to be up very early in the morning, soon after sunrise, and remain in the fields until after sunset. One day, being completely worn out, I unfortunately fell asleep. Equally unfortunately for me the crows were hungry, and they came on to the field and began to pick the corn. Soon after the farmer arrived on the scene and caught me asleep, and for this crime at six years of age he gave me a severe thrashing, and deducted 2d. from my wage at the end of the week. Thus I had only 10d. to take home to my mother that week. But my mother was too good to scold.

Having finished crow-scaring for that season, I was set looking after the cows, to see that they did not get out of the field, and take them home in the evening to be milked. This I continued to do all the summer.

In 1856, I entered upon my first harvest. During the wheat-cutting I made bonds for the binders. There were no reaping machines in those days, the corn all having to be cut by the scythe. Women were engaged to tie up the corn, and the little boys made bonds with which to tie the corn. For this work I received 3d. per day, or at the rate of 1s. 6d. per week.

When the wheat was carted I led the horse and shouted to the loaders to hold tight when the horse moved. When this work was finished and there was nothing further for me to do, I went gleaning with my mother. In those days it was the custom for the poor to glean the wheatfields after they had been cleared. This was a help to the poor, for it often provided them with a little bread during the winter months, when they would not have had half enough to eat had it not been that they were allowed to glean. The men used to thresh the corn with a flail, dress it and clean it, and send it to the mill to be ground into meal. The rules for gleaning were very amusing. No one was allowed in the field while there was a sheaf of corn there, and at a given hour the farmer would open the gate and remove the sheaf, and shout "All on." If anyone went into the field before this was done the rest would "shake" the corn she had gleaned.

This was a happy time for the women and children. At the conclusion of the harvest they would have what was called a gleaners' frolic. In the year to which I am referring, after harvest, I went keeping cows until the autumn, working for a farmer named Thomas Whighten. At the next wheat-sowing I was again put to scaring crows, and when this was finished I was set to work cleaning turnips, and what cold hands I had when the snow was on the ground! And what suffering from backache! Those who know anything about this class of work may judge how hard it was for a child of six and a half years. My mother did all she could to help me. She would get up in the morning and make a little fire over which to boil some water. With this she would soak a little bread and a small piece of butter. This would constitute my breakfast. For dinner I had, day after day for weeks, nothing but two slices of bread, a small piece of cheese, and an apple or an onion.

In the spring I left this employer and went with my father to work in the brickfield for a Mr. John Howlett, the leading farmer, who had about two years before put my father into prison for taking home turnips, but after a time had set him on again. This farmer used to have bricks made in the summer, and my father was set to make them, he having learned this trade when young. In fact, my family for generations were brickmakers as well as agricultural labourers. Being then barely seven years of age, my daily task was made easier by my father, and I had not to go to work until after breakfast. My father, however, had to be up very early, as brickmaking in those days was very hard work. I was just man enough to wheel away eight bricks at a time. The summer being ended, I helped my father to feed bullocks. In the spring of 1858 I again went into the brickfield, and during the following winter was set cleaning turnips by Mr. Howlett. By this time my wages were raised to 2s. per week. Well can I remember the many sore backs I had given me by the old steward, who never missed an opportunity to thrash me if I did not clean enough turnips. I might say I do not think I ever forgave this old tyrant for his cruelty to me. The treatment I received was no exception to the rule, all poor boys in those days were treated badly. One farmer I knew used to hang the poor boys up by the heels and thrash them on the slightest provocation, and the parents dare not say anything. Had my father complained of the treatment to his son he would have been discharged.

In the spring of 1859 I was set to work as a horseman. This was a new experience to me, but afterwards I was to become an efficient workman, having a liking for horses from the very first. My first job as a horseman was to lead the fore-horse in the drill, and many times the first day the horse trod on my feet. My next job was rolling, and I then thought I was a man, having for the first time a pair of reins in my hands. This change of work brought me another 6d. a week increase in my wages. By the next spring (1860) I was so far improved that I was set to plough, and on April 7th of that year something happened which caused me to change my employment. The old steward, to whom I have previously referred, rode up by the side of the horses and struck me on the knuckles because I was not ploughing straight enough. I at once swore at him and told him I would pay him out for that

treatment when I became a man. He forthwith got down from his horse, took me on his knee, and thrashed me until I was black. I, however, got a little of my own back. I kicked him in the face until he was black, and then ran home and told my mother what had happened. She at once went after the steward, pulled his whiskers and slapped his face. For this she was summoned, and was fined 5s. and costs or fourteen days' hard labour. The fine was paid by a friend.

I soon found another job with a Mr. Charles Jones and rapidly improved in my work. I was kept using horses, taking a delight in my work, and soon became, although very young, quite an expert in ploughing. The head team-man was a nice fellow, and took a great interest in me, and taught me all he knew about horses. I worked for this man about four years, and then left because he would not pay me more than 2s. 9d. a week! I next went to work for three old bachelors by the names of Needham, William and James Watts, who lived together near to my home. I helped one of them to look after their team of five horses. They also took great interest in me, and here I was taught all kinds of skilled work on the farm, including drilling, stacking and thatching. I worked for them about three years, and by the time I left my wages had risen to about 6s. per week, mother taking 4s. for my board and allowing me 2s. with which to buy clothes and for pocket-money.

I might say by this time the condition of the family had very much improved. My elder brothers had grown up and left home. My mother by her hand-loom weaving had managed to clear off the debts which had been contracted while the children were small. It showed the honesty of these poor people.

I left my work just before harvest because of my employers not being willing to give me enough for my harvest. This was in 1866. I then decided I would leave home. This was the first time my mother chided me for leaving my work, and I have thought since she was right.

I obtained work during the harvest serving the thatcher at Summerfield, near Docking, Norfolk, which was about thirty miles from my home. After harvest I stayed on the farm and looked after the seventh team of horses. A Mr. Freeman had the farm, which was a much larger one than I had ever worked on before. It consisted of 1,000 acres, and one field was 212 acres in extent. The men on the farm did not like me staying. There was a good bit of clannishness about them, and they did not like people coming from other parts of the county to work in their district.

Hence the men in the other stables did not treat me kindly and often endeavoured to steal my corn. I had, however, been taught a great deal about horses by my eldest brother, who was a stud-groom and well trained in the medical treatment of horses. I was therefore able to treat my horses in such a way that they looked better than any of the others. My employer and the other men did not know my secret, and the latter, not being able to out-do me in this direction, tried to beat me at work. I mention this merely to show the state of ignorance the men were in. In these days, I am happy to say, there is a much better spirit amongst the labourers.

I decided, however, not to stay there more than the year, and on October 11, 1867, I left and returned to my own home. I obtained a job as a team-man with a farmer of the name of Thomas Blyth, at a farm called Botnay Bay. I lived in and received a wage of 2s. per week, with board and lodging, and had to feed and groom five horses. Here I increased my efficiency as a horseman and workman. My employer, though an old tyrant, did put me to all kinds of work. I was set to drill and at the harvest to stack and thatch. The thatching I followed for several years after I left my regular work as a farm hand. I stayed at this place until 1869, when an unhappy affair happened that caused me to leave my farm work for some few years. This farmer had threatened to thrash me and my fellow worker several times. My colleague's name was Sam Spanton. One day when we were at plough he came and accused us of stopping at the end of the field. With an oath I denied this and called him a liar. He thereupon struck me with his clenched fist and knocked me down. As I got up I struck him on the side of the head with my whip-stalk and knocked him down. I at once got on to him and struck him with my fist. My colleague came to my assistance, and between the two of us, after a rough tussle, we thus far came off victorious, for he never again attempted to hit us. This, however,

finished us with this employer. This affair took place in the last week in March 1869, and I obtained work for the summer on a brickfield at Bessingham.

It was, however, a turning-point in my life, greatly to the delight of my mother, for I had begun to adopt rather bad habits whilst in this man's employ. I had taken to snaring hares and catching rabbits and selling them for pocket-money. I had also begun to visit the public-houses, although I never got drunk. This caused my saintly mother some anxious moments.

On leaving this employer I attended a little Primitive Methodist chapel one Sunday evening, when a very earnest lay-preacher, by name Samuel Harrison, was preaching. He took for his text: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" His sermon was a thoroughly orthodox one, and it certainly did appeal to me, and I was led to see I had not been pursuing a right course. I became what we used to call in those days "saved," but which I term now the spiritual forces coming into contact with the forces of evil, which up till then were completely controlling my life, and which, had I not been brought under the influence of the Eternal Spirit at this particular time, might have altered the whole course of my life.

I at once embraced the simple faith of Christ as the Great Saviour of man, although in a rather different light then to what I do now. But I continued to maintain my faith in Christ as the Eternal Son of God, and as the Great Leader and Saviour of men, and in the principles of righteousness advocated by Him as the true solution for all the evils affecting humanity.

I still love my Church, and I remain a loyal supporter of that great section of the Methodist Church, namely the Primitive Methodists, which has during the last hundred years done so much for the uplifting of the toiling masses of England, and brought light and comfort into thousands of homes. The faith I then embraced created within me new ideals on life and, although an illiterate and uneducated youth, I became very thoughtful and most strict in my habits, thinking I had to give up everything I had hitherto indulged in.

CHAPTER III
EDUCATION AT LAST

In the spring of 1870 I went to work in a brickfield at Alby. Here I met a woman who was to play a wonderful part in my future life. Her name was Charlotte Corke, daughter of the late Mr. James Corke of that parish. She herself had felt the pinch of poverty, being the youngest child of nine.

We became engaged, and on June 21, 1872, we married at Alby Church. A record of this event is still to be found in the church register.

At this time I was given a note of liberty by the Aylsham Primitive Methodist Circuit Quarterly Meeting, permitting me to speak in their chapels, and I was appointed to accompany two accredited lay-preachers by the names of Edward Gladden and James Applegate. This continued for two quarters, after which my name appeared on the plan of preachers. In October of the same year I returned to my former employment, agriculture, obtaining a situation with Mr. James Rice of Oulton. I hired a cottage at Oulton, which is near Aylsham (Norfolk), where we lived for the first seven years of our married life. I worked for Mr. Rice for two years, when a dispute arose over the right to stop work for breakfast, and I left and again returned to brickmaking, and went to work at Blickling, about a mile and a half from my home, which distance I walked morning and night. Mr. James Applegate was the contractor and foreman on this yard, on which was manufactured all kinds of ware. My foreman was quite a skilled tradesman and he took great interest in me and set me to manufacture all kinds of ware, and he also taught me the art of burning the ware. I stayed with him about five years, when, by his assistance, I obtained a situation as brick-burner with a Mr. John Cook of Thwaite Hall and, on October 11, 1879, I moved to Alby Hill into one of my employer's cottages.

The September Quarterly Meeting of 1872 of the Aylsham Primitive Methodist Circuit decided that my name should appear on the preachers' plan as an "Exhorter," and I was planned to take my first service on the third Sunday in October of that year.

Up to this time I could not read, I merely knew my letters, but I set myself to work. My dear wife came to my rescue and undertook to teach me to read. For the purposes of this first service she helped me to commit three hymns to memory and also the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. It was a big task, but she accomplished it, and this is how it was done. When I returned home from work after tea she would get the hymn-book, read the lines out, and I would repeat them after her. This was repeated until I had committed the whole hymn to memory.

My first three were good old Primitive Methodist hymns. The opening verse of the first hymn I learned was: —

Hark, the Gospel news is sounding,
Christ has suffered on the tree.
Streams of mercy are abounding,
Grace for all is rich and free.
Now, poor sinner,
Look to Him who died for thee.

The second hymn was: —

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The third hymn was: —

Stop, poor sinner, stop and think
Before you further go.
Will you sport upon the brink
Of everlasting woe?
On the verge of ruin stop,
Now the friendly warning take,
Stay your footsteps or you'll drop
Into the burning lake.

The last hymn does not appear in the present-day Primitive Methodist hymnal. Needless to say, I have long ceased to use the hymn. It was too horrible for my humanitarian spirit. I might say that at my first service I was not quite sure that I held the book the right way up, as I was not quite certain of the figures. I had, however, committed the hymns to memory correctly, and also the lesson, and I made no mistakes. In those days we used to give out the hymns two lines at a time, as very few people could read, and they could possibly remember the two lines. There was no musical instrument in many of the small village chapels at that time. My wife went with me to my first appointment and listened. My first text was taken from the first chapter of John: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." I would not like to say the sermon was a very intellectual one. It was, however, well thought out as far as my limited knowledge would allow me to do so, and in preparing it I had the assistance of my wife. We had spent nights in thinking it out, and it certainly was orthodox in the extreme. I made rapid progress with my education under the tutorship of my wife, who would sit up very late at night to teach me. She would sit on one side of the fireplace and I on the other. I would spell out the words and she would tell me their pronunciation.

By the time the next plan came out I could just manage to read my lesson and hymns, but not until I had gone through them many times with my wife and had mistakes rectified.

One interesting little incident occurred about this time. I went to an appointment one Sunday about eight miles from my home. A brother lay-preacher was planned at the chapel in an adjoining village, hence we travelled most of the way together. Coming home it was very dark, and we had to travel some distance by a footpath across some meadows. We lost ourselves! I told my companion to follow me, but it turned out that it was a case of the blind leading the blind, for no sooner had I instructed my companion than we both walked into a ditch up to our knees in water, and had to walk the rest of the way home with wet feet! This was not the day of bicycles nor yet horse-hire. The circuit to which I was attached was very large, and for many years I walked sixteen miles on the Sunday, conducted two services, and reached home at eleven o'clock at night. Whatever may have been our weaknesses in those days, it must be admitted we were enthusiastic and devoted to the cause we advocated. No sacrifice was too great.

Having once learned to read, I became eager for knowledge. Until then I possessed only a Bible and hymn-book and two spelling-books. But I had no money to buy other books. My wife and I talked it over, and I decided I would give up smoking and purchase books with the money saved. I was then smoking 2 oz. of tobacco a week, which in those days cost 6d. This did not seem much, but it was £1 6s. a year. It was a great sacrifice to me to give up smoking, for I did enjoy my pipe. I had, however, a thirst for knowledge, and no sacrifice was too great to satisfy my longing. My first purchase was Johnson's Dictionary, two volumes of *The Lay-preacher*, which contained outlines of sermons, Harvey's *Meditations among the Tombs* and *Contemplation of the Starry Heavens*, a Bible dictionary, and a *History of Rome*. These I bought second-hand from Mr. James Applegate, who was a great reader. The *Lay-preacher* I used extensively for some years, and it certainly did help me for

the first few years. I ultimately discarded the two volumes and relied upon my own resources, and I should advise every young man with the advantage of education, who is thinking of engaging in such great and good work, never to use such books, for it is far better for him to think out subjects for himself and store his mind well with knowledge.

The different Primitive Methodist services of my early days would be out of date now, and the quaint sayings of those days, though effective then, would cause some amount of amusement to our young educated folk of to-day. One form of service was called a "love-feast," at which small pieces of bread were taken round with water. The meeting was thrown open for anyone to speak, and then the simple, faithful, uneducated, saintly people, in relating what to them was Christian experience, would express themselves in peculiar phrases. I call to mind the statement made by a brother at one meeting who said he felt "like a fool in a fair." At the same meeting another said he thanked God that although that was the first time he had attempted to speak, he was getting used to it. Others would relate what dreadful characters they had been and what religion had done for them.

Although my preaching efforts did not give me entire satisfaction, still I can look back with pleasure at some of the results of my labours. Although uneducated and not well informed and although I used such phrases and put the Gospel in such a way that I should not think for one moment of doing to-day, still it had its effect. I can recall instances of ten and twelve of my hearers at my Sunday services making a stand for righteousness. Many of them in after years became stalwarts for truth.

They also soon began to be dissatisfied with the conditions under which they worked and lived. Seeing no hope of any improvement they migrated to the North of England, and found work in the coalfields, and never returned to their native county. When in Newcastle last December I met several of my old converts and friends.

With my study of theology, I soon began to realize that the social conditions of the people were not as God intended they should be. The gross injustices meted out to my parents and the terrible sufferings I had undergone in my boyhood burnt themselves into my soul like a hot iron.

Many a time did I vow I would do something to better the conditions of my class.

CHAPTER IV
PIONEERS AND VICTIMS

The year 1872 will throughout history be considered the most interesting period from the standpoint of the agricultural labourers of England. There had been some improvement in the condition of the labourers of England through the increase of the purchasing power of their wages, largely due to the abolition of the wicked Corn Laws and the adoption of Free Trade. Moreover, agriculture was never more prosperous than it was from 1849 to 1872. But, despite the increase in the purchasing power of the labourers' wage, the condition of the workers had not improved at the same rate as agriculture had improved. The working hours were as long as they had been for the preceding hundred years, the labourers were no more free to bargain with their employers than their fathers had been for fifty years before, and there was much discontent. In fact, the whole countryside was seething with discontent and we were much nearer a serious upheaval than many people thought. The farmers were arrogant and oppressive, and the gulf between the farmer and the labourer was greater than ever before. The labourer had acquired a little knowledge and the town workers were uprising. Many of the sons of the labourers who had left agriculture since 1864, being disgusted with the low wages of the labourer, had sent glowing accounts over to their friends, and a great migration had again set in until very few young men were left in the villages.

Early in the year 1872 a few labourers met in the village inn at Barford, in Warwickshire, and decided to make an effort to form a Union. But they were without a leader, and it was in search of such a person that they turned their attention to Mr. Joseph Arch, who was a Primitive Methodist lay-preacher. They waited upon him at his residence and informed him that they wanted to form a Union for the agricultural labourers and asked him if he would lead them. Mr. Arch hesitated for a time, as his clear vision could discern that it would cause a tremendous upheaval and he was not sure of his class. After due thought, and through the persuasive powers of Mrs. Arch, he ultimately consented. Accordingly it was arranged that a meeting should be held under what is now known as the Welbourne Tree.

This meeting was attended by at least two thousand agricultural labourers from all parts of the country, and it was there decided to form a Union. The news of the meeting spread rapidly throughout the country. All the newspapers gave it prominence with such headlines as "The Uprising of the Agricultural Labourer." Numerous meetings were held in various parts of the country, and in the second week in May a meeting was held on the children's playground at Alby where I was at work. This was a month before my marriage. I attended the meeting. It was addressed by a local preacher, who was an agricultural labourer, named Josiah Mills, and by Mr. Burton from Cromer. I also spoke, although, as stated before, I could not read. Still, I related my experience of how I was obliged to go to work at the age of six.

A branch of the Union was formed and I became a member. But, as Mr. Arch had foreseen, trouble soon arose, for this new movement met with the most bitter opposition.

Labourers were discharged by the hundred. It was evident that the farmers were bent on crushing the movement in its infancy. Many labourers who lived in their employers' cottages were victimized and turned out into the road. One case which personally came to my notice was that of a poor man and his wife and family who were turned out on to the road with all their furniture and a friendly publican took them in. Scores of farmers locked their men out because they would not give up their Union cards.

This threw Mr. Arch on to his beam ends, as he and his men had no previous knowledge of Trade Unionism. Happily for him and the movement generally a leading Trade Unionist by the name

of Mr. Henry Taylor paid Arch a visit and offered him all the help possible. This brought help from other Trade Unionists.

In Norfolk we were specially favoured, as the proprietors of the *Norfolk News* and the *Norwich Mercury* (the latter one of the country's earliest newspapers) opened the columns of the *Eastern Weekly Press* and the *Peoples' Weekly Journal* respectively to Labour news. Thus the news of the Union spread rapidly and the story was told of the uprising of the agricultural labourer. Hundreds of meetings were held in Norfolk as well as in other counties, branches of the Union were formed everywhere, and within six months 150,000 labourers had joined some Union. It must be remarked that in the first six months the branches formed were all independent Unions.

During the summer Arch, with the help of Mr. Taylor, drew up a list of rules and called a conference of the branches formed in the Warwick district, at which it was decided to form a National Union, its central office to be at Leamington. Mr. Arch was elected President and was sent on a mission throughout the country to explain the rules. Arch soon gathered around him a number of persons who were prominent in the political world, including the late Sir Charles Dilke, Howard Evans, John Bright, George Mitchell, and a host of others. Among those in Norfolk who rallied to Arch were the late Mr. Z. Walker, who remained a faithful follower to the end, the late Mr. Lane of Swaffham, the late Mr. Colman, the late Mr. George Rix, and Mr. George Pilgrim. But all the branches did not join with Mr. Arch. Kent and Sussex formed a Union of their own, which became very strong in those two counties. Lincolnshire also formed a Union and it became known as the "Lincolnshire Amalgamated Labour League." A Mr. Banks became its General Secretary. This Union gained considerable support in Norfolk and had several strong branches in the county, and among its warm supporters were the late Mr. James Applegate of Aylsham, the late Mr. James Ling of Cromer and Mr. James Dennis of Hempton.

All these Unions grew in strength, but unfortunately a spirit of rivalry grew up between them and much mischief was done.

My first acquaintance with Arch was at Aylsham in September 1872, when he came over to explain the code of rules drawn up by the Warwickshire Committee and to invite the branch there to join the Union. The meeting was held in Aylsham Town Hall, which was packed. All in the audience were, however, not in sympathy with the movement. There were several farmers present.

One farmer asked Arch if his mother knew he was out?

Quick as lightning came the retort: "Yes," replied Arch, "and she sent me out to buy a fool. Are you for sale?"

That was just such an answer as the farmer who asked the foolish question deserved. He had, however, no further opportunity of asking questions, for he was soon roughly handled and was promptly thrown out of the hall.

There were many strikes and lock-outs during the first nine months of this uprising of the labourers. The greatest opposition was raised by the farmers.

I was involved in a strike in the first year of the Union's existence. Although only just twenty-two years of age and recently married and unable to read, I became greatly interested in the movement and never lost a chance of attending a Union meeting.

The first general demand we made for an increase in wages took place in March 1873. We asked that wages should be increased from 11s. to 13s. a week, so far as Norfolk was concerned, and this demand was granted. It had never reached that figure before. This gave a great stimulus to the movement generally. The Aylsham branch of which I was a member decided not to join Arch's Union, but joined the Lincolnshire Amalgamated League, which governed on the principle of each district holding its own funds and paying a quarterly levy to the central fund, on the same principle which obtained with the Oddfellows and Foresters Friendly Societies. The next great struggle was in the spring of 1874, when a demand was made for another 2s. increase and time off for breakfast. Up to that time we were not allowed to stop for breakfast, and we had no food from tea-time the

previous day until dinner-time the next day. Many farmers allowed the concession but others would not. The man I worked for at Oulton, Mr. James Rice, was one of the latter, although a member and a deacon of the Congregational Church in that village. We adopted all kinds of methods to snatch time to eat our piece of bread. Scores of times I have held the plough with one hand and eaten the bread with the other. Others, when a number were working together, would set one to watch to see if the boss came while they ate their bread.

This demand was hotly contested and I became involved and struck work. Fortunately for me I had another trade at my back, namely brickmaking. There was a great call for brickmakers at this time and I obtained work at once with James Applegate at Blickling, himself a leader of the Amalgamated Labour League, so I had not to call on the funds of the Union at all and I did not go back to farm work for several years. During these two years I had made rapid progress with my education, and I was so far advanced that I could begin to read a newspaper. I had, however, not been in ignorance of happenings in the world around me, for my wife had always read to me the weekly papers. The first newspapers I read were the *Eastern Weekly Press* and the *People's Weekly Journal*, the two local papers. I had, however, not spoken at a Labour meeting since the first meeting was held two years before, but I had been on the preachers' plan for two years and had begun to have a little confidence in myself. I at once begun to speak at local labour meetings.

The strike going on at this time was successful, and the village labourer in Norfolk for the first time in his history received his 2s. 6d. per day and the right to stop for breakfast.

But the great struggle began as soon as this was settled. The farmers of Suffolk at once locked their men out, not on the question of wages, but because the men would not give up their Union cards. Some four thousand men were locked out and thrown on to the funds of the various Unions. Arch and others visited the large centres of industry and over £20,000 was collected for the funds. Religious services were held on the Sundays and spiritual addresses given. I at once threw myself into this kind of work, although only a young man of twenty-four years of age, and in the village in which I then lived, Oulton, I preached my first Labour sermons. My soul burned with indignation at the gross cruelty inflicted on my parents and the hardships I had undergone, and I became determined to fulfil the vow I had made when quite a lad, namely, to do all I could to alter the conditions under which the labourers lived. I was, however, most anxious to ensure myself that I was doing the right thing from a religious point of view, and again by the assistance of my dear wife I searched the Scriptures and soon was able to satisfy myself I was doing the right thing. Then, as now, to me the Labour movement was a most sacred thing and, try how one may, one cannot divorce Labour from religion.

I found work when the strike took place with Mr. James Applegate, who was many years my senior and himself a leader in the Labour League and an advanced politician, although he possessed no vote. He had posted himself up in Radical politics, for in those days we only knew two political parties. Anyway, I had a real political schoolmaster, and my first political lessons were of the Liberal school of thought. I set myself to work hard in the study of political questions and got possessed of every scrap of political information. My means would not allow me to purchase literature, but I soon became a most ardent Liberal.

Soon after the great struggle of 1874 the labourers began to lose interest in the various Unions. Many of the young men again left the villages and either migrated to the North of England or emigrated to America. I still kept up my political studies and at the same time, by the assistance of Mr. Applegate, I became skilled in the work in which I was then engaged. I kept with Mr. Applegate for five years.

It was in 1880 that my father died.

In October 1879 I obtained a situation with the late Mr. John Cook of Thwaite Hall as brickmaker and burner, and moved into part of an old farmhouse at Alby Hill. One of the conditions of employment was that I should take the work by contract; that I should raise the earth, make the bricks and burn them at 10s. per thousand, the employer finding all tools and coal for burning. Further,

whilst I was not so engaged he was to find me work as a farm labourer. I also undertook to do my harvest on the farm. On leaving Oulton I was out of the reach of the Union to which I then belonged.

I then joined Arch's Union and became an active member. I got along very well with my employer for some few years, but in 1885 an agitation arose for the granting of the franchise to the agricultural labourers and all rural workers. I at once threw myself into the movement and spoke at many meetings. I had become fairly well educated by this time by hard study. I was, however, laying up in store for myself some serious trouble, for my employer was a bigoted Tory.

The franchise was introduced into the House of Commons by Mr. Gladstone, who was then Prime Minister, and was met with bitter opposition by the Conservatives. As stated previously, a great campaign was commenced in which I took a leading part, this greatly enraging the local Tories. After my speech at a meeting one night in March 1895 my employer came to me at my work and in a most autocratic manner said he had been informed that I had been speaking at some Liberal meetings and demanded to know if this was true? I at once replied that it was true. His reply to that was that if I wished to remain a man of his I should have to give that kind of thing up, for he would not have any man of his attending such meetings, setting class against class. The fighting spirit that I inherited from my mother at once rose and I replied in dignified language that much as I respected him as an employer, I respected my liberty a great deal more and could not on any condition comply with his request. Further, I considered so long as I did my work satisfactorily and did not neglect it in any way and led an honest and straightforward life, neither he nor anyone else had any right to dictate how I spent my evenings. I should therefore claim my liberty as a citizen. He had no arguments to use against this, but said I would have to leave. It was then that my spirit of independence was put to the test. I was not long in deciding, and I told him at once I should take his notice, for my whole soul revolted against such tyranny. This seemed to stagger him, for it was the first time his authority had been challenged in such a way. As soon as he had time to recover himself, he asked when I wished the notice to expire. I told him not until I had finished my contract, for I had already raised sufficient earth to make 100,000 bricks and I should complete that before I left. He insisted that he would force me to leave at once. I told him to try and put the threat into execution and I would sue him for breach of contract. Again he was completely taken back and asked me if I meant it? I told him I did and defied him to break the contract. He at once saw he was in the wrong and said: "Very well, finish your contract." I replied that I intended to and then he could carry out his threat. Being thwarted in this direction he thought he would hit me in another way.

My wife's mother was a widow and was living with me. The Guardians allowed her 2s. 6d. per week. My employer was a member of that Board, which at once took 6d. a week off her relief. My victimization was made known throughout the country. I at once informed the leaders of the Union, and also the Liberal Party, and this act of political tyranny was denounced on every Liberal and Labour platform. Coming at a time when the labourers were about to be enfranchised it caused quite a stir in the country.

I was offered by the Liberals an organizing and lecturing position, but this I declined, as, having insisted upon finishing my contract, I did not intend giving the Tories an opportunity to say I had broken it. Further, I had no wish to give up manual labour, nor had I confidence in myself that I could do the work. I felt I was not sufficiently educated or well informed to do that kind of work; thus I kept at my brickmaking. Into this I put more energy than I think I had ever done before. It was a fine season and I was able to turn out a better class of brick than in previous seasons. At the same time I attended as many political meetings in the evenings as I could and I also read every bit of literature I could get hold of.

During the summer the Franchise Bill, coupled with a Redistribution Bill, was passed, and for the first time in English history the agricultural labourers were enfranchised. Norfolk was mapped out into six single-member rural constituencies. Where I lived became known as North Norfolk. It became evident that there would be a General Election in November, and that by the time I had

finished my contract the election would be near. This the leading Tories appeared to advise my employer would put him into a very awkward position, for he had not only given me notice to leave my employment, but also my house on October 11th. Hence he came to me in July and said he wished to withdraw both notices and wished all misunderstanding to cease. After consultation with some of my friends I accepted the offer. I was, however, never satisfied, although the offer to withdraw the notices was genuine as the following correspondence will show.

In July I received the following letter from the late Mr. Charles Louis Buxton, who was the then leader of the Liberal Party in North Norfolk: —

> *Bolwick Hall, Aylsham,*
> *July 20, 1885.*
>
> Dear Mr. Edwards,
>
> I was delighted to hear yesterday that your employer had withdrawn his notice for you to leave your work and house, and hope everything will go on smoothly and that you will be quite happy and that we shall have no more of this kind of victimization,
>
> *Yours truly,*
> *C. L. Buxton.*

I replied as follows: —

> Charles Louis Buxton, Esq., J.P. Bolwick Hall, Aylsham.
>
> Dear Sir,
>
> I thank you for yours of the 20th *re* my employment. I must confess I do not derive the same satisfaction from the withdrawal of the notice as you appear to do. Although it was withdrawn unconditionally, each of us to be free to go our own way, I feel convinced when the election is over he will find some excuse to get rid of me.
>
> Nevertheless, I will stand by my principles, come what may.
>
> *Yours sincerely,*
> *George Edwards.*

I finished my season's work fairly early, and I think I earned more money than I had ever done before. Having finished my season's work, I returned to my farm work as before.

In October the election started in all earnestness. For three weeks I addressed six meetings a week. This I might say was all voluntary work, as I kept at my daily employment all the time, being determined not to absent myself from work one hour.

Mr. Herbert Cozens-Hardy, who afterwards became Lord Cozens-Hardy, Master of the Rolls, and whose son and heir was in after years by a strange coincidence to be my opponent in my first bid for parliamentary honours, was chosen Liberal candidate for North Norfolk. Mr. Joseph Arch was selected Liberal and Labour candidate for North-West Norfolk, Mr. Robert Gurdon was chosen Liberal candidate for Mid-Norfolk, Sir William Brampton Gurdon for South-West Norfolk, and a Mr. Falk for East Norfolk. After a most hotly contested election, Mr. Cozens-Hardy beat his opponent, Sir Samuel Hoare, by over 1,700 majority. Mr. Arch and Mr. Robert Gurdon were also elected by good majorities, whilst Sir Brampton Gurdon and Mr. Falk were defeated.

The election being over, things quieted down and, so far as I was concerned, nothing untoward happened. My employer and myself appeared to be on very good terms. Early in the new year, 1886, when I asked him for my orders as usual, he informed me that he should not make any bricks that year, as there were a good many standing on the ground and there was not much sale for them. As a matter of fact there were not many bricks on the ground, not so many by 20,000 as there were the year before when he gave me the order to make 100,000 and, further, when there was a prospect of a greater sale than in the previous year. A few weeks later I received notice to leave the farm work,

and on April 6th I was served with another six months' notice to leave my cottage. Thus the fear I had expressed to Mr. Buxton nine months before became true, and proved that he only withdrew the previous notice to save himself from the law against intimidation.

I obtained work for the season's brickmaking with Mr. Emery at Stibbard. Strange to relate, before my notice expired to leave the cottage, my landlord and late employer died. He had not been dead more than a month before his brother, Mr. Herbert Cook, who was heir to the estate, called at my house in my absence and informed my wife that he should carry out his brother's notice. Now came the difficulty of getting another house, and it looked for some time as if I should go homeless. I first hired a cottage at Colby on the Gunton estate, but before I could move into it it was let with the farm, and of course, being an agitator, I could not have it. Thus within a few weeks of October 11th I had no prospect of a home. It was then that a friend came along in the person of Mr. Horace Car, who lived at Wickmere. He had hired a little farm in another village and did not want his cottage at Wickmere and sub-let it to me.

The election of 1885 was doomed not to stand long. Mr. Gladstone introduced his Irish Home Rule Bill, which caused a terrible split in the ranks of the Liberal Party, and in July 1886 the Government was defeated and a General Election took place. Mr. Cozens-Hardy again came forward. This time his opponent was Mr. Ailwyn Fellowes, now Lord Ailwyn of Honingham, a gentleman whom I hold in the highest esteem and who has done me the honour of writing a foreword to this book. Mr. Arch was this time fought by Lord Henry Bentinck, who defeated him by twenty votes. At this election I was brought a great deal into Mr. Arch's company whilst working in his division. I attended several of his meetings and spoke for him. I remember being with him at one meeting during the election when we spoke from a wagon standing close to a pond. During the proceedings a young farmer rode into the company and endeavoured to strike at Arch with his whip-stalk. No sooner did he do this than he was unhorsed and ducked in the pond, greatly to his discomfort. This, I should think, he never forgot.

Mr. Arch and I were destined in after years to work together in one common cause, although, unfortunately, we were to belong to two different Unions. Most of the meetings I attended in this election were in my division and, smarting under the gross injustice that had been meted out to me, I spoke out very strongly. My victimization had created a bitter feeling in the division, and some very exciting scenes occurred during the election. At one of these meetings, after being interrupted by one or two of the most ignorant Tory farmers, I prophesied that after the election the Tory political victimisers would be politically dead and on their political tombstone would be written the following epitaph: —

> Here lay the Party that never did any good
> and, if they had lived, they never would.

This naturally caused a great deal of laughter, but my enthusiasm for the cause I then believed to be right had somewhat blinded me to the fact that the wheels of human progress move very slowly and that my whole life would have to be spent before Democracy would come into its own. Let me remark that fate sometimes seems to be cruel. It was the son of the very man on whose behalf I suffered so much and for whom I worked so hard to secure his return at least in three elections who fought me in after years in South Norfolk when I stood for Parliament the first time! I thought at the time it was rather an ungracious act.

Well, this election went badly for the Liberals in the country and the Tories were returned to power with a majority of 100.

Some hard times were in store for me. At the end of the season my work at Stibbard also ended. I moved to Wickmere, but no one in the district would employ me, although I was an efficient workman. I was a horrible Radical, setting class against class! Strange to relate, in those days the

Liberals were looked upon as being out for destruction. To be a Liberal was looked upon as belonging to a most discreditable party. They were classed as infidels, wanting to pull down Church and State, and disloyal to Queen and Country.

To-day the same things are said about the Labour Party. We of the Party are called all kinds of names. But those who make the statements know they are untrue.

I tried everywhere to get employment, but none could I find.

At last Mr. Ketton of Felbrigg Hall offered to find me work on his home farm, but he had no cottage to offer me. Felbrigg was six miles from Wickmere. I accepted the employment and for eighteen months or more I walked night and morning this six miles, a journey of twelve miles every day! Whilst living here my wife's mother died. I had kept her for sixteen years, her only income being parish relief. In 1878 Mr. Ketton found me a cottage at Aylmerton and I settled down comfortably once again as a farm labourer.

At this time agriculture was sorely depressed. The labourer's wage was rapidly being reduced and reached the miserably low figure of 10s. per week, and in some districts 9s. per week. The labourers had left their Unions and were in a most helpless position. This was brought about by many causes, one being the great falling out amongst the leaders. Arch had the misfortune to fall out with all his best supporters. Mr. Henry Taylor resigned his position as General Secretary. Mr. Howard Evans and Mr. George Mitchell had left him. Mr. George Rix of Swanton Morley had resigned, and he took with him a large district and formed a Union which he called the Federal Union. In fact, in every county, with the exception of Norfolk, the Unions became defunct. The Kent and Sussex Union went smash, the Lincolnshire and Amalgamated Labour League became defunct, and all that remained of Arch's Union were a few members belonging to the sick benefit department, the funds of which were being fast depleted.

Under these circumstances the political power placed in the hands of the labourers but further enslaved them and made them easy victims for the Tory party. Happily for me I had at last got under a Liberal employer, who not only was favourable to the men, but showed his sympathy with them by paying them 1s. per week above the rate paid by other employers, and I was able to breathe freely without any fear of victimization. My employer also assisted me by lending me books and papers on political problems. He also put every kind of work on the farm in my way to enable me to earn extra money. I at once settled down to study even more closely than I had done before. Thirsting for knowledge, religious, social and political, I set about adding to my library. I became a close student of theology and took great interest in many of the theological subjects which were disturbing the Christian world at that period, such as the doctrine of eternal punishment, and I soon became what was known then as a Liberal in theology. When I purchased a new book, I never read any other until I had read it through and thought the matter out for myself. I never accepted a thing as a fact just because someone else said it was so. Included in the new works I bought at this time were Canon Farrar's *Life of Christ*, the same author's *Eternal Hope*, Dr. Dale's work on *Conditional Immortality*, Mr. Robertson's book entitled *Eternal Punishment, not Eternal Torments*. I also read very closely Dr. Parker's books. Taking the other side, I also became a regular reader of the weekly periodical the *Christian Commonwealth*, which was published about this time to counteract what they termed the heterodoxy of the *Christian World*. Strange to say, this paper became a thousand times more heterodox than the *Christian World* ever could be, for it became a strong advocate of the Rev. R. J. Campbell's New Theology.

My close study of these matters marked me out for trouble. In fact, Job's description of man seemed to apply to me in every respect, for I seemed to be born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. I was called up before the Quarterly Meeting of my Church for what some of the elder brethren termed heterodoxical preaching and I was regarded as almost an infidel. Never, however, was a more false accusation made against anyone, for my faith in the eternal Truths was never stronger. But I had a

strong supporter in my friend Mr. James Applegate, who himself was a progressive in thought, and the matter blew over and I was left to go on in my own way.

At this time there was a deal of discussion on the Single Tax Movement as advocated by Henry George. I became interested in this and purchased his books on social problems, *Protection or Free Trade*, *Progress and Poverty* and *The Condition of Labour*. These I closely read, sitting up late at night. Many a time have I gone out at eleven o'clock at night and wiped my eyes with the dew of the grass in an endeavour to keep myself awake. I managed to get through all these books during the winter and became a convert to the principles contained therein, and thus became an advanced thinker on political and social questions. I think Henry George's books did more to mould my thought on social questions than those of any other writer. About this time I also purchased Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Thorold Roger's *Six Centuries of Work and Labour*. These I soon mastered in all their details. I was thus enabled to take a very broad view on all matters pertaining to Labour and was able to see more clearly the cause of all the gross injustice that was inflicted on my class. I became convinced that if there was a revival in the Labour movement amongst the rural workers, the leaders would have to lift the men's thoughts above the question of the mere raising of wages and would have to take political action and seek to remove the great hindrance to man's progress. I made one mistake. I thought and was convinced that the Liberal Party would do these things, and I was strengthened in my belief by a speech made by the late Mr. Joseph Chamberlain about "ransoming the land back to the people." In my political innocence I thought all politicians were sincere. I was, however, to live to see my faith in some people shattered.

During this year I received again one or two offers to go on a lecturing tour, all of which I declined. I was not, however, to remain in the shade and inactive long. The men again began to be restless and were anxious to have another try at organizing.

CHAPTER V
DARE TO BE A UNION MAN

IN the autumn of 1889 the men in Norfolk began to want to form a Union again. This time they appealed to me to lead them in the district in which I lived. For some weeks I refused to take any leading part, but was willing to join a Union. I had only just got settled down comfortably after my terrible eighteen months of bitter persecution, and was just anxious to remain quietly at work. I had no wish to enter into the turmoil of public life. But at last, through the men's constant pleadings, I yielded to the pressure. On November 5, 1889, eleven men formed a deputation and came to my house and stated they represented a large number of men in the district who had decided to form a Union and they wanted me to lead them. I questioned them in order to ascertain if they had seriously thought the matter over. They assured me they had. I also informed them that in my judgment no Union would stand which had no other object than merely to raise wages and that they must go in for something higher than that. I then asked them what Union they wished to form, or did they wish to link up with Arch's Union which was almost defunct. They expressed a wish to form a Union on the same lines as Mr. Rix had formed his, and I was asked to write to Mr. Rix to come over and address one or two meetings and explain the rules of his Union. This I did. Mr. Rix agreed to come, and two meetings were arranged to be held within a fortnight, one at the White Horse Inn at Cromer and the other at the Free Methodist Church at Aylmerton. Both meetings were packed and were addressed by George Rix and myself. Large numbers gave in their names for membership. It was decided to form a Union on the principle of the rules as explained by Mr. Rix, to be called the Federal Union, Cromer District. The objects of the Union were to be as follows: To improve the social and moral well-being of its members; to assist them to secure allotments and representation on local authorities and even in the Imperial Parliament; to assist members to migrate and emigrate. Ten shillings per week to be paid in strike and victimization pay. Legal advice to be given. Each member to pay 1s. per year harvest levy to enable a member to have his harvest money made up to him in case of a dispute. Each member to pay a contribution of 2¼d. per week, or 9d. per month, 8d. per month to be sent to the district and 1d. per month to be kept by the branch for branch management.

I was elected District Secretary, with no salary fixed for the office. I set about the work in all earnestness, addressing five meetings a week, and writing articles in the weekly papers each week. I kept at my daily work all this time, my employer, Mr. Ketton, putting nothing in my way, allowing me to leave my work an hour early whenever I required to do so and always allowing me to go "one journey." I opened branches at Gresham and Alby Hill (the very place at which I was turned out of my house only five years before). Branches were also opened at Aylsham, Hindolveston, Foulsham, Reepham, Guestwick, Kelling, Southrepps, Gunthorpe, Barney, Guist, Cawston, Bintry, and Lenwade. To many of these places I had to walk, as there was no train service except in a few instances and then only one way. Numbers of the villages were ten and twelve miles from my home. I often left a meeting at ten o'clock at night and reached home at two o'clock in the morning. I could not cycle in those days. This work continued for over nine months, and during this time I enrolled over 1,000 members at no expense to the Union.

In the autumn of 1890 a general meeting of the members was called, and this meeting decided I should become a whole-time officer and offered me £1 a week. This I at once declined on the ground that the labourers were only receiving 10s. per week, and said I should only take 15s. per week until the labourers received an increase in their wages. From this date, greatly against my wishes, I became a paid official of the Union. Although at this time there was a great revival of the Union spirit, and men were anxious to join a Union, the National Union, of which Mr. Arch was the leader, never again took any hold outside Norfolk. County Unions rose rapidly in other counties under various leaders,

Warwickshire under the leadership of Mr. Ben Ryler, Wiltshire was financed by Mr. Louis Anstie of Devizes, and Berkshire was financed by the Misses Skirrett of Reading and led by Mr. T. Quelch. All these were, however, short-lived. In Norfolk we made rapid progress. Arch revived many of his branches in North-west and East Norfolk and progress was made by me in North Norfolk. I helped to start a district in South Norfolk, of which Mr. Edward James of Ditchingham became secretary. My district, not being satisfied with its isolated position, made an offer to the two other districts, namely, East Dereham and Harleston, to become amalgamated in some way, and thus enable us to become a strong force. Both, for reasons best known to themselves, preferred to remain independent. I, however, was convinced that we should never be a force strong enough to meet the farmers, who were rapidly organizing, so long as we remained little isolated Unions. In fact, we were nothing more than tiny rural Unions. I felt rather than continue along those lines I would give the whole thing up, and I placed my views before my district committee – a splendid body of men. They at once gave me full power to open correspondence with the secretary of a Norwich Union, Mr. Joseph Foyster, now a member of the Norwich bench of magistrates, and the late Mr. Edward Burgess, of "Daylight" fame, who was president of the Union, which was started about the time our Cromer district came into being. A conference of the two Unions was held at the Boar's Head, Surrey Street, Norwich, and after some discussion an agreement to amalgamate was arrived at, each district to hold its own funds and to pay a quarterly levy of 2d. per member to a central fund, which was to be used as a reserve fund in case of a dispute in either district. An Executive was elected which was to have control of the Union. Mr. Edward Burgess was elected president and Messrs. John Leeder, Robert Gotts, J. Spalding, Frank Howes, Joseph Foyster and A. Day were appointed as the Executive. A Mr. Millar of Norwich was elected General Secretary with myself as General Treasurer. I left my position as secretary to the Cromer district. This arrangement did not last long. Mr. Millar soon left the city and was never known to come back again. I was asked to accept the position of General Secretary, which I did. In the Cromer district the following were amongst my most staunch supporters: Messrs. John Leeder, James Leeder, Robert Gotts, Miles Leeder, Edward Holsey, John Spalding, Thomas Painter and Robert Leeder. These men stood by me until the last, never faltering.

The amalgamation being effected and the rules drawn up and registered, we made rapid progress. The Norwich district boundaries were fixed east and south of Norwich. I opened branches at Newton Flotman, Surlingham, Crostwick, Costessey, Eaton, Lakenham, Great Plumstead, Kirby Bedon, Rockland St. Mary, Stoke Holy Cross, Rackheath, and Salhouse. In the two districts in twelve months we reached 3,000 members. Arch's Union also made progress. The late Mr. Z. Walker was his Norfolk organizer, and that Union reached about 5,000. We never exceeded these figures. Although there was a spirit of rivalry between us, the utmost good feeling prevailed. We never went into each other's district, and always aimed at preventing overlapping, frequently appearing on each other's platforms.

Although I started out with the idea of avoiding strikes, we had not gone far before we found that was impossible. The first struggle we had was at Hindolveston. A Mr. Aberdeen set his men to cut some meadow grass and for this he offered them 3s. 6d. per acre. These terms the men rejected and a lock-out took place. I was informed and I sought an interview with the employer. This was scornfully refused and a message was sent out to me that if I went on to his place again he would set the dog on to me. I indignantly replied that I expected I was dealing with a gentleman, but regretted to find I was dealing with a man who was not sufficiently intelligent to treat another with respect. I also told him I was sure that in less than a week he would send for me and that I would then mete him out the respect he should have shown me. This was what did happen. The men would not consent to see him, but referred him to me. Within a week he sent for me and I settled the dispute by making arrangements for the men to receive 5s. per acre. That was my first effort as a leader and peace-maker. While the dispute lasted the men received the lock-out pay of 10s. per week. The next dispute was at Great Plumstead in the Norwich district and was of a more serious character for one hundred

men came out in a demand for 1s. increase in wages. The greatest enthusiasm prevailed, but we found we were in for a very stiff fight. The Farmers' Federation found up a few men to fill the places of those on strike, but we were not dismayed. Enthusiastic meetings were held in every village covered by the Union, and at these songs written by members of Arch's Union were used by permission of those concerned. These were sung to well-known Sankey hymn tunes.

One favourite song sung to the tune of "Dare to be a Daniel" was: —

Standing by a purpose true,
Heeding your command,
Honour them, the faithful men,
All hail to the Union band.

Chorus.
Dare to be a Union man,
Dare to stand alone.
Dare to have a purpose firm,
Dare to make it known.

Another song we sung was "The Farmer's Boy": —

The sun went down beyond the hills,
Across yon dreary moor.
Weary and lame, a boy there came
Up to a farmer's door.
"Will you tell me if any there be
That will give me employ,
To plough and sow, to reap and mow,
And be a farmer's boy?"

Another was "The Labourer's Anthem."

The sons of Labour in the land
Are rising in their might.
In every town they nobly stand,
And battle for the right.
For long they have been trampled on
By money-making elves,
But the time is come for everyone
To rise and help themselves.

Chorus.
So now, you men, remember then,
This is to be your plan.
Nine hours a day and better pay.
For every working man.

This last song reveals that over forty years ago the men had the ideal of a fuller life. The struggle in question lasted nearly a month, but we gained the 1s. increase.

The next battle was fought side by side with Arch's Union. This was over the resistance of a wage reduction. It was on a large scale and was fought with great bitterness. Many of the men were evicted from their homes. This time we were not successful by reason of the fact that the years of 1891 and 1892 were years of great agricultural depression and there were large numbers of unemployed in the villages. After a bitter struggle the men went back to work at the wage offered them. This greatly dispirited the men, though I did my best to encourage them both on the platform and in the press.

CHAPTER VI
A DEFEAT AND A VICTORY

In 1892 I fought my first political battle, and for the first time my faith in the Liberal Party received a shock. In this year took place the second General County Council Election, and, by special request of the working men in the Cromer district, I allowed myself to be nominated as a Liberal-Labour candidate for that division, expecting, of course, that I should have the united support of the Liberal Party in whose interests I had worked so hard for several years. Believing them when they said they were anxious that the working man should be represented on all Authorities, one can understand my surprise and astonishment when I found the leading Liberal in the district nominating as my opponent the leading Tory in the district! I lost faith in their sincerity. It was evident they were not prepared to assist the working men to take their share in the government of the country. The contest was turned at once into a class contest. Many of the leading Liberals, as well as the Tories, expressed their disgust at a working man having the audacity to fight for a seat on the Norfolk County Council against a local landlord. My opponent was the late Mr. B. Bond Cabbell, who was returned unopposed at the first election of the Council.

The contest caused the greatest excitement. The late Mr. Henry Broadhurst, M.P., came to my help. The division comprised the towns of Cromer and Sheringham and the following villages: East and West Runton, Weybourne, Beeston Regis, East and West Beckham, Gresham, Bessingham, Sustead, Aylmerton, Metton and Felbrigg. The contest lasted three weeks, and I covered the whole district and held meetings in every village. All this I did on foot, as I could not cycle and I could not afford to hire a conveyance. The meetings were well attended, and the only help I received was from Mr. Broadhurst and from a few of my own members who were local preachers. The supporters of my opponent manifested the greatest bitterness during the contest, especially the Liberals. So far did they carry this spirit that they descended to publishing a most disgraceful cartoon, depicting a coffin with me lying in it and Broadhurst standing by the side and weeping over me. Underneath were the words: "Puzzle, find Edwards after the election." My opponent strongly condemned such action and threatened to retire unless they withdrew the thing.

The saddest thing of all was that it was my opponent who was dead within three months from the day of the election.

Throughout the election I was booed at by my opponent's supporters, bags of flour and soot were thrown at me, but my supporters heartened me with their cheers. The poll was a heavy one and the votes were counted at Cromer Town Hall on the night of the poll, the result being: —

Bond Cabbell	505
Edwards	455
	—
Majority	50

There was a great crowd gathered outside the hall, my opponents being certain of victory, which they had made every preparation to celebrate. A brass band was there in readiness, and a torchlight procession was formed. I was informed the next morning that the band was worked up to such a state of excitement that the drummer broke in the end of his drum, which caused much amusement and comment not altogether to the credit of the performers.

The result, however, did not give much satisfaction to the aristocratic party; in fact, they were more bitter than ever. For a working man to run the gentlemen's party so close was more than they could tolerate, for they were afraid that at the next trial of strength Labour might win. Owing to Mr.

Bond Cabbell's death another election had to take place, but I decided not to contest the seat again so soon, and my late employer, Mr. R. W. Ketton, came forward and was returned unopposed.

I then turned my attention to perfecting my organization. In the autumn of that year I opened some strong branches at Shipdham, East and West Bradenham, Saham Toney, Ashill, Earlham, Barford, Grimston, Wood Dalling, Swanton Abbott, Hockering and Weston. We were soon doomed to more trouble. Early in 1893 the men got restless. The employers seemed determined to reduce wages further. Arch's Union was seriously involved. Strikes took place at Calthorpe, Erpingham, Southrepps, Northrepps and Roughton, and our Union became involved, as we had members on the farms. Our members also came out at North Barningham, Aylmerton and Alby. A great deal of hard work and anxiety devolved upon me, as I was the only paid official in the Union. Mr. Z. Walker, the only organizer the National Union had at this time, was hardly pressed, as both Unions had members on most of the farms affected, and we frequently met and held joint meetings. I also met Mr. Arch and addressed many meetings with him and we became great friends from that time. We both saw that to have two Unions with the same objects and catering for the same class was a source of weakness, but how to find a way out of it neither of us could see.

We decided, however, so long as the movement lasted, we would work side by side without any friction.

The dispute lasted many weeks. The greatest use was made by the employers of the weapon of the tied cottage and many evictions took place.

The magistrates never hesitated when the opportunity presented to grant an eviction order.

In 1893 the Government appointed a Royal Commission to inquire into the administration of the Poor Law. Amongst those appointed to serve on the Commission were the late King (then Prince of Wales), the late Lord Aberdare, Rt. Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P., Henry Broadhurst, M.P., Joseph Arch, M.P. and others. I was invited to give evidence before the Commission upon the following points: Relief in kind; its quality; the amount of allowance; the question of compelling children to support their aged parents. I obtained my facts and prepared my evidence and was called up to London to give it in March 1893. To prove the poorness of the quality of flour allowed by Boards of Guardians I obtained some of this flour and I also bought some of the best flour sold on the market. Needless to say, the contrast was enormous. The members of the Commission were astonished beyond degree at the poorness of the quality of the flour doled out by the Guardians, and I was requested by the Commission to go back and ask my wife to make some bread from the two classes of flour before completing my evidence. This I did, and the following week I took the bread with me before the Commission. The contrast in the bread was more marked even than in the flour. The late King expressed himself as shocked that such stuff was served out to the poor to eat and thanked me for the trouble I had taken in the matter.

Dealing with the inadequacy of the relief, I was requested to give cases of hardship that had come under my personal notice. I presented several cases. One came from the parish of Aylmerton, being that of a widow left with four little children, one a baby in arms. She was allowed 6d. per week each for three children and nothing for the fourth; half a stone of flour each for three and nothing for herself. In those days a widow was supposed to keep herself and one child. This poor widow's suffering was beyond degree, but this was only a sample of the suffering and extreme poverty of those who had lost the breadwinner. The case of the aged poor was even worse. I presented cases, giving the names of aged couples living together and only receiving one stone of flour and 2s. 6d. in money, and of widows (aged) receiving only half a stone of flour and 1s. 6d. in money. In fact, my own mother was only allowed 2s. 6d. per week and no flour and, further, I was called upon by the Aylsham Board of Guardians to contribute 1s. 3d. per week towards the sum allowed her by the Board, although I was only receiving 15s. per week with which to keep myself and my wife.

I also named several cases of extreme hardship of children being called upon to support their parents. I gave the cases of two agricultural labourers named Hazelwood, living at Baconsthorpe. Both

were married men with large families, one, I believe, had eight children. They were both summoned before the Cromer magistrates by the Erpingham Board of Guardians to show cause why they should not contribute towards the maintenance of their aged parents.

I was cross-examined on my evidence for some hours by Mr. Joseph Chamberlain. At the close of my examination I was thanked by the late King and the other members of the Commission for my evidence. The Commission held their sittings in the Queen's Robing Room in the House of Lords. When my evidence was published it caused quite a sensation in the country, and I think the report of this Commission hastened on the passing of the District and Parish Councils Act. About this time I grew so disgusted with the treatment meted out to my mother that I absolutely refused to contribute any more towards the sum granted her by them. I told the Board they could stop the miserable 2s. 6d. per week and this they did forthwith. My wife and I at once gave notice to the landlord of the cottage in which my mother had lived for fifty years, the rent of which we had paid between us, and I decided to take her to our home and look after her. My sister had the furniture with the exception of the bed on which my mother slept and an old chest of drawers. I kept my mother until she died on February 5, 1892, without receiving a penny from anyone.

In 1894 the Government brought in a Bill known as the District and Parish Councils Bill, which provided for the establishment of a Council in every parish having a population of 300 and over, and the placing of the obtaining of allotments for the working classes in the hands of the Council, together with the appointing of trustees for Parish Charities. It also sought to abolish all property qualification in election as Guardians. Mr. Z. Walker and I jointly entered into a campaign during the passage of the Bill through Parliament, Mr. Arch paying as many visits to the county as his parliamentary duties would permit. We also had the valuable assistance of the English Land Restoration League, as it was then called, Mr. Frederick Verinder being the General Secretary. The League sent down one of their vans and a lecturer.

The Trades Union Congress was held in Norwich this year (1894). I attended the Congress as delegate from the Norfolk and Norwich Amalgamated Labour League and moved a resolution on the tied cottage system.

At the end of the session the Bill became law, and by the instructions of my Executive I set about preparing to put the Act in force. I held meetings in every village where we had branches of the Union and explained the provisions of the Act. By the time the first meetings were held to elect the Parish Councils in many of our villages we had got our men ready and well posted up in the mode of procedure as to nominations and how to carry on.

The first meeting was held in December in the village in which I lived. We held a preliminary meeting in the schools to explain the Act. This meeting was attended by the Rev. W. W. Mills, the Rector of the parish, who caused some little amusement by his constant personal interjections. For some years for some reason he had shown a personal dislike to me, and he never lost an opportunity to manifest this spirit of dislike. What influenced him I never could understand, but he always seemed jealous of my influence in the village as a Nonconformist. A few days after this meeting was held the Rector came to my house to inform me that Mrs. Mills was being nominated as a candidate for the District Council, and I informed him that I was also being nominated. He expressed a wish that the contest might be friendly. I informed him that so far as I was concerned it would. He then accused me of being the cause of the meeting referred to above being disorderly, which I stoutly denied. He then called me a liar, and it looked for a few moments as if we were in for a scuffle, for I threatened to put him out of my house and began to take steps to do so. He at once rose from his seat and rushed to the door before I could lay hands on him, but in getting away he caught my hand in the door and knocked the skin off my knuckles. My wife was in the next room, and had she not appeared on the scene I do not know what would have happened. She got between us, took the Rector by the collar and put him out of the yard. This event caused some little excitement in the village.

At the meeting held for the election of Parish Councillors all the Labour members nominated were elected. We had nominated sufficient candidates to fill all the seats but one, and this was taken by Mr. Groom, the schoolmaster. The parish of Felbrigg was also joined to Aylmerton for the purpose of forming the Parish Council, and it became known as the Aylmerton-cum-Felbrigg Parish Council. At the first meeting of the Council I was elected chairman. I was also elected on the Beckham Parish Council on which I served for some years, and I was also one of the charity trustees. One of the first things we did on the Aylmerton Council was to obtain allotments for the labourers in the parishes of Aylmerton and Felbrigg. In fact, our enthusiasm to do something was so great that it was the cause of our undoing, for at the next election we all got defeated, and I took no more interest in the affairs of the parish while I lived there.

At the District Council election I beat my opponent by four votes. My wife was elected for the parish of East and West Beckham unopposed, Mr. Barker was elected for Sustead, Mr. T. Self for Felbrigg, Mr. Walter Towler for Edgefield and Mr. B. Johnson for Sheringham. Thus we started the new Erpingham District Council and Board of Guardians with six direct Labour representatives, which beat the record in all rural England. I was a member of this Council for eighteen years and my wife for ten years.

The reception we received at the first meeting of the Council was rather mixed. Many of the members were rather alarmed at so many Labour members being elected, particularly myself, whom they looked upon as being the leader of the group, and of course I was looked upon as being a rebel, out for revolution, to upset law and order, and to go in for most indiscriminate outdoor relief. Our arrival at the Board was rather late, and on entering the room we found all the other members present discussing the probable events of the day. As soon as I appeared in the room I saw some of the members point to me and remark, that I was "the fellow." Well, it was quite true, we were there for business and to make a great alteration in the administration of the Poor Law. On settling down to work we found the outdoor relief allowed by this Board was as follows: Aged couples, one stone of flour and 2s. 6d. per week, and in a few special cases 3s. per week; single persons, half a stone of flour and 1s. 6d. per week; young widow with family 6d. per week and half a stone of flour for all the children with the exception of one, which the widow was expected to keep as well as herself. We found another shameful practice in existence. If the late husband of the recipient was in a sick club, the widow was requested to show all her bills as evidence of how she had spent her husband's funeral money before any relief was granted.

This seems almost incredible, but it is true. We made an early attempt to alter this scandalous state of things, as the following account of a debate that took place will prove. Although we did not get the improvements we aimed at, still we made some advancement, and it encouraged us to aim very soon at other improvements. We Labour members made strict inquiries into the conditions of the poor. We also found in those days that the Relieving Officers had not advanced far from their predecessors in the treatment of the poor and would take any excuse to deprive the poor of relief. On going to the Board meeting one day my wife found that a poor sick and aged widow had had her relief stopped by the Relieving Officer, the excuse being that the woman had given birth to an illegitimate child. This the officer said he knew to be true as the woman had told him so. This astounded my wife, as she knew it was impossible for such a thing to have happened, and she undertook to investigate the matter. This she did, and was able to inform the Board that the so-called illegitimate child was thirty years of age, married, and a mother herself. Needless to say, we Labour members did not fail to denounce this cruel act for all we were worth and we got the poor woman her money put on again. The Relieving Officer was made to pay her her back money himself and never to come to the Board again with such a story.

The next question we tackled was the relief given in kind. We found that meat tickets ordered by the doctor had been refused in numbers of cases, so much so that the doctors had begun to complain. I raised the question on the Board and I found up a clause in the Poor Law Act that prohibited

the Guardians from refusing to give relief in kind ordered by the doctor. It caused a good deal of discussion, but we got the matter put right. The quality of the flour allowed to the poor next came under our notice. One week a poor widow living in my village brought me a loaf of bread she had made from the flour the Relieving Officer had left her that week. One could take the middle out and leave the crust standing like two walls. My wife gave the woman some of her own flour, took the other flour and made it into bread herself, with the same result. I took this bread, with a loaf my wife made from her own flour, to the meeting of the Guardians, and strange to say the Rev. Casson, living at Mundesley, fourteen miles from where I lived, also took some. We denounced this treatment and all kinds of excuses were forthcoming. During the discussion it came to light that the contractor was only a journeyman, and that he took the contract for his master. The result of this exposure was the stopping of all relief in kind so far as flour was concerned. The following report of the debate appeared in the *Eastern Weekly Leader*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.