



A Season of Happiness

nothing too serious

Popcorn



P05

THE GOOD OLD DAYS 2

The King's Shilling

In olden times, employers could be quite unscrupulous when it came to recruiting extra staff. We have all heard of the notorious press gang, a group of sailors who would scour the streets and ale houses of a port in search of likely candidates. Once found, they would be rendered unconscious courtesy of a deft tap on the pate, later finding themselves the unwitting crew-members of a ship that had already put to sea.

The Navy, of course, was a party to this crude and painful means of enlistment, but they also had a far more subtle and legal method, one shared by their land-lubber co-conspirator, the Army. Whenever a new recruit was enlisted, the one joining up was handed a coin, the King's shilling, acceptance of which was deemed to represent a binding contract between the individual and his new boss, His Majesty's Military Forces. Of course, not everyone



approached was interested in a job that meant being poorly paid for eventually getting killed, and a miserable shilling didn't make it any more attractive, so not many felt inclined to take it. There was a ploy, however, to trick even the wiliest into accepting the coin, and that was by dropping one into their tankard of ale when they weren't looking. As they downed the last drop, they would have felt something in their mouth and removed it to discover they were holding in their fingers a coin of the realm. They had accepted the

King's shilling and were now a soldier or sailor, like it or not! It wasn't long before manufacturers started putting clear glass in the bottoms of their tankards so that drinkers could see if there was anything other than beer in their mug. I imagine a few whose sight was blurred by drink would still have been caught. One would like to think they were permitted to spend their shilling on a couple of farewell noggins before they were carted off to the barracks.

The Right to Vote

Even today, not everyone has the right to vote for the government of their choice. In some countries, the privilege is still denied to specific groups of the population based on gender, race or creed. Presumably, when a current ruling class is responsible for the selection process, it might feel obliged to pass laws ensuring that power over the people is retained not necessarily by those best suited, but often by the self-serving old guard who would most likely lose their seats if every man and his dog had a say in their re-election. If this seems a bit unfair, take a step back in time and see how representatives of the people were decided 200 years ago.

In Britain, women weren't the only ones to miss out. Prior to the 1800's, the right to vote was initially limited to the ruling classes themselves, later being extended to merchants and landowners whose annual income was sufficient for them to be regarded as sympathetic; in effect, the men who knew which side their bread was buttered. Not only were there fewer voters by design, but some regions, in particular the industrial centres of the midlands, weren't represented in parliament at all; and yet, despite being abandoned years previously and since being unable to produce anything of real value, the medieval borough of Old Sarum had two MP's. They got in thanks to a massive turnout of voters - seven, actually - who were apparently not averse to accepting the odd bribe! Cornwall was another electorate allowed a questionable number of seats; and of the twenty-eight in total, ten of these were available to be purchased.

There was no consistency on a national basis, local laws dictating who could vote for a member of parliament. In thirty-nine of the boroughs, the right to vote went to the owners of "certain" properties, whereas in a further forty-three the town councils got to pick their man of choice. Every freeman was allowed his say in sixty-two other boroughs; but in the counties, freeholders had to be in the forty-shilling bracket before they could go to the ballot - and they would always be mindful of the local landowner's preference, because he was the one who could make their life easy, or quite the opposite if they ticked the wrong box.

These days, most of our adult population has the right to vote, but we accept this concession too casually. Our ancestors had to fight for the opportunity to elect their government, and would find it hard to understand our complacency. They might still, however, regard their struggle for equality as a priceless legacy for future generations; especially if they could only see what ordinary people have achieved by exercising their freedom of choice, see how different in comparison are their elected representatives, how forthright and honest are the modern day politicians... Ah, well. Maybe we'll get it right one day.

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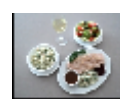
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