



## In Labour

*(more from David's adventures in London ...)*

As I mentioned last week, for the remainder of that winter in London, I found 'real' work instead of busking with my flute. Somebody told me about a 'labour exchange' area near Charing Cross Station, and I went down there one day to see how the system worked, and if I could find something interesting (and remunerative!) to do.

My first visit there was a complete bust. It must have been mid-day in the middle of the week; the waiting room of the office I visited was empty, and I learned the first rule about finding work - the early bird gets the worm. I was told that if I wanted work I would have to be there early in the morning - Monday morning - as that was when the week's jobs were distributed. Next Monday I returned, to a scene of chaos. The streets around the exchange offices were full of men lined up looking for work, and when, after working my way up one of the lines, and finally getting into the packed and smoky room, where men were shouting instructions and job offers to the crowd, I found myself at one of the windows. The man sized me up with a glance, took my name, and then shoved a slip of paper at me with a name and address on it. I didn't quite understand, but he quickly set me straight, "Just go to that address, and report to that man. Get going; you're already late!"

I got going. By the time I found the address, I was indeed late, and the people there were not happy. It was a winery, and my job for the next five days was going to be at a position in the packing department, operating a machine that glued labels onto wine bottles. Now that might sound like a bit of a cushy job - watching bottles passing through a machine - but this was long before the days of efficient automation; bottles didn't 'pass' through the machine, I had to put them in and take them out, one by one, and I had to do it at blinding speed, to keep up with the conveyor belt!

It was a two-handed job - one hand lifted a bare bottle from the incoming conveyor and put it into the machine, while at the same time the other hand pulled out the freshly-labelled one and placed in on the outgoing conveyor. A foot pedal had to be operated just at the precise moment, to activate the labelling mechanism. And did I mention these were full bottles? And not small delicate ones, but giant - and heavy! - bottles of cheap 'plonk'.

At first - of course - I was very slow, and the incoming conveyor became jammed up with unprocessed bottles. But it didn't take long to get into the swing of it, and I became able to keep my station running basically smoothly. There were dozens of us working at these stations around the room, and every few minutes you would hear the smash of breaking glass - and a curse - as somebody missed the input slot of the machine just ever-so-slightly, and the machine crushed the bottle instead of smoothly pasting on the label, sending wine cascading over the legs of the operator. I wasn't immune to such accidents, and in the evening, when I was riding the underground home, slumped in my seat exhausted from the long hours of non-stop labour, I am sure the other people in the car thought that I was a wino!

The job lasted - as all these jobs did - just for the course of the week; come Friday evening, I reported back to the exchange office, where I was paid off for the week's work. If I remember correctly, it was usually

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around 15 ~ 20 pounds, enough to keep me going for the next couple of weeks. When the money got low again, I returned to the exchange office early on a Monday, ready for a new assignment somewhere in the city.

It was a wonderful system; perhaps not the best way for a 'family man' to try and make a living, but just perfect for a carefree young man. I worked on building sites, in department stores, in factories, and even spent a week in a company where furs from Canada were unpacked from their bundles and prepared for auction.

I have no idea if these 'labour exchanges' still operate in London, but if they did, it would be interesting to head down to Charing Cross early one Monday morning ... I'd be guaranteed to find good material for 'A Story A Week'!

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