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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Charity

*Many Children and Little Bread is a Painful Pleasure.*



Agricultural wages were lower than all others in the middle of the nineteenth century. The poverty a farm worker endured was made worse by the Enclosures Acts, which excluded him from land on which formerly he would have kept livestock to help to feed his family. To add to his plight the Corn Law (instituted in 1815 and not abolished until 1845) stopped cheap wheat being imported into the country until British corn reached a certain price. As a consequence the price of bread rose to make it a luxury rather than a necessity. Farm workers and their families turned to potatoes as a substitute; but from 1845 onwards potato blight frequently ravaged crops. In the last quarter of Victoria's reign, farmers had even less incentive to pay wages to their workers. Cheap corn and meat imported from America and Australia had driven the British farming industry into a depression which continued until the First World War.

Given the above catalogue of disasters it is little wonder that charitable offerings from the kitchens of big country houses were eagerly accepted. These kitchens made large quantities of nourishing soup which was given to the sick and very poor. Milk puddings, calves foot jelly and occasionally fruit were also distributed. It was the custom in some villages for the family from the mansion to go to church in a pony cart. Before they set off the footman lifted into the back of the cart large, sealed soup containers. The soup was given out after church.

In most parishes the farm workers' children walked up to the mansion once a week. They collected scraps of food, left-over cake and dripping for their mother. The mansion kitchen also provided the cakes, jellies and sandwiches which were given at village school treats. At one Christmas party, which took place in a Devon village at the turn of the century, the children were given an extra treat. The lady from the big house was giving out the presents which were stacked beneath the tree. As she stooped the tree's lighted candles set the long feather in her hat on fire and there was great hilarity when the flames had to be extinguished by the footman with a sponge.