

# CHALLENGING EVIL



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Dispatches from  
the frontlines of  
Radical Justice

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**with Chapter  
Discussion Guides**

S. Carvosso Gauntlett

*and*

Cpt. Danielle Strickland

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## SWEATED LABOUR

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SOME folk, it appears, collect match-boxes and their labels. A teacher of languages resident in London is said to have 15,000 different match-box labels - from all over the world; though the 'queen' of this hobby evidently is a lady living in Surrey, whose collection is more than double as large: 35,000 labels!

Among this huge number, very probably, is one bearing the crest of The Salvation Army, and inscribed:

LIGHTS IN DARKEST ENGLAND

Security from. Fire-

Fair Wages for Fair Work.

The Salvation Army Social Wing.

To modern eyes the box would look rather large, perhaps clumsy;<sup>9</sup> but behind it lies a story that is worth recalling.

About the time when William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* was published, the making of matches was a far from pleasant

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The Army's Museum at Judd Street, King's Cross, has a sample or two.

occupation. Wages were low - 'sweated' - and working conditions dangerous. As in so many businesses, the welfare of the workers was scarcely considered, if only high profits and dividends could be secured. The matches were made in factories, where workers were paid on a piece-work basis, or in the poor people's 'homes' - singleroom tenements where men, women and children worked long hours, even on Sundays, to earn a few shillings.

Matches in those days were made with phosphorus, which had the advantage that you could strike them on any dry surface.<sup>10</sup> But phosphorus was poisonous. If it got to the gums or jaw it caused necrosis - commonly called 'phossy jaw' - which slowly ate away the jaw bones. This disease - also known as 'match-maker's leprosy' - was most painful and, of course, disfiguring. Quite young girls suffered agonies from this 'living death,' and despite operations lost health and their occupation.

The trouble arose, in the main, from the fact that the workers - most of them, it appears, women - ate without first washing their hands. Pay was so low that no time could be wasted, so folk worked on while they had their lunch or tea, and fingers dipped in phosphorus conveyed the poison to the mouth *via* the food taken.

Trade unions and others had protested, and various strikes had taken place. A number of people were striving to improve the terrible conditions. The Government issued regulations that factories must provide (a) hoods to protect the workers against the phosphorus fumes; (b) proper washing arrangements which must be used by workers before they partook of food.

That, of course, was an advance; but it did not effect very much until a model factory was established-an enterprise for which credit belongs to The Salvation Army.

In May, 1891, the Founder himself opened this match factory, situated in Lamprell Street, Old Ford, London, E. It produced only safety matches, which did away with all danger from phosphorus. The premises were comfortable, light and well-aired. About a hundred workers were employed. A room was set apart for the convenience of those who wished to make tea.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Safety matches were manufactured, but only in the proportion, approximately, of one to every thousand phosphorus matches.

<sup>11</sup> At midday a brief 'Meeting for prayer and praise' was held; attendance was, of course, voluntary, but

The wages paid to match-box makers by the big firms was 2¼d. or 2½d. per gross. The Salvation Army paid its workers 4d. per gross. This, as the Founder said, was 'a very considerable improvement,' made possible partly by the elimination of needless 'middlemen.' A shilling, of course, was worth far more than nowadays.

Working at the average rate, a first-class box-maker ... would earn 15s. a week as against, formerly, 9s. 4½d. A medium hand, producing twenty-five gross of boxes a week, earned 5s. 2½d. on the sweating scale, but would get 8s. 4d. from The Salvation Army.

The selling price of these safety matches - not yet produced in vast quantities-was only slightly dearer than of those made with phosphorus by the large manufacturers.

Up and down the country The Army's venture found support -from the press,<sup>12</sup> co-operatives and many business men. The chemistry professor at University College, London, spoke of The Army's matches as superior to others, and said: 'We use these matches alone.' The matches were being sold by the middle of 1891.<sup>13</sup>

The great British match manufacturers soon had to abandon their old, unhealthy methods and conditions, and adopt better rates of wages. A firm abroad, using the process by which The Army made its matches, put on the British market boxes with the Founder's picture! The Salvationist enterprise had the desired effect, and by the beginning of the twentieth century safety matches were the rule, and 'phossy jaw' was a matter of history.

The Army's factory was closed, and though this was but one venture in our battle for the rights of the poor, it is worthy of remembrance-next time you strike a match!

evidently averaged about thirty- 'real typical East-enders who sing most heartily,' as an early report states.

<sup>12</sup> One provincial paper offered six months' free advertisement; another hoped that 'the sweater has" met his match" in General Booth.'

<sup>13</sup> A large number were prepared for sale at The Army's great Crystal Palace Day on July 7th; just before the date, however, it was found that the Crystal Palace authorities would not allow this. Commissioner Cadman, then in charge of The Army's 'Darkest England' work, filled a quantity of boxes with dummy matches-splints only; these were sold at a penny each, so that friends could take away a specimen box .\*. to see the size, style of wrapper, etc. Actually they were in great demand.