Striking Hard
Deep Waters, Part 10.

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DEEP WATERS

By W.W. JACOBS

STRIKING HARD

"You've what?" demanded Mrs. Porter, placing the hot iron carefully on its stand and turning a heated face on the head of the family.

"Struck," repeated Mr. Porter; "and the only wonder to me is we've stood it so long as we have. If I was to tell you all we've 'ad to put up with I don't suppose you'd believe me."

"Very likely," was the reply. "You can keep your fairy-tales for them that like 'em. They're no good to me."

"We stood it till flesh and blood could stand it no longer," declared her husband, "and at last we came out, shoulder to shoulder, singing. The people cheered us, and one of our leaders made 'em a speech."

"I should have liked to 'ave heard the singing," remarked his wife. "If they all sang like you, it must ha' been as good as a pantermime! Do you remember the last time you went on strike?"

"This is different," said Mr. Porter, with dignity.

"All our things went, bit by bit," pursued his wife, "all the money we had put by for a rainy day, and we 'ad to begin all over again. What are we going to live on? O' course, you might earn something by singing in the street; people who like funny faces might give you something! Why not go upstairs and put your 'ead under the bed-clothes and practise a bit?"

Mr. Porter coughed. "It'll be all right," he said, confidently. "Our committee knows what it's about; Bert Robinson is one of the best speakers I've ever 'eard. If we don't all get five bob a week more I'll eat my 'ead."

"It's the best thing you could do with it," snapped his wife. She took up her iron again, and turning an obstinate back to his remarks resumed her work.

Mr. Porter lay long next morning, and, dressing with comfortable slowness, noticed with pleasure that the sun was shining. Visions of a good breakfast and a digestive pipe, followed by a walk in the fresh air, passed before his eyes as he laced his boots. Whistling cheerfully he went briskly downstairs.

It was an October morning, but despite the invigorating chill in the air the kitchen-grate was cold and dull. Herring-bones and a disorderly collection of dirty cups and platters graced the table. Perplexed and angry, he looked around for his wife, and then, opening the back-door, stood gaping with astonishment. The wife of his bosom, who should have had a bright fire and a good breakfast waiting for him, was sitting on a box in the sunshine, elbows on knees and puffing laboriously at a cigarette.

"Susan!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Porter turned, and, puffing out her lips, blew an immense volume of smoke. "Halloa!" she said, carelessly.

"Wot--wot does this mean?" demanded her husband.

Mrs. Porter smiled with conscious pride. "I made it come out of my nose just now," she replied. "At least, some of it did, and I swallowed the rest. Will it hurt me?"

"Where's my breakfast?" inquired the other, hotly. "Why ain't the kitchen-fire alight? Wot do you think you're doing of?"

"I'm not doing anything," said his wife, with an aggrieved air. "I'm on strike."

Mr. Porter reeled against the door-post. "Wot!" he stammered. "On strike? Nonsense! You can't be."

"O, yes, I can," retorted Mrs. Porter, closing one eye and ministering to it hastily with the corner of her apron. "Not 'aving no Bert Robinson to do it for me, I made a little speech all to myself, and here I am."

She dropped her apron, replaced the cigarette, and, with her hands on her plump knees, eyes him steadily.

"But--but this ain't a factory," objected the dismayed man; "and, besides

--I won't 'ave it!"

Mrs. Porter laughed--a fat, comfortable laugh, but with a touch of hardness in it.

"All right, mate," she said, comfortably. "What are you out on strike for?"

"Shorter hours and more money," said Mr. Porter, glaring at her.

His wife nodded. "So am I," she said. "I wonder who gets it first?"

She smiled agreeably at the bewildered Mr. Porter, and, extracting a paper packet of cigarettes from her pocket, lit a fresh one at the stub of the first.

"That's the worst of a woman," said her husband, avoiding her eye and addressing a sanitary dustbin of severe aspect; "they do things without thinking first. That's why men are superior; before they do a thing they look at it all round, and upside down, and--and--make sure it can be done. Now, you get up in a temper this morning, and the first thing you do--not even waiting to get my breakfast ready first--is to go on strike. If you'd thought for two minutes you'd see as 'ow it's impossible for you to go on strike for more than a couple of hours or so."

"Why?" inquired Mrs. Porter.

"Kids," replied her husband, triumphantly. "They'll be coming 'ome from school soon, won't they? And they'll be wanting their dinner, won't they?"

"That's all right," murmured the other, vaguely.

"After which, when night comes," pursued Mr. Porter, "they'll 'ave to be put to bed. In the morning they'll 'ave to be got up and washed and dressed and given their breakfast and sent off to school. Then there's shopping wot must be done, and beds wot must be made."

"I'll make ours," said his wife, decidedly. "For my own sake."

"And wot about the others?" inquired Mr. Porter.

"The others'll be made by the same party as washes the children, and cooks their dinner for 'em, and puts 'em to bed, and cleans the 'ouse," was the reply.

"I'm not going to have your mother 'ere," exclaimed Mr. Porter, with sudden heat. "Mind that!"

"I don't want her," said Mrs. Porter. "It's a job for a strong, healthy man, not a pore old thing with swelled legs and short in the breath."

"Strong--'ealthy--man!" repeated her husband, in a dazed voice. "Strong--'eal---- Wot are you talking about?"

Mrs. Porter beamed on him. "You," she said, sweetly.

There was a long silence, broken at last by a firework display of expletives. Mrs. Porter, still smiling, sat unmoved.

"You may smile!" raved the indignant Mr. Porter. "You may sit there smiling and smoking like a--like a man, but if you think that I'm going to get the meals ready, and soil my 'ands with making beds and washing-up, you're mistook. There's some 'usbands I know as would set about you!"

Mrs. Porter rose. "Well, I can't sit here gossiping with you all day," she said, entering the house.

"Wot are you going to do?" demanded her husband, following her.

"Going to see Aunt Jane and 'ave a bit o' dinner with her," was the reply. "And after that I think I shall go to the 'pictures.' If you 'ave bloaters for dinner be very careful with little Jemmy and the bones."

"I forbid you to leave this 'ouse !" said Mr. Porter, in a thrilling voice. "If you do you won't find nothing done when you come home, and all the kids dirty and starving."

"Cheerio!" said Mrs. Porter.

Arrayed in her Sunday best she left the house half an hour later. A glance over her shoulder revealed her husband huddled up in a chair in the dirty kitchen, gazing straight before him at the empty grate.

He made a hearty breakfast at a neighbouring coffee-shop, and, returning home, lit the fire and sat before it, smoking. The return of the four children from school, soon after midday, found him still wrestling with the difficulties of the situation. His announcement that their mother was out and that there would be no dinner was received at first in stupefied silence. Then Jemmy, opening his mouth to its widest extent, acted as conductor to an all-too-willing chorus.

The noise was unbearable, and Mr. Porter said so. Pleased with the tribute, the choir re-doubled its efforts, and Mr. Porter, vociferating orders for silence, saw only too clearly the base advantage his wife had taken of his affection for his children. He took some money from his pocket and sent the leading treble out marketing, after which, with the assistance of a soprano aged eight, he washed up the breakfast things and placed one of them in the dustbin.

The entire family stood at his elbow as he cooked the dinner, and watched, with bated breath, his frantic efforts to recover a sausage which had fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire. A fourfold sigh of relief heralded its return to the pan.

"Mother always--" began the eldest boy.

Mr. Porter took his scorched fingers out of his mouth and smacked the critic's head.

The dinner was not a success. Portions of half-cooked sausages returned to the pan, and coming back in the guise of cinders failed to find their rightful owners.

"Last time we had sausages," said the eight-year-old Muriel, "they melted in your mouth." Mr. Porter glowered at her.

"Instead of in the fire," said the eldest boy, with a mournful snigger.

"If I get up to you, my lad," said the harassed Mr. Porter, "you'll know it! Pity you don't keep your sharpness for your lessons! Wot country is Africa in?"

"Why, Africa's a continent!" said the startled youth.

"Jes so," said his father; "but wot I'm asking you is: wot country is it in?"

"Asia," said the reckless one, with a side-glance at Muriel.

"And why couldn't you say so before?" demanded Mr. Porter, sternly. "Now, you go to the sink and give yourself a thorough good wash. And mind you come straight home from school. There's work to be done."

He did some of it himself after the children had gone, and finished up the afternoon with a little shopping, in the course of which he twice changed his grocer and was threatened with an action for slander by his fishmonger. He returned home with his clothes bulging, although a couple of eggs in the left-hand coat-pocket had done their best to accommodate themselves to his figure.

He went to bed at eleven o'clock, and at a quarter past, clad all too lightly for the job, sped rapidly downstairs to admit his wife.

"Some 'usbands would 'ave let you sleep on the doorstep all night," he said, crisply.

"I know they would," returned his wife, cheerfully. "That's why I married you. I remember the first time I let you come 'ome with me, mother ses: 'There ain't much of 'im, Susan,' she ses; 'still, arf a loaf is better than--'"

The bedroom-door slammed behind the indignant Mr. Porter, and the three lumps and a depression which had once been a bed received his quivering frame again. With the sheet obstinately drawn over his head he turned a deaf ear to his wife's panegyrics on striking and her heartfelt tribute to the end of a perfect day. Even when standing on the cold floor while she remade the bed he maintained an attitude of unbending dignity, only relaxing when she smote him light-heartedly with the bolster. In a few ill-chosen words he expressed his opinion of her mother and her deplorable methods of bringing up her daughters.

He rose early next morning, and, after getting his own breakfast, put on his cap and went out, closing the street-door with a bang that awoke the entire family and caused the somnolent Mrs. Porter to open one eye for the purpose of winking with it. Slowly, as became a man of leisure, he strolled down to the works, and, moving from knot to knot of his colleagues, discussed the prospects of victory. Later on, with a little natural diffidence, he drew Mr. Bert Robinson apart and asked his advice upon a situation which was growing more and more difficult.

"I've got my hands pretty full as it is, you know," said Mr. Robinson, hastily.

"I know you 'ave, Bert," murmured the other. "But, you see, she told me last night she's going to try and get some of the other chaps' wives to join 'er, so I thought I ought to tell you."

Mr. Robinson started. "Have you tried giving her a hiding?" he inquired.

Mr. Porter shook his head. "I daren't trust myself," he replied. "I might go too far, once I started."

"What about appealing to her better nature?" inquired the other.

"She ain't got one," said the unfortunate. "Well, I'm sorry for you," said Mr. Robinson, "but I'm busy. I've got to see a Labour-leader this afternoon, and two reporters, and this evening there's the meeting. Try kindness first, and if that don't do, lock her up in her bedroom and keep her on bread and water."

He moved off to confer with his supporters, and Mr. Porter, after wandering aimlessly about for an hour or two, returned home at mid-day with a faint hope that his wife might have seen the error of her ways and provided dinner for him. He found the house empty and the beds unmade.

The remains of breakfast stood on the kitchen-table, and a puddle of cold tea decorated the floor. The arrival of the children from school, hungry and eager, completed his discomfiture.

For several days he wrestled grimly with the situation, while Mrs. Porter, who had planned out her week into four days of charing, two of amusement, and Sunday in bed, looked on with smiling approval. She even offered to give him a little instruction--verbal--in scrubbing the kitchen-floor.

Mr. Porter, who was on his knees at the time, rose slowly to his full height, and, with a superb gesture, emptied the bucket, which also contained a scrubbing-brush and lump of soap, into the back-yard. Then he set off down the street in quest of a staff.

He found it in the person of Maudie Stevens, aged fourteen, who lived a few doors lower down. Fresh from school the week before, she cheerfully undertook to do the housework and cooking, and to act as nursemaid in her spare time. Her father, on his part, cheerfully under-took to take care of her wages for her, the first week's, payable in advance, being banked the same evening at the Lord Nelson.

It was another mouth to feed, but the strike-pay was coming in very well, and Mr. Porter, relieved from his unmanly tasks, walked the streets a free man. Beds were made without his interference, meals were ready (roughly) at the appointed hour, and for the first time since the strike he experienced satisfaction in finding fault with the cook. The children's content was not so great, Maudie possessing a faith in the virtues of soap and water that they made no attempt to share. They were greatly relieved when their mother returned home after spending a couple of days with Aunt Jane.

"What's all this?" she demanded, as she entered the kitchen, followed by a lady-friend.

"What's all what?" inquired Mr. Porter, who was sitting at dinner with the family.

"That," said his wife, pointing at the cook-general.

Mr. Porter put down his knife and fork. "Got 'er in to help," he replied, uneasily.

"Do you hear that?" demanded his wife, turning to her friend, Mrs. Gorman. "Oh, these masters!"

"Ah!" said her friend, vaguely.

"A strike-breaker!" said Mrs. Porter, rolling her eyes.

"Shame!" said Mrs. Gorman, beginning to understand.

"Coming after my job, and taking the bread out of my mouth," continued Mrs. Porter, fluently. "Underselling me too, I'll be bound. That's what comes of not having pickets."

"Unskilled labour," said Mrs. Gorman, tightening her lips and shaking her head.

"A scab!" cried Mrs. Porter, wildly. "A scab!"

"Put her out," counselled her friend.

"Put her out!" repeated Mrs. Porter, in a terrible voice. "Put her out! I'll tear her limb from limb! I'll put her in the copper and boil her!"

Her voice was so loud and her appearance so alarming that the unfortunate Maudie, emitting three piercing shrieks, rose hastily from the table and looked around for a way of escape. The road to the front-door was barred, and with a final yelp that set her employer's teeth on edge she dashed into the yard and went home via the back-fences. Housewives busy in their kitchens looked up in amazement at the spectacle of a pair of thin black legs descending one fence, scudding across the yard to the accompaniment of a terrified moaning, and scrambling madly over the other. At her own back-door Maudie collapsed on the step, and, to the intense discomfort and annoyance of her father, had her first fit of hysterics.

"And the next scab that comes into my house won't get off so easy," said Mrs. Porter to her husband. "D'you understand?"

"If you 'ad some husbands--" began Mr. Porter, trembling with rage.

"Yes, I know," said his wife, nodding. "Don't cry, Jemmy," she added, taking the youngest on her knee. "Mother's only having a little game. She and dad are both on strike for more pay and less work."

Mr. Porter got up, and without going through the formality of saying good-bye to the hard-featured Mrs. Gorman, put on his cap and went out. Over a couple of half-pints taken as a sedative, he realized the growing seriousness of his position.

In a dull resigned fashion he took up his household duties again, made harder now than before by the scandalous gossip of the aggrieved Mr. Stevens. The anonymous present of a much-worn apron put the finishing touch to his discomfiture; and the well-meant offer of a fair neighbour to teach him how to shake a mat without choking himself met with a reception that took her breath away.

It was a surprise to him one afternoon to find that his wife had so far unbent as to tidy up the parlour. Ornaments had been dusted and polished and the carpet swept. She had even altered the position of the furniture. The table had been pushed against the wall, and the easy-chair, with its back to the window, stood stiffly confronting six or seven assorted chairs, two of which at least had been promoted from a lower sphere.

"It's for the meeting," said Muriel, peeping in.

"Meeting?" repeated her father, in a dazed voice.

"Strike-meetings," was the reply. "Mrs. Gorman and some other ladies are coming at four o'clock. Didn't mother tell you?"

Mr. Porter, staring helplessly at the row of chairs, shook his head.

"Mrs. Evans is coming," continued Muriel, in a hushed voice--"the lady what punched Mr. Brown because he kept Bobbie Evans in one day. He ain't been kept in since. I wish you----"

She stopped suddenly, and, held by her father's gaze, backed slowly out of the room. Mr. Porter, left with the chairs, stood regarding them thoughtfully. Their emptiness made an appeal that no right-minded man could ignore. He put his hand over his mouth and his eyes watered.

He spent the next half-hour in issuing invitations, and at half-past three every chair was filled by fellow-strikers. Three cans of beer, clay pipes, and a paper of shag stood on the table. Mr. Benjamin Todd, an obese, fresh-coloured gentleman of middle age, took the easy-chair. Glasses and teacups were filled.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Todd, lighting his pipe, "afore we get on to the business of this meeting I want to remind you that there is another meeting, of ladies, at four o'clock; so we've got to hurry up. O' course, if it should happen that we ain't finished----"

"Go on, Bennie!" said a delighted admirer. "I see a female 'ead peeping in at the winder already," said a voice.

"Let 'em peep," said Mr. Todd, benignly. "Then p'r'aps they'll be able to see how to run a meeting."

"There's two more 'eads," said the other. "Oh, Lord, I know I sha'n't be able to keep a straight face!"

"H'sh!" commanded Mr. Todd, sternly, as the street-door was heard to open. "Be'ave yourself. As I was saying, the thing we've got to consider about this strike----"

The door opened, and six ladies, headed by Mrs. Porter, entered the room in single file and ranged themselves silently along the wall.

"Strike," proceeded Mr. Todd, who found himself gazing uneasily into the eyes of Mrs. Gorman----"strike--er--strike----"

"He said that before," said a stout lady, in a loud whisper; "I'm sure he did."

"Is," continued Mr. Todd, "that we have got to keep this--this--er--"

"Strike," prompted the same voice.

Mr. Todd paused, and, wiping his mouth with a red pocket-handkerchief, sat staring straight before him.

"I move," said Mrs. Evans, her sharp features twitching with excitement, "that Mrs. Gorman takes the chair."

"'Ow can I take it when he's sitting in it?" demanded that lady.

"She's a lady that knows what she wants and how to get it," pursued Mrs. Evans, unheeding. "She understands men--"

"I've buried two 'usbands," murmured Mrs. Gorman, nodding.

"And how to manage them," continued Mrs. Evans. "I move that Mrs. Gorman takes the chair. Those in favour--"

Mr. Todd, leaning back in his chair and gripping the arms, gazed defiantly at a row of palms.

"Carried unanimously!" snapped Mrs. Evans.

Mrs. Gorman, tall and bony, advanced and stood over Mr. Todd. Strong men held their breath.

"It's my chair," she said, gruffly. "I've been moved into it."

"Possession," said Mr. Todd, in as firm a voice as he could manage, "is nine points of the law. I'm here and--"

Mrs. Gorman turned, and, without the slightest warning, sat down suddenly and heavily in his lap. A hum of admiration greeted the achievement.

"Get up!" shouted the horrified Mr. Todd. "Get up!"

Mrs. Gorman settled herself more firmly.

"Let me get up," said Mr. Todd, panting.

Mrs. Gorman rose, but remained in a hovering position, between which and the chair Mr. Todd, flushed and dishevelled, extricated himself in all haste. A shrill titter of laughter and a clapping of hands greeted his appearance. He turned furiously on the pallid Mr. Porter.

"What d'you mean by it?" he demanded. "Are you the master, or ain't you? A man what can't keep order in his own house ain't fit to be called a man. If my wife was carrying on like this----"

"I wish I was your wife," said Mrs. Gorman, moistening her lips.

Mr. Todd turned slowly and surveyed her.

"I don't," he said, simply, and, being by this time near the door, faded gently from the room.

"Order!" cried Mrs. Gorman, thumping the arm of her chair with a large, hard-working fist. "Take your seats, ladies."

A strange thrill passed through the bodies of her companions and communicated itself to the men in the chairs. There was a moment's tense pause, and then the end man, muttering something about "going to see what had happened to poor old Ben Todd," rose slowly and went out. His companions, with heads erect and a look of cold disdain upon their faces, followed him.

It was Mr. Porter's last meeting, but his wife had several more. They lasted, in fact, until the day, a fortnight later, when he came in with flushed face and sparkling eyes to announce that the strike was over and the men victorious.

"Six bob a week more!" he said, with enthusiasm. "You see, I was right to strike, after all."

Mrs. Porter eyed him. "I am out for four bob a week more," she said, calmly.

Her husband swallowed. "You--you don't understand 'ow these things are done," he said, at last. "It takes time. We ought to ne--negotiate."

"All right," said Mrs. Porter, readily. "Seven shillings a week, then."

"Let's say four and have done with it," exclaimed the other, hastily.

And Mrs. Porter said it.

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