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STRIKING HARD

William Wymark Jacobs
Striking Hard

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Striking Hard / Deep Waters, Part 10.:*

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W. W. Jacobs

Striking Hard / Deep Waters, Part 10

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."

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