

THE STRIKE AT PARTINGTON'S.

Jim Wishart was secretary of the Dollybridge Millworkers' Union, and on that account it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should drop in of an evening at Pete Carlow's to smoke a pipe and discuss matters affecting the welfare of the association, to say nothing of the opportunities which thus sometimes cropped up for a delightful chat with Nellie, Pete's winsome daughter. Indeed—and Jim always blushed when the thought occurred to him—but for love of Nell he would have refused point-blank to become involved in the active work of the union, for he believed that the toiler of Dollybridge had not then—and never would have so long as Mr. Partington lived—and real justification for instituting protective measures.

For more than twenty years the relations between the millowner and his workpeople had been ideal, and it was only with the advent of a swarthy, sinister-looking man named Alf Slocum into the secluded world of Dollybridge that the first cloud appeared on the industrial horizon. Whence he came no one knew. He had appeared a dilapidated tramp six months before the date of our story, had secured work in the mill, and proceeded to sow discontent around him.

Pete Carlow fell an easy victim to Slocum's fascinating doctrine, and the moment the idea of a union was suggested he went enthusiastically to work, calling a mass meeting of the workmen, and in half an hour the union was an accomplished fact, with himself as chairman and Jim Wishart, who at the moment was thinking more of a woman's smile than the rights of man, as secretary.

One evening Jim had gone home from the mill unconscious of anything having occurred to seriously endanger the existing relations between master and men, and after tea found himself, as usual, cheerfully whistling his way down the street on his way to Carlow's house. It was dusk, and a man, carrying a bag, approached—a straight, soldier-like figure, who peered into Jim's face, then stopped and held out his hand.

"Thought 'twas you, Jim. How are you, old chap?"

"Ned Peaseley?" cried Jim, surprised, shaking heartily the proffered hand. "Jolly glad to see you again. But where did you drop from? I never heard you were coming home."

"I hardly knew myself," laughed Peaseley. "My time expired, just as the war was comfortably finished, but, as you know, I stayed on for a bit with the idea of finding a crib as soon as things had shaken down into the old groove. But after a couple of years veldt-tramping a fellow does sigh for a look at an English meadow. Then there's mother—how is she, Jim?"

"Well and hearty, Ned, I'm glad to say," answered Jim.

"Thanks for that, old chap. I've got some hair-raisers to tell you, but you'll excuse me tonight."

They parted, and Jim resumed his way to Carlow's. Nellie was standing on the doorstep with a shawl over her head, and the moment he appeared she came eagerly to meet him.

"Why, Nell, lass," he said, as he folded his arms about her, "this is indeed nice of you. Were you really waiting for me?"

"Yes, Jim, dear; and if you'll stop kissing me—now, you must—I'll tell you why. I'm awfully worried."

Something in the tone vaguely alarmed Jim. "Yes? Tell me, then, lass," he said, peering into his sweetheart's upturned face. Tense anxiety, even fear, was plainly visible there. Besides, she was trembling in his arms.

"Something happened at the mill tonight, Jim, after you left," she said. "Slocum"—Jim started violently—"yes, Alf Slocum got into a row with the foreman and knocked him down. Mr. Partington saw him do it and dismissed him on the spot. Oh, Jim, I'm afraid to think of what may be the upshot. Slocum's raging mad. He's upstairs with dad now, and they have sent Tommy round to call a meeting of the union committee for tonight. They are waiting for you—the two of them—and I came out to tell you about it first. What's to be done, Jim? Don't let them strike, for that's what Slocum wants."

Jim smiled reassuringly. Said he: "Strike because Slocum has got what he deserves? Our chaps are not such fools. I tell you he's a born skulker—the sort that never did an honest day's work; unless, maybe, 'twere in prison with the warden looking on. No, no, lass; we don't strike for such as he."

"I wish I could think with you, Jim," said the girl, sighing; "but dad's siding with him, and you know what that means."

For all his brave words Jim Wishart groaned inwardly as he mounted the stair, for he knew that if Pete used his influence with the men in Slocum's favor, as appeared likely from Nell's words, the affair might soon become serious enough.

Pete was listening with a flushed and frowning face, while Slocum slashed the air with his arms, denouncing masters in general and Mr. Partington in particular, in strong

terms. Pete greeted Jim with a nod of relief. "Ha, lad," he said, "we've got business on hand now." Then he rapidly repeated the substance of Nell's story. "Now," he concluded, with a grim laugh, "let's go down to the institute, and, by Lucifer, Mr. Partington'll soon find out that we're both fit and willing to stand up for our rights!"

Jim made no comment, and presently the three men sallied forth and made for the committee room, around which a noisy and excited crowd had assembled—men, women and children seizing and absorbing eagerly every bit of information that was flying about, and feeling in a vague, indefinite way that Mr. Partington, whom they had hitherto regarded as their best friend, was in reality a slave-driving tyrant, grown supercilious and haughty because of the wealth which their hearts' blood had earned.

That was the feeling which dominated the meeting of the committee. Jim Wishart urged moderation, and in consequence came in for many menacing scowls from Slocum; but his counsel was utterly disregarded, and he grew sick and angry when it was resolved to present Mr. Partington with an ultimatum at the breakfast hour next morning, the terms of which were, in effect, that work would instantly cease pending Slocum's reinstatement; the chairman, a young firebrand named Wilde, and Jim Wishart being appointed delegates.

At this Jim rose. "Mates," he said, sternly, "I'll be no party to such foolery. I hold Mr. Partington was in the fight, and—"

A jeering laugh from Slocum interrupted him. "There's a chicken-heart for you, gents. I votes we chuck 'im out so's he can go right away to the big 'ouse and lick 'is guv'nor's boots!"

Jim flashed round and let drive his fist straight across the table at Slocum, who ducked, and in an instant Jim was struggling helplessly in the grasp of two powerful pairs of arms.

"Jim Wishart," said Pete, coldly, "I reckoned you was a man that could be trusted to stand by his mates in a time like this. I see I was mistaken. You're no friend of me and mine after this—d'you hear?—mine! You can clear out, and my advice to you is to quit Dollybridge for good!"

Mr. Partington, a silver-haired old gentleman with a firm mouth, and eyes that twinkled good-humouredly behind his spectacles, received the delegates genially.

"You wish to have a talk with me? Certainly, gentleman. Glad to have you come direct to me when anything goes wrong." He rubbed his hands together with a pleased chuckle.

Pete Carlow suddenly felt his courage begin to ooze away under Mr. Partington's mild, inquiring glance. He strove angrily with the weakness, then plunged desperately into the all-important subject. "We've come to talk about Alf Slocum's affair," he began, lamely.

"Ha, I'm glad of that," said the millowner. "It gratifies me to know that our sentiments agree in the matter, and I take it that you wish to express the sympathy of your fellows with poor Robinson, who, I may say, is rather seriously hurt."

Pete's companions grinned uneasily at each other; this was hardly what they had bargained for. Pete himself turned purple.

"N—no," he stammered. "We didn't come for that at all. We are here representing the Millworkers' Union to state a grievance."

"Oh! Well, pray continue."

Pete cleared his throat. "We want to know why you sacked Slocum," he said. "He's one of us, and the men, through me, say they won't have him, nor no one, sacked without having a say in it—might be anyone's turn next since this sort of thing's begun."

Pete paused and nervously wiped his brow, while Mr. Partington eyed each of the shuffling delegates in turn with a smile.

"Dear me! dear me!" he said; "this is a most regrettable matter—unprecedented, indeed, in our annals. But really, Mr. Carlow and gentleman, I hardly think this is a question that affects your interests in the slightest. I fancy I engaged the man and paid his wages. You will surely admit that?"

"Of course you did, sir."

"Thanks! That admitted, you can hardly question my right to dismiss him when I choose, more especially when I find him shirking the work he is paid for doing, using physical violence against the foreman when called in question for skulking, and doing his best generally to destroy the harmony which has all along existed between us."

"That's not the question, sir," said Pete, hotly. "We must have Slocum back. He's outside now ready to start, and we're deputed to say that if you refuse our request we stop work until you change your mind."

Mr. Partington's lips chipped together.

"In plain English—strike!" he said, slowly. His face saddened, then he leant forward and resumed: "Have you considered what your resolve may entail upon your wives and children? I think not. But I have. Listen! You are aware we have been working an hour per day less for three weeks past. Do you

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know that every other manufacturer in the county is working half-time only? Do you know that for months my stock of goods has been steadily accumulating; that I couldn't sell out just now, and I'm afraid for many months to come, at the cost of the material? Do you know that I am keeping the place going at present at a cost to myself of, roughly, a hundred pounds weekly? Of course, you don't but I wish to be quite frank with you. Do not let me drain you now, but if by the dinner hour you have found no cause to alter your plans the gates will be closed, to open again—Heaven only knows when."

He waved his hand, and the delegates retired, crestfallen and angry.

Around the mill gates the men were assembled to await the result of the fateful interview. Not quietly, for the situation was a novel one to them, and they discussed the pros and cons of it with vehement gestures and noisy tongues.

Jim Wishart was in the centre of an excited group, reasoning, exhorting; aye, pleading with them to refrain from pushing the matter to extremes for so slight a cause—for no cause at all, indeed. To no purpose. Jim's action of last night they held to be both cowardly and treacherous; and black, threatening looks and blatant cries of "Turncoat!" "Traitor!" and the like were showered upon him from all sides. He quickly grew excited under the storm of epithets, and they began to hustle him. It might have gone hard with Jim, but just then a stalwart figure burst through the ring and took his place beside him. It was Ned Peaseley, looking cool and business-like, with a glint of steel in his eyes.

"The fellows who try to maltreat Jim Wishart have got to do the same to me," he said, "and I reckon I won't be standing idle at the time. Seems to me Jim's showing you the straight course, and you're fools if you don't take it. What's the row about, anyway? If Slocum had been in the Army and knocked down his officer he'd ha' got a sight more than his walking ticket, and serve him jolly well right. Stand back, I say. Ah, would you, Abe Jenkins? If you will have it, here goes!"

There came a rush, and with his cautionary words Ned placed his back to Jim's and proceeded, with the utmost cheerfulness, to hit out; Jim, goaded to frenzy, doing likewise. The human wave recoiled; but suddenly a stone, slung with reckless venom by Slocum, who from the skirts of the crowd had been watching for an opening, hurtled through the air, struck Jim on the temple, and sent him reeling. Ned wheeled and put an arm about him.

"I'm all right, Ned," was his reply to Peaseley's inquiry. Then Ned faced the mob with the glare of a lion, and told them his estimate of them in the choicest barrack-room language, before whose scathing virulence they slunk away ashamed. Not an eye met his, and the delegates appearing at that moment there was a general rush and the friends were left alone.

Ned immediately led Jim to a seat and bound up the wound—an ugly gash—with his handkerchief.

"How do you feel now, lad," he said, sympathetically.

"A bit groggy, that's all; but who's that speaking? Pete? What's he saying?"

"Never you mind, old chap. Just you sit here. I'm going to find the coward who threw that stone, and if I don't wipe the floor with him—Halloo! Great heavens, who's that beside Carlow. Tell me, Jim?"

"That's Slocum," he said, "the man they're going to strike for."

"Slocum! Slocum! No, not that!" Ned's eyes were riveted fiercely intent upon Slocum's face. "He reminds me of—oh, if he'd speak I'd know in a moment. And he's going to, by Jupiter! Listen!"

To their ears came the strident voice of Slocum: "Gents, the great moment has come, and—"

Ned sprang to his feet with a grasp.

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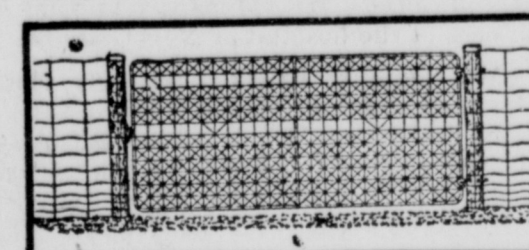
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