

GALSWORTHY

JOHN

STRIFE

John Galsworthy

Strife

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John Galsworthy

Strife: A Drama in Three Acts

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

JOHN ANTHONY, Chairman of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works
EDGAR ANTHONY, his Son

FREDERIC H. WILDER, |
WILLIAM SCANTLEBURY, | Directors Of the same
OLIVER WANKLIN, |

HENRY TENCH, Secretary of the same
FRANCIS UNDERWOOD, C.E., Manager of the same

DAVID ROBERTS, |
JAMES GREEN, |
JOHN BULGIN, | the workmen's committee
HENRY THOMAS, |
GEORGE ROUS, |

HENRY ROUS, |
LEWIS, |
JAGO, | workman at the Trenartha Tin Plate
EVANS, |
Works
A BLACKSMITH, |
DAVIES, |
A RED-HAIRED YOUTH. |
BROWN |

FROST, valet to John Anthony
ENID UNDERWOOD, Wife of Francis Underwood, daughter of John Anthony
ANNIE ROBERTS, wife of David Roberts
MADGE THOMAS, daughter of Henry Thomas
MRS. ROUS, mother of George and Henry Rous
MRS. BULGIN, wife of John Bulgin
MRS. YEO, wife of a workman
A PARLOURMAID to the Underwoods
JAN, Madge's brother, a boy of ten
A CROWD OF MEN ON STRIKE
ACT I. The dining-room of the Manager's house.
ACT II,
SCENE I. The kitchen of the Roberts's cottage near the works.
SCENE II. A space outside the works.
ACT III. The drawing-room of the Manager's house.

The action takes place on February 7th between the hours of noon and six in the afternoon, close to the Trenartha Tin Plate Works, on the borders of England and Wales, where a strike has been in progress throughout the winter.

ACT I

It is noon. In the Underwoods' dining-room a bright fire is burning. On one side of the fireplace are double-doors leading to the drawing-room, on the other side a door leading to the hall. In the centre of the room a long dining-table without a cloth is set out as a Board table. At the head of it, in the Chairman's seat, sits JOHN ANTHONY, an old man, big, clean-shaven, and high-coloured, with thick white hair, and thick dark eyebrows. His movements are rather slow and feeble, but his eyes are very much alive. There is a glass of water by his side. On his right sits his son EDGAR, an earnest-looking man of thirty, reading a newspaper. Next him WANKLIN, a man with jutting eyebrows, and silver-streaked light hair, is bending over transfer papers. TENCH, the Secretary, a short and rather humble, nervous man, with side whiskers, stands helping him. On WANKLIN'S right sits UNDERWOOD, the Manager, a quiet man, with long, stiff jaw, and steady eyes. Back to the fire is SCANTLEBURY, a very large, pale, sleepy man, with grey hair, rather bald. Between him and the Chairman are two empty chairs.

WILDER. [Who is lean, cadaverous, and complaining, with drooping grey moustaches, stands before the fire.] I say, this fire's the devil! Can I have a screen, Tench?

SCANTLEBURY. A screen, ah!

TENCH. Certainly, Mr. Wilder. [He looks at UNDERWOOD.] That is – perhaps the Manager – perhaps Mr. Underwood —

SCANTLEBURY. These fireplaces of yours, Underwood —

UNDERWOOD. [Roused from studying some papers.] A screen? Rather! I'm sorry. [He goes to the door with a little smile.] We're not accustomed to complaints of too much fire down here just now.

[He speaks as though he holds a pipe between his teeth, slowly, ironically.]

WILDER. [In an injured voice.] You mean the men. H'm!

[UNDERWOOD goes out.]

SCANTLEBURY. Poor devils!

WILDER. It's their own fault, Scantlebury.

EDGAR. [Holding out his paper.] There's great distress among them, according to the Trenartha News.

WILDER. Oh, that rag! Give it to Wanklin. Suit his Radical views. They call us monsters, I suppose. The editor of that rubbish ought to be shot.

EDGAR. [Reading.] "If the Board of worthy gentlemen who control the Trenartha Tin Plate Works from their arm-chairs in London would condescend to come and see for themselves the conditions prevailing amongst their work-people during this strike — "

WILDER. Well, we have come.

EDGAR. [Continuing.] "We cannot believe that even their leg-of-mutton hearts would remain untouched."

[WANKLIN takes the paper from him.]

WILDER. Ruffian! I remember that fellow when he had n't a penny to his name; little snivel of a chap that's made his way by black-guarding everybody who takes a different view to himself.

[ANTHONY says something that is not heard.]

WILDER. What does your father say?

EDGAR. He says "The kettle and the pot."

WILDER. H'm!

[He sits down next to SCANTLEBURY.]

SCANTLEBURY. [Blowing out his cheeks.] I shall boil if I don't get that screen.

[UNDERWOOD and ENID enter with a screen, which they place before the fire. ENID is tall; she has a small, decided face, and is twenty-eight years old.]

ENID. Put it closer, Frank. Will that do, Mr. Wilder? It's the highest we've got.

WILDER. Thanks, capitally.

SCANTLEBURY. [Turning, with a sigh of pleasure.] Ah! Merci, Madame!

ENID. Is there anything else you want, Father? [ANTHONY shakes his head.] Edgar – anything?

EDGAR. You might give me a "J" nib, old girl.

ENID. There are some down there by Mr. Scantlebury.

SCANTLEBURY. [Handing a little box of nibs.] Ah! your brother uses "J's." What does the manager use? [With expansive politeness.] What does your husband use, Mrs. Underwood?

UNDERWOOD. A quill!

SCANTLEBURY. The homely product of the goose. [He holds out quills.]

UNDERWOOD. [Drily.] Thanks, if you can spare me one. [He takes a quill.] What about lunch, Enid?

ENID. [Stopping at the double-doors and looking back.] We're going to have lunch here, in the drawing-room, so you need n't hurry with your meeting.

[WANKLIN and WILDER bow, and she goes out.]

SCANTLEBURY. [Rousing himself, suddenly.] Ah! Lunch! That hotel – Dreadful! Did you try the whitebait last night? Fried fat!

WILDER. Past twelve! Are n't you going to read the minutes, Tench?

TENCH. [Looking for the CHAIRMAN'S assent, reads in a rapid and monotonous voice.] "At a Board Meeting held the 31st of January at the Company's Offices, 512, Cannon Street, E.C. Present – Mr. Anthony in the chair, Messrs. F. H. Wilder, William Scantlebury, Oliver Wanklin, and Edgar Anthony. Read letters from the Manager dated January 20th, 23d, 25th, 28th, relative to the strike at the Company's Works. Read letters to the Manager of January 21st, 24th, 26th, 29th. Read letter from Mr. Simon Harness, of the Central Union, asking for an interview with the Board. Read letter from the Men's Committee, signed David Roberts, James Green, John Bulgin, Henry Thomas, George Rous, desiring conference with the Board; and it was resolved that a special Board Meeting be called for February 7th at the house of the Manager, for the purpose of discussing the situation with Mr. Simon Harness and the Men's Committee on the spot. Passed twelve transfers, signed and sealed nine certificates and one balance certificate."

[He pushes the book over to the CHAIRMAN.]

ANTHONY. [With a heavy sigh.] If it's your pleasure, sign the same.

[He signs, moving the pen with difficulty.]

WANKLIN. What's the Union's game, Tench? They have n't made up their split with the men. What does Harness want this interview for?

TENCH. Hoping we shall come to a compromise, I think, sir; he's having a meeting with the men this afternoon.

WILDER. Harness! Ah! He's one of those cold-blooded, cool-headed chaps. I distrust them. I don't know that we didn't make a mistake to come down. What time'll the men be here?

UNDERWOOD. Any time now.

WILDER. Well, if we're not ready, they'll have to wait – won't do them any harm to cool their heels a bit.

SCANTLEBURY. [Slowly.] Poor devils! It's snowing. What weather!

UNDERWOOD. [With meaning slowness.] This house'll be the warmest place they've been in this winter.

WILDER. Well, I hope we're going to settle this business in time for me to catch the 6.30. I've got to take my wife to Spain to-morrow. [Chattily.] My old father had a strike at his works in '69; just such a February as this. They wanted to shoot him.

WANKLIN. What! In the close season?

WILDER. By George, there was no close season for employers then! He used to go down to his office with a pistol in his pocket.

SCANTLEBURY. [Faintly alarmed.] Not seriously?

WILDER. [With finality.] Ended in his shootin' one of 'em in the legs.

SCANTLEBURY. [Unavoidably feeling his thigh.] No? Which?

ANTHONY. [Lifting the agenda paper.] To consider the policy of the Board in relation to the strike. [There is a silence.]

WILDER. It's this infernal three-cornered duel – the Union, the men, and ourselves.

WANKLIN. We need n't consider the Union.

WILDER. It's my experience that you've always got to, consider the Union, confound them! If the Union were going to withdraw their support from the men, as they've done, why did they ever allow them to strike at all?

EDGAR. We've had that over a dozen times.

WILDER. Well, I've never understood it! It's beyond me. They talk of the engineers' and furnace-men's demands being excessive – so they are – but that's not enough to make the Union withdraw their support. What's behind it?

UNDERWOOD. Fear of strikes at Harper's and Tinewell's.

WILDER. [With triumph.] Afraid of other strikes – now, that's a reason! Why could n't we have been told that before?

UNDERWOOD. You were.

TENCH. You were absent from the Board that day, sir.

SCANTLEBURY. The men must have seen they had no chance when the Union gave them up. It's madness.

UNDERWOOD. It's Roberts!

WILDER. Just our luck, the men finding a fanatical firebrand like Roberts for leader. [A pause.]

WANKLIN. [Looking at ANTHONY.] Well?

WILDER. [Breaking in fussily.] It's a regular mess. I don't like the position we're in; I don't like it; I've said so for a long time. [Looking at WANKLIN.] When Wanklin and I came down here before Christmas it looked as if the men must collapse. You thought so too, Underwood.

UNDERWOOD. Yes.

WILDER. Well, they haven't! Here we are, going from bad to worse losing our customers – shares going down!

SCANTLEBURY. [Shaking his head.] M'm! M'm!

WANKLIN. What loss have we made by this strike, Tench?

TENCH. Over fifty thousand, sir!

SCANTLEBURY, [Pained.] You don't say!

WILDER. We shall never got it back.

TENCH. No, sir.

WILDER. Who'd have supposed the men were going to stick out like this – nobody suggested that. [Looking angrily at TENCH.]

SCANTLEBURY. [Shaking his head.] I've never liked a fight – never shall.

ANTHONY. No surrender! [All look at him.]

WILDER. Who wants to surrender? [ANTHONY looks at him.] I – I want to act reasonably. When the men sent Roberts up to the Board in December – then was the time. We ought to have humoured him; instead of that the Chairman – [Dropping his eyes before ANTHONY'S] – er – we snapped his head off. We could have got them in then by a little tact.

ANTHONY. No compromise!

WILDER. There we are! This strike's been going on now since October, and as far as I can see it may last another six months. Pretty mess we shall be in by then. The only comfort is, the men'll be in a worse!

EDGAR. [To UNDERWOOD.] What sort of state are they really in, Frank?

UNDERWOOD. [Without expression.] Damnable!

WILDER. Well, who on earth would have thought they'd have held on like this without support!

UNDERWOOD. Those who know them.

WILDER. I defy any one to know them! And what about tin? Price going up daily. When we do get started we shall have to work off our contracts at the top of the market.

WANKLIN. What do you say to that, Chairman?

ANTHONY. Can't be helped!

WILDER. Shan't pay a dividend till goodness knows when!

SCANTLEBURY. [With emphasis.] We ought to think of the shareholders. [Turning heavily.] Chairman, I say we ought to think of the shareholders. [ANTHONY mutters.]

SCANTLEBURY. What's that?

TENCH. The Chairman says he is thinking of you, sir.

SCANTLEBURY. [Sinking back into torpor.] Cynic!

WILDER. It's past a joke. I don't want to go without a dividend for years if the Chairman does. We can't go on playing ducks and drakes with the Company's prosperity.

EDGAR. [Rather ashamedly.] I think we ought to consider the men.

[All but ANTHONY fidget in their seats.]

SCANTLEBURY. [With a sigh.] We must n't think of our private feelings, young man. That'll never do.

EDGAR. [Ironically.] I'm not thinking of our feelings. I'm thinking of the men's.

WILDER. As to that – we're men of business.

WANKLIN. That is the little trouble.

EDGAR. There's no necessity for pushing things so far in the face of all this suffering – it's – it's cruel.

[No one speaks, as though EDGAR had uncovered something whose existence no man prizing his self-respect could afford to recognise.]

WANKLIN. [With an ironical smile.] I'm afraid we must n't base our policy on luxuries like sentiment.

EDGAR. I detest this state of things.

ANTHONY. We did n't seek the quarrel.

EDGAR. I know that sir, but surely we've gone far enough.

ANTHONY. No. [All look at one another.]

WANKLIN. Luxuries apart, Chairman, we must look out what we're doing.

ANTHONY. Give way to the men once and there'll be no end to it.

WANKLIN. I quite agree, but —

[ANTHONY Shakes his head]

You make it a question of bedrock principle?

[ANTHONY nods.]

Luxuries again, Chairman! The shares are below par.

WILDER. Yes, and they'll drop to a half when we pass the next dividend.

SCANTLEBURY. [With alarm.] Come, come! Not so bad as that.

WILDER. [Grimly.] You'll see! [Craning forward to catch ANTHONY'S speech.] I didn't catch —

TENCH. [Hesitating.] The Chairman says, sir, "Fais que – que – devra."

EDGAR. [Sharply.] My father says: "Do what we ought – and let things rip."

WILDER. Tcha!

SCANTLEBURY. [Throwing up his hands.] The Chairman's a Stoic – I always said the Chairman was a Stoic.

WILDER. Much good that'll do us.

WANKLIN. [Suavely.] Seriously, Chairman, are you going to let the ship sink under you, for the sake of – a principle?

ANTHONY. She won't sink.

SCANTLEBURY. [With alarm.] Not while I'm on the Board I hope.

ANTHONY. [With a twinkle.] Better rat, Scantlebury.

SCANTLEBURY. What a man!

ANTHONY. I've always fought them; I've never been beaten yet.

WANKLIN. We're with you in theory, Chairman. But we're not all made of cast-iron.

ANTHONY. We've only to hold on.

WILDER. [Rising and going to the fire.] And go to the devil as fast as we can!

ANTHONY. Better go to the devil than give in!

WILDER. [Fretfully.] That may suit you, sir, but it does n't suit me, or any one else I should think.

[ANTHONY looks him in the face-a silence.]

EDGAR. I don't see how we can get over it that to go on like this means starvation to the men's wives and families.

[WILDER turns abruptly to the fire, and SCANTLEBURY puts out a hand to push the idea away.]

WANKLIN. I'm afraid again that sounds a little sentimental.

EDGAR. Men of business are excused from decency, you think?

WILDER. Nobody's more sorry for the men than I am, but if they [lashing himself] choose to be such a pig-headed lot, it's nothing to do with us; we've quite enough on our hands to think of ourselves and the shareholders.

EDGAR. [Irritably.] It won't kill the shareholders to miss a dividend or two; I don't see that that's reason enough for knuckling under.

SCANTLEBURY. [With grave discomfort.] You talk very lightly of your dividends, young man; I don't know where we are.

WILDER. There's only one sound way of looking at it. We can't go on ruining ourselves with this strike.

ANTHONY. No caving in!

SCANTLEBURY. [With a gesture of despair.] Look at him!

[ANTHONY'S leaning back in his chair. They do look at him.]

WILDER. [Returning to his seat.] Well, all I can say is, if that's the Chairman's view, I don't know what we've come down here for.

ANTHONY. To tell the men that we've got nothing for them – [Grimly.] They won't believe it till they hear it spoken in plain English.

WILDER. H'm! Shouldn't be a bit surprised if that brute Roberts had n't got us down here with the very same idea. I hate a man with a grievance.

EDGAR. [Resentfully.] We didn't pay him enough for his discovery. I always said that at the time.

WILDER. We paid him five hundred and a bonus of two hundred three years later. If that's not enough! What does he want, for goodness' sake?

TENCH. [Complainingly.] Company made a hundred thousand out of his brains, and paid him seven hundred – that's the way he goes on, sir.

WILDER. The man's a rank agitator! Look here, I hate the Unions. But now we've got Harness here let's get him to settle the whole thing.

ANTHONY. No! [Again they look at him.]

UNDERWOOD. Roberts won't let the men assent to that.

SCANTLEBURY. Fanatic! Fanatic!

WILDER. [Looking at ANTHONY.] And not the only one! [FROST enters from the hall.]

FROST. [To ANTHONY.] Mr. Harness from the Union, waiting, sir. The men are here too, sir.

[ANTHONY nods. UNDERWOOD goes to the door, returning with HARNESS, a pale, clean-shaven man with hollow cheeks, quick eyes, and lantern jaw – FROST has retired.]

UNDERWOOD. [Pointing to TENCH'S chair.] Sit there next the Chairman, Harness, won't you?

[At HARNESS'S appearance, the Board have drawn together, as it were, and turned a little to him, like cattle at a dog.]

HARNESS. [With a sharp look round, and a bow.] Thanks! [He sits – his accent is slightly nasal.] Well, gentlemen, we're going to do business at last, I hope.

WILDER. Depends on what you call business, Harness. Why don't you make the men come in?

HARNESS. [Sardonically.] The men are far more in the right than you are. The question with us is whether we shan't begin to support them again.

[He ignores them all, except ANTHONY, to whom he turns in speaking.]

ANTHONY. Support them if you like; we'll put in free labour and have done with it.

HARNESS. That won't do, Mr. Anthony. You can't get free labour, and you know it.

ANTHONY. We shall see that.

HARNESS. I'm quite frank with you. We were forced to withhold our support from your men because some of their demands are in excess of current rates. I expect to make them withdraw those demands to-day: if they do, take it straight from me, gentlemen, we shall back them again at once. Now, I want to see something fixed upon before I go back to-night. Can't we have done with this old-fashioned tug-of-war business? What good's it doing you? Why don't you recognise once for all that these people are men like yourselves, and want what's good for them just as you want what's good for you [Bitterly.] Your motor-cars, and champagne, and eight-course dinners.

ANTHONY. If the men will come in, we'll do something for them.

HARNESS. [Ironically.] Is that your opinion too, sir – and yours – and yours? [The Directors do not answer.] Well, all I can say is: It's a kind of high and mighty aristocratic tone I thought we'd grown out of – seems I was mistaken.

ANTHONY. It's the tone the men use. Remains to be seen which can hold out longest – they without us, or we without them.

HARNESS. As business men, I wonder you're not ashamed of this waste of force, gentlemen. You know what it'll all end in.

ANTHONY. What?

HARNESS. Compromise – it always does.

SCANTLEBURY. Can't you persuade the men that their interests are the same as ours?

HARNESS. [Turning, ironically.] I could persuade them of that, sir, if they were.

WILDER. Come, Harness, you're a clever man, you don't believe all the Socialistic claptrap that's talked nowadays. There 's no real difference between their interests and ours.

HARNESS. There's just one very simple question I'd like to put to you. Will you pay your men one penny more than they force you to pay them?

[WILDER is silent.]

WANKLIN. [Chiming in.] I humbly thought that not to pay more than was necessary was the A B C of commerce.

HARNESS. [With irony.] Yes, that seems to be the A B C of commerce, sir; and the A B C of commerce is between your interests and the men's.

SCANTLEBURY. [Whispering.] We ought to arrange something.

HARNESS. [Drily.] Am I to understand then, gentlemen, that your Board is going to make no concessions?

[WANKLIN and WILDER bend forward as if to speak, but stop.]

ANTHONY. [Nodding.] None.

[WANKLIN and WILDER again bend forward, and SCANTLEBURY gives an unexpected grunt.]

HARNESS. You were about to say something, I believe?

[But SCANTLEBURY says nothing.]

EDGAR. [Looking up suddenly.] We're sorry for the state of the men.

HARNESS. [Icily.] The men have no use for your pity, sir. What they want is justice.

ANTHONY. Then let them be just.

HARNESS. For that word "just" read "humble," Mr. Anthony. Why should they be humble? Barring the accident of money, are n't they as good men as you?

ANTHONY. Cant!

HARNESS. Well, I've been five years in America. It colours a man's notions.

SCANTLEBURY. [Suddenly, as though avenging his uncompleted grunt.] Let's have the men in and hear what they've got to say!

[ANTHONY nods, and UNDERWOOD goes out by the single door.]

HARNESS. [Drily.] As I'm to have an interview with them this afternoon, gentlemen, I 'll ask you to postpone your final decision till that's over.

[Again ANTHONY nods, and taking up his glass drinks.] [UNDERWOOD comes in again, followed by ROBERTS, GREEN, BULGIN, THOMAS, ROUS. They file in, hat in hand, and stand silent in a row. ROBERTS is lean, of middle height, with a slight stoop. He has a little rat-gnawn, brown-grey beard, moustaches, high cheek-bones, hollow cheeks, small fiery eyes. He wears an old and grease-stained blue serge suit, and carries an old bowler hat. He stands nearest the Chairman. GREEN, next to him, has a clean, worn face, with a small grey goatee

beard and drooping moustaches, iron spectacles, and mild, straightforward eyes. He wears an overcoat, green with age, and a linen collar. Next to him is BULGIN, a tall, strong man, with a dark moustache, and fighting jaw, wearing a red muffler, who keeps changing his cap from one hand to the other. Next to him is THOMAS, an old man with a grey moustache, full beard, and weatherbeaten, bony face, whose overcoat discloses a lean, plucked-looking neck. On his right, ROUS, the youngest of the five, looks like a soldier; he has a glitter in his eyes.]

UNDERWOOD. [Pointing.] There are some chairs there against the wall, Roberts; won't you draw them up and sit down?

ROBERTS. Thank you, Mr. Underwood – we'll stand in the presence of the Board. [He speaks in a biting and staccato voice, rolling his r's, pronouncing his a's like an Italian a, and his consonants short and crisp.] How are you, Mr. Harness? Did n't expect t' have the pleasure of seeing you till this afternoon.

HARNESS. [Steadily.] We shall meet again then, Roberts.

ROBERTS. Glad to hear that; we shall have some news for you to take to your people.

ANTHONY. What do the men want?

ROBERTS. [Acidly.] Beg pardon, I don't quite catch the Chairman's remark.

TENCH. [From behind the Chairman's chair.] The Chairman wishes to know what the men have to say.

ROBERTS. It's what the Board has to say we've come to hear. It's for the Board to speak first.

ANTHONY. The Board has nothing to say.

ROBERTS. [Looking along the line of men.] In that case we're wasting the Directors' time. We'll be taking our feet off this pretty carpet.

[He turns, the men move slowly, as though hypnotically influenced.]

WANKLIN: [Suavely.] Come, Roberts, you did n't give us this long cold journey for the pleasure of saying that.

THOMAS. [A pure Welshman.] No, sir, an' what I say iss —

ROBERTS. [Bitingly.] Go on, Henry Thomas, go on. You 're better able to speak to the – Directors than me. [THOMAS is silent.]

TENCH. The Chairman means, Roberts, that it was the men who asked for the conference, the Board wish to hear what they have to say.

ROBERTS. Gad! If I was to begin to tell ye all they have to say, I wouldn't be finished to-day. And there'd be some that'd wish they'd never left their London palaces.

HARNESS. What's your proposition, man? Be reasonable.

ROBERTS. You want reason Mr. Harness? Take a look round this afternoon before the meeting. [He looks at the men; no sound escapes them.] You'll see some very pretty scenery.

HARNESS. All right my friend; you won't put me off.

ROBERTS. [To the men.] We shan't put Mr. Harness off. Have some champagne with your lunch, Mr. Harness; you'll want it, sir.

HARNESS. Come, get to business, man!

THOMAS. What we're asking, look you, is just simple justice.

ROBERTS. [Venomously.] Justice from London? What are you talking about, Henry Thomas? Have you gone silly? [THOMAS is silent.] We know very well what we are – discontented dogs – never satisfied. What did the Chairman tell me up in London? That I did n't know what I was talking about. I was a foolish, uneducated man, that knew nothing of the wants of the men I spoke for.

EDGAR. Do please keep to the point.

ANTHONY. [Holding up his hand.] There can only be one master, Roberts.

ROBERTS. Then, be Gad, it'll be us.

[There is a silence; ANTHONY and ROBERTS stare at one another.]

UNDERWOOD. If you've nothing to say to the Directors, Roberts, perhaps you 'll let Green or Thomas speak for the men.

[GREEN and THOMAS look anxiously at ROBERTS, at each other, and the other men.]

GREEN. [An Englishman.] If I'd been listened to, gentlemen —

THOMAS. What I've got to say is what we've all got to say —

ROBERTS. Speak for yourself, Henry Thomas.

SCANTLEBURY. [With a gesture of deep spiritual discomfort.] Let the poor men call their souls their own!

ROBERTS. Aye, they shall keep their souls, for it's not much body that you've left them, Mr. [with biting emphasis, as though the word were an offence] Scantlebury! [To the men.] Well, will you speak, or shall I speak for you?

ROUS. [Suddenly.] Speak out, Roberts, or leave it to others.

ROBERTS. [Ironically.] Thank you, George Rous. [Addressing himself to ANTHONY.] The Chairman and Board of Directors have honoured us by leaving London and coming all this way to hear what we've got to say; it would not be polite to keep them any longer waiting.

WILDER. Well, thank God for that!

ROBERTS. Ye will not dare to thank Him when I have done, Mr. Wilder, for all your piety. May be your God up in London has no time to listen to the working man. I'm told He is a wealthy God; but if he listens to what I tell Him, He will know more than ever He learned in Kensington.

HARNESS. Come, Roberts, you have your own God. Respect the God of other men.

ROBERTS. That's right, sir. We have another God down here; I doubt He is rather different to Mr. Wilder's. Ask Henry Thomas; he will tell you whether his God and Mr. Wilder's are the same.

[THOMAS lifts his hand, and cranes his head as though to prophesy.]

WANKLIN. For goodness' sake, let 's keep to the point, Roberts.

ROBERTS. I rather think it is the point, Mr. Wanklin. If you can get the God of Capital to walk through the streets of Labour, and pay attention to what he sees, you're a brighter man than I take you for, for all that you're a Radical.

ANTHONY. Attend to me, Roberts! [Roberts is silent.] You are here to speak for the men, as I am here to speak for the Board.

[He looks slowly round.] [WILDER, WANKLIN, and SCANTLEBURY make movements of uneasiness, and EDGAR gazes at the floor. A faint smile comes on HARNESS'S face.]

Now then, what is it?

ROBERTS. Right, Sir!

[Throughout all that follows, he and ANTHONY look fixedly upon each other.

Men and Directors show in their various ways suppressed uneasiness, as though listening to words that they themselves would not have spoken.]

The men can't afford to travel up to London; and they don't trust you to believe what they say in black and white. They know what the post is [he darts a look at UNDERWOOD and TENCH], and what Directors' meetings are: "Refer it to the manager – let the manager advise us on the men's condition. Can we squeeze them a little more?"

UNDERWOOD. [In a low voice.] Don't hit below the belt, Roberts!

ROBERTS. Is it below the belt, Mr. Underwood? The men know. When I came up to London, I told you the position straight. An' what came of it? I was told I did n't know what I was talkin' about. I can't afford to travel up to London to be told that again.

ANTHONY. What have you to say for the men?

ROBERTS. I have this to say – and first as to their condition. Ye shall 'ave no need to go and ask your manager. Ye can't squeeze them any more. Every man of us is well-nigh starving. [A surprised murmur rises from the men. ROBERTS looks round.] Ye wonder why I tell ye that? Every man of us is going short. We can't be no worse off than we've been these weeks past. Ye need n't think that by waiting yell drive us to come in. We'll die first, the whole lot of us. The men have sent for ye to know, once and for all, whether ye are going to grant them their demands. I see the sheet of paper in the Secretary's hand. [TENCH moves nervously.] That's it, I think, Mr. Tench. It's not very large.

TENCH. [Nodding.] Yes.

ROBERTS. There's not one sentence of writing on that paper that we can do without.

[A movement amongst the men. ROBERTS turns on them sharply.]

Isn't that so?

[The men assent reluctantly. ANTHONY takes from TENCH the paper and peruses it.]

Not one single sentence. All those demands are fair. We have not. asked anything that we are not entitled to ask. What I said up in London, I say again now: there is not anything on that piece of paper that a just man should not ask, and a just man give.

[A pause.]

ANTHONY. There is not one single demand on this paper that we will grant.

[In the stir that follows on these words, ROBERTS watches the Directors and ANTHONY the men. WILDER gets up abruptly and goes over to the fire.]

ROBERTS. D' ye mean that?

ANTHONY. I do.

[WILDER at the fire makes an emphatic movement of disgust.]

ROBERTS. [Noting it, with dry intensity.] Ye best know whether the condition of the Company is any better than the condition of the men. [Scanning the Directors' faces.] Ye best know whether ye can afford your tyranny – but this I tell ye: If ye think the men will give way the least part of an inch, ye're making the worst mistake ye ever made. [He fixes his eyes on SCANTLEBURY.] Ye think because the Union is not supporting us – more shame to it! – that we'll be coming on our knees to you one fine morning. Ye think because the men have got their wives an' families to think of – that it's just a question of a week or two —

ANTHONY. It would be better if you did not speculate so much on what we think.

ROBERTS. Aye! It's not much profit to us! I will say this for you, Mr. Anthony – ye know your own mind! [Staying at ANTHONY.] I can reckon on ye!

ANTHONY. [Ironically.] I am obliged to you!

ROBERTS. And I know mine. I tell ye this: The men will send their wives and families where the country will have to keep them; an' they will starve sooner than give way. I advise ye, Mr. Anthony, to prepare yourself for the worst that can happen to your Company. We are not so ignorant as you might suppose. We know the way the cat is jumping. Your position is not all that it might be – not exactly!

ANTHONY. Be good enough to allow us to judge of our position for ourselves. Go back, and reconsider your own.

ROBERTS. [Stepping forward.] Mr. Anthony, you are not a young man now; from the time I remember anything ye have been an enemy to every man that has come into your works. I don't say that ye're a mean man, or a cruel man, but ye've grudged them the say of any word in their own fate. Ye've fought them down four times. I've heard ye say ye love a fight – mark my words – ye're fighting the last fight ye'll ever fight!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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