

"Strike!"

The baleful word flashed out in all its old hideous familiarity. Was there to be no end to its recurrence?

"Do you mean," faltered the reporter, "that you are contemplating a mutual withdrawal of the charges?"

"Precisely," said the Duke.

"But think of the arrangements that have been made, the special reporting, the cinematographs, the catering for the distinguished foreign witnesses, the prepared music-hall allusions; think of all the money that has been sunk --"

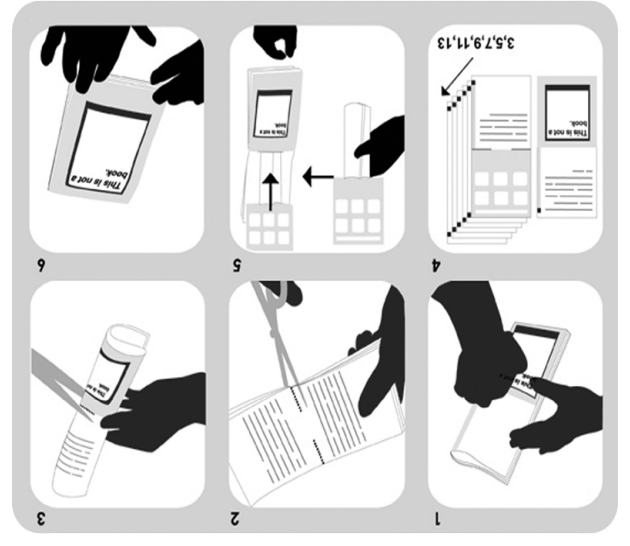
"Exactly," said the Duke coldly, "the Duchess and I have realised that it is we who provide the material out of which this great far-reaching industry has been built up. Widespread employment will be given and enormous profits made during the duration of the case, and we, on whom all the stress and racket falls, will get -- what? An unenviable notoriety and the privilege of paying heavy legal expenses whichever way the verdict goes. Hence our decision to strike. We don't wish to be reconciled; we fully realise that it is a grave step to take, but unless we get some

films depicted the Duchess holding imaginary consultations with fictitious lawyers or making a light repast off specially advertised vegetarian sandwiches during a supposed luncheon interval. As far as human foresight and human enterprise could go nothing was lacking to make the trial a success. Two days before the case was down for hearing the advance reporter of an important syndicate obtained an interview with the Duke for the purpose of gleaningsome final grains of information concerning his Grace's personal arrangements during the trial. "I suppose I may say this will be one of the biggest affairs of its kind during the lifetime of a generation," began the reporter as an excuse for the unsparing minuteness of detail that he was about to make quest for. "I suppose so -- if it comes off," said the Duke lazily. "If?" queried the reporter, in a voice that was something between a gasp and a scream. "The Duchess and I are both thinking of going on strike," said the Duke.

The season of strikes seemed to have run itself to a standstill. Almost every trade and industry calling in which a dislocation could possibly be engineered had indulged in that luxury. The last and least successful convulsion had been the strike of the World's Union of Zoological Garden attendants, who, pending the settlement of certain demands, refused to minister further to the wants of the animals committed to their charge or to allow any other keepers to take their place. In this case the threat of the Zoological Gardens authorities that if the men "came out" the animals should come out also had intensified and precipitated the crisis. The imminent prospect of the larger carnivores, to say nothing of rhinoceroses and bull bison, roaming at large and unfed in the heart of London, was not one which permitted of prolonged conferences. The Government of the day, which from its tendency to be a few hours behind the course of events had been nicknamed the Government of the afternoon, was obliged to intervene with promptitude and decision. A strong force of Bluejackets was despatched to Regent's Park to take over the temporarily abandoned duties of the strikers. Bluejackets were chosen in preference to

# The Unkindest Blow

Saki (H H Munro)



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land forces, partly on account of the traditional readiness of the British Navy to go anywhere and do anything, partly by reason of the familiarity of the average sailor with monkeys, parrots, and other tropical fauna, but chiefly at the urgent request of the First Lord of the Admiralty, who was keenly desirous of an opportunity for performing some personal act of unobtrusive public service within the province of his department.

"If he insists on feeding the infant jaguar himself, in defiance of its mother's wishes, there may be another by-election in the north," said one of his colleagues, with a hopeful inflection in his voice. "By-elections are not very desirable at present, but we must not be selfish."

As a matter of fact the strike collapsed peacefully without any outside intervention. The majority of the keepers had become so attached to their charges that they returned to work of their own accord.

And then the nation and the newspapers turned with a sense of relief to happier things. It seemed as if a new era of contentment was about to dawn. Everybody had struck who could possibly want to strike or who could possibly be cajoled or

bullied into striking, whether they wanted to or not. The lighter and brighter side of life might now claim some attention. And conspicuous among the other topics that sprang into sudden prominence was the pending Falverton divorce suit.

The Duke of Falverton was one of those human *hors d'oeuvres* that stimulate the public appetite for sensation without giving it much to feed on. As a mere child he had been precociously brilliant; he had declined the editorship of the *Anglian Review* at an age when most boys are content to have declined *mensa*, a table, and though he could not claim to have originated the Futurist movement in literature, his "Letters to possible Grandson," written at the age of fourteen, had attracted considerable notice. In later days his brilliancy had been less conspicuously displayed. During a debate in the House of Lords on affairs in Morocco, at a moment when that country, for the fifth time in seven years, had brought half Europe to the verge of war, he had interpolated the remark "a little Moor and how much it is," but in spite of the encouraging reception accorded to this one political utterance he was never tempted to a

reasonable consideration out of this vast stream  
of wealth and industry that we have called into  
being we intend coming out of court and staying  
out. Good afternoon."

The news of this latest strike spread universal  
dismay. Its inaccessibility to the ordinary methods  
of persuasion made it peculiarly formidable. If the  
Duke and Duchess persisted in being reconciled  
the Government could hardly be called on to  
interfere. Public opinion in the shape of social  
ostracism might be brought to bear on them, but  
that was as far as coercive measures could go.  
There was nothing for it but a conference, with  
powers to propose liberal terms. As it was,  
several of the foreign witnesses had already  
departed and others had telegraphed cancelling  
their hotel arrangements.

The conference, protracted, uncomfortable, and  
occasionally acrimonious, succeeded at last in  
arranging for a resumption of litigation, but it was  
a fruitless victory. The Duke, with a touch of his  
earlier precocity, died of premature decay a  
fortnight before the date fixed for the new trial.

further display in that direction. It began to be  
generally understood that he did not intend to  
supplement his numerous town and country  
residences by living overmuch in the public eye.

And then had come the unlooked-for tidings of  
the imminent proceedings for divorce. And such a  
divorce! There were cross-suits and allegations  
and counter-allegations, charges of cruelty and  
desertion, everything in fact that was necessary  
to make the case one of the most complicated  
and sensational of its kind. And the number of  
distinguished people involved or cited as  
witnesses not only embraced both political parties  
in the realm and several Colonial governors, but  
included an exotic contingent from France,  
Hungary, the United States of North America, and  
the Grand Duchy of Baden. Hotel accommodation  
of the more expensive sort began to experience a  
strain on its resources. "It will be quite like the  
Durbar without the elephants," exclaimed an  
enthusiastic lady who, to do her justice, had  
never seen a Durbar. The general feeling was one  
of thankfulness that the last of the strikes had  
been got over before the date fixed for the  
hearing of the great suit.

As a reaction from the season of gloom and  
industrial strife that had just passed away the  
agencies that purvey and stage-manage  
sensations laid themselves out to do their level  
best on this momentous occasion. Men who had  
made their reputations as special descriptive  
writers were mobilised from distant corners of  
Europe and the further side of the Atlantic in  
order to enrich with their pens the daily printed  
records of the case; one word-painter, who  
specialised in descriptions of how witnesses turn  
pale under cross-examination, was summoned  
hurriedly back from a famous and prolonged  
murder trial in Sicily, where indeed his talents  
were being decidedly wasted. Thumb-nail artists  
and expert kodak manipulators were retained at  
extravagant salaries, and special dress reporters  
were in high demand. An enterprising Paris firm  
of costume builders presented the defendant  
Duchess with three special creations, to be worn,  
marked, learned, and extensively reported at  
various critical stages of the trial; and as for the  
cinematograph agents, their industry and  
persistence was untiring. Films representing the  
Duke saying good-bye to his favourite canary on  
the eve of the trial were in readiness weeks  
before the event was due to take place; other