

meetin' an' standin' free beer got out, an' Nobby Clark was nearly trampled to death tryin' to get into the canteen to second old Oatsey's motion.

“ Well, they got a lot of rules out, an' a new kind of grip invented by Nobby, an' a password, an' a sign, so that everybody should know a brother.’

“ It didn't want no password or sign, or grip either.

“ You couldn't miss the brothers. They used to sit round Oatsey, sayin' ‘Hear, hear,’ while Oatsey was payin' for the beer, an' when Oatsey had spent all his money, one of the brothers would rise an' move that the meetin' should adjourn till next pay-day.

“ ‘Our motto is,’ Oatsey would say, ‘a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, an' one man's as good as another’ ; an' the general idea was that the secret society should be a trade union of soldiers.

" There was lots of special ideas, but most of 'em wasn't worth mentionin'.

" One was that every brother should pay for his own beer. Oatsey put that in hissself, an' it nearly btoke up the society.

" Me and Nobby didn't go to any of the meetin's after that rule was made. Oatsey said that all the Army would join if we once got it fairly started.

" S'pose we was at war.

" The 1st Anchesters (the Anchester branch of the Pore Soldiers' Anti-Slavery League, as it'd be then) would be waitin' to attack.

" Up gallops one of the glitterin' staff.

" ' Take your battalion forward, Colonel Gollingham,' he sez.

" ' Very good, sir,' sez the Colqnel, an' orders the bugler to sound the advance.

" Not a chap moves.

" ' What the somethin' bad does this

mean?' yells the Colonel. 'Advance! you unmentionable horrors!'

"Then Oatsey steps out of the ranks—him bein' the Perpetual President of the League—with all his sashes an' decorations on.

" 'Beg pardon, sir,' he sez, 'we can't go on. A fair day's work for a fair day's pay,' he sez, 'is a motter we all adore, an' we've done our eight hours already.'

" 'But,' sez the Colonel, 'think of the regiment—think of yourselves—think of the country.'

" 'There ain't no joy in workin' unless you're workin' for yourself,' Oatsey sez gloomily; 'the country can look after itself, an' as to the trade—I mean the reg'ment—we only do what we do because we're paid for it.'

"By this time the Colonel's half orf his head.

" 'But the enemy—you blitherin' flat-footed ass—they'll defeat us—they'll——'

" ' We're indifferent to the enemy,' sez Oatsey proudly, ' an' the sooner they know it the better.'

" Or p'raps," Smithy went on, letting his fancy run free, " p'raps we're advancin' in workin' hours, an' suddenly Oatsey shouts out, ' Halt!'

" Along comes the Colonel, sayin' ' Rotterdam ' as fast as he can."

" ' What's the meanin' of this? ' he sez.

" ' Very sorry,' sez Oatsey, as cool as you please, ' but we can't charge alongside of the North Wessex Regiment.'

" ' Why? ' sez the Colonel, among other things.

" ' Because,' sez Oatsey, ' the North Wessex is a non-union regiment,' he sez, ' an' wot's more, the Colonel of the Wessex has got sharès in a tied-house brewery, wot's a monopoly.'

" ' Think of the honour of the country,' sez the pore old Colonel.

“ ‘ I can’t,’ sez Oatsey, as bold as brass, ‘ an’ wot’s more, I can’t let the members—I mean the men—think either; it would overstrain their physical capacity,’ sez Oatsey.

“ So we get defeated again,” said Smithy with some relish. “ Sometimes the Army would stand out for extra overtime, just when the enemy was gettin’ guns into position; sometimes we’d want to knock off on Saturdays at two o’clock. Sometimes, at the minute the enemy was goin’ to strike, we’d strike too.

“ That was Oatsey’s idea.

“ He said one man was as good as another, an’ every man that worked for hisself was workin’ for the country, an’ it didn’t much matter about the country, any way.

“ One night I met Nobby Clark down town.

“ ‘ Smithy,’ he sez, ‘ do you want to join another secret society?’ ”

" ' Who's payin' for the beer this time ? ' "

I sez.

" ' Nobody,' sez Nobby, larfin'.

" ' Wot's it called ? ' I sez.

" ' The Society for Givin' old Oatsey a Barrack-Room Court-Martial,' sez Nobby.

" ' Put me down as a honor'y member,' I sez quick.

" That night when Oatsey was defendin' the Empire by sleepin' in his cot, me an' Nobby an' Bill Tasker an' Pug Williams an' a few more chaps pulled him out of bed by the leg.

" ' Wot's up ? ' sez Oatsey, rubbin' his eyes.

" ' The Empire's in danger,' sez Nobby.

" ' No larks ! ' sez Oatsey, tryin' to get up.

" So we sat him on a form an' read the funeral service out of his own Prayer-book. Then Nobby, bein' the President of the Court, sez :—

“ ‘ Private Oatsey, you are charged, accordin’ to King’s Regulations an’ the manual of Military Law, with conspirin’ with others not yet in custody——’

“ ‘ You drunk my beer, anyway,’ sez Oatsey.

“ ‘ Don’t make your crime worse, young feller,’ sez Nobby—‘ With mutiny an’ other crimes too numerous to mention. With tryin’ to form a silly fool of a league an’ cetrer, an’ cetrer.’

“ So they sentenced him,” said Smithy cheerfully.

“ To what ? ” I asked.

“ To punishment,” answered Smithy evasively.

“ Anyway, that broke up our secret society, for old Oatsey paraded at the orderly-room the next mornin’ an’ asked to be transferred to another reg’ment. He said the Anchesters was so noisy they made his head ache.”