

ing Bates. "Good morning, Mr. Bates," turning to Saxelby. "Hem! I have called you here to communicate to you a matter unprecedented in the annals of this department. I have in my hand a letter from Mr. Latters. In it Mr. Latters states that having just inherited an estate from an uncle, he proposes to resign his post and take his pension. Never in the course of my official career have I known such a discreditable action. Were he in the army it would be regarded as desertion. The whole working of the office—the most efficient I am proud to say of all the Government departments — is to be upset by the private affairs of one official. I tell you, gentlemen, that if I inherited a million I would never resign my post whilst I could do good work for the State."

The principal clerks murmured admiration of the chief's noble statement, though they felt in their hearts that devotion to the public service might be carried to extremes.

"It will require time, gentlemen, and much thought," continued the Chief, "to select his successor. I shall have to scrutinise your work very closely. Whatever decision I come to — for I may say that my recommendation will be final—I hope that you will admit that I have only one thought in my mind—the best interests of the department."

The three clerks murmured agreement, though each of them felt that the department would be ruined if Mr. Campion promoted either of the other two rotters.

"That is all at present, gentlemen," said the Chief, "except that for a time Mr. Latters' duties will be allocated amongst you. You will take his duties for a day each in turn. The first one on the rota for duty will be"—the Chief paused, uncertain as to the name of each clerk. Then he came to a triumphant conclusion by saying, "In order not to make an invidious selection, you will come on duty in alphabetical order.

That is all, gentlemen. Except that I rely on your hearty support during this grave emergency."

The principal clerks eyed each other jealously in the passage outside.

"Nice thing," said Bates, "to do the work of a twelve hundred a year man on an eight hundred salary."

"He may keep us waiting for months," said Morris.

"It's rotten having to depend on the decision of an old——," began Saxelby, and then remembered just in time that the word "ass" might be brought up against him, so he substituted "head of a department who is too conscientious to come to a decision."

There was a great sensation in the department when the news was known. One of the first division clerks—an amiable and businesslike person — instantly opened a book — laying two to one against any of the principal clerks being promoted to the vacancy, and twenty to one against any individual first division clerk becoming a principal clerk. His book filled rapidly.

A fortnight passed away, then one morning Saxelby, though not on duty, deliberately entered the Chief's private room and had a long interview with him. The other two regarded this as base treachery.

"I suppose you've been making suggestions for the improvement of the office," inquired Morris, sarcastically.

"My conversation with Mr. Campion concerned purely personal and private matters," replied Saxelby.

Later in the day an awful rumour ran through the office. A first-class clerk who had been at a dance the previous evening stated that Saxelby had sat out nearly every dance with the youngest Miss Campion. Morris and Bates were full of horror. They knew that their colleague was capable of anything, and they suspected Saxelby intended something more than a dance partnership. But