

Stephanie Greene

SOPHIE HARTLEY,

ON STRIKE



Stephanie Greene

SOPHIE HARTLEY,



CLARION BOOKS

New York

Clarion Books
a Houghton Mifflin Company imprint
215 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003
Copyright © 2006 by Stephanie Greene

The text was set in 13-point Giovanni Book.

All rights reserved.

For information about permission to reproduce selections from
this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company,
215 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003.

www.clarionbooks.com

Printed in the U.S.A.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greene, Stephanie.
Sophie Hartley, on strike / by Stephanie Greene.
p. cm.

Summary: After their mother sets up a new list of
household chores for them, Sophie and her siblings
argue about housekeeping and finally go on strike.

ISBN-13: 978-0-618-71960-0

ISBN-10: 0-618-71960-1

[1. Family life—Fiction. 2. Housekeeping—Fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.G8434Sop 2006
[Fic]—dc22 2006008375

MP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER ONE

If Sophie hadn't stopped to watch television with John on Saturday morning but had gone straight to the kitchen and written a note saying she was going to Alice's house, she might have been able to slip out the back door before her mother came down. The Hartley family wouldn't have gotten into such a mess later on, either.

But it was one of Sophie's favorite TV programs. Even though she'd seen it a million times, she couldn't resist. It put her totally off schedule.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Mrs. Hartley, coming into the kitchen as Sophie was opening the back door. She had Maura on one hip and the bucket of household cleaning supplies

resting on the other. "Where do you think *you're* going?" She plopped Maura in her high chair and put the bucket on the floor next to the sink. "Have you cleaned your room yet?" she said, turning to Sophie with a knowing look.

Sophie vowed never to watch TV again. There was a small window of opportunity in which a person could escape from the Hartley house on a Saturday morning before Mrs. Hartley appeared and started assigning chores, and Sophie had missed it. Horrible chores that wasted the entire morning, like dusting tables and sweeping the mudroom floor and other totally unnecessary tasks. What was the point of cleaning the house when it was only going to get dirty again?

Sophie eyed the distance from the back porch to the garage longingly. She could probably be on her bike and down the driveway before her mother made it to the door. But when she tried to imagine what it would be like when she came home, all she could see was black.

"Alice invited me over," she said, one hand on the doorknob and the other clutching the strap of her bicycle helmet.

"You can go to Alice's when your jobs are done." Her mother poured some dry cereal on the tray of the highchair and handed Maura a cup with a lid. "First, you need to strip your bed, put on clean sheets, and vacuum your room."

"Thad went out without doing *his* room," said Sophie.

"Thad has soccer practice."

"What about Nora?"

"Nora's asleep." Her mother put her mug of coffee on the table and sat down. "All you have to worry about is yourself."

"I don't see why I have to work when no one else is," Sophie insisted stubbornly. "John is watching TV, and look at Maura. She's making a mess and she doesn't even have to clean it up."

It was true. There was more dry cereal on the floor around Maura's highchair than on her tray, and the pieces there were floating in a

pool of juice like miniature life preservers. Maura slapped the pool with her hand and laughed.

Mrs. Hartley expertly grabbed her hand while sopping up the juice with the towel she kept over her shoulder for such emergencies. Then she took away Maura's cup and handed her a piece of banana. Maura immediately crammed it into her mouth.

"I'll make Maura mop the floor the minute she learns how to walk," Mrs. Hartley said. "I promise."

"It's not funny." Sophie reluctantly hung her helmet back on its hook next to the door. She was sick of the way Maura got out of doing everything just because she was a baby. And Thad because he played sports. And Nora because she needed her "beauty sleep," as she called it. It wasn't fair.

"Why doesn't John have to strip his bed?" she asked.

"John is six," said her mother. "When you were six, you didn't change your bed, either. For heaven's sake, Sophie! You could've fin-

ished your chores and been at Alice's house by now if you stopped worrying about what everybody else is doing."

It was impossible for Sophie not to worry. She felt as if she was always the one who ended up doing chores on Saturday morning. All by herself, too. It wouldn't be so bad if they were all moaning and groaning and vacuuming together. At least they'd be doing something as a family. They could turn it into a fun family time, and have pillow fights and tie their dirty sheets together to practice fire drills from their bedroom windows.

Sometimes it felt as if they hardly ever did things as a family anymore. Sophie missed it. Now that Thad was in high school, he always seemed to be at some sort of practice, and Nora skinned out of everything by sleeping late on the weekends. Sophie had tried sleeping late, too. But even after she made herself lie in bed with her eyes shut for what felt like a million hours, it was never later than seven thirty when she finally looked at the clock.

"I can't strip my bed now," she said with a

half-hearted display of sisterly love. "I don't want to wake up Nora."

"You can start in the living room, then," her mother said, "and dust the tables and straighten the magazines and basically make the room more livable. I shouldn't have to tell you what to do all the time. You know what needs to be done. Unless, of course," she added sweetly, looking at Sophie's stormy brow, "you'd rather do the bathrooms."

It really wasn't that hard a job, once she got started. Sophie slid the magazines under the couch and gave the coffee table a cursory wipe with the hem of her T-shirt. She picked up an armful of the assorted shoes people had left lying around and, after carefully placing hers, and a pair of her father's, side by side in the front hall closet, put one of each of the other pairs in with them. The rest she dumped in a pile in the mudroom.

Thinking about how Thad and Nora and John were going to have to look all over the house to make a matching pair cheered

Sophie up so much, she decided to plump up the pillows on the couch as a bonus. A dense fog of dust rose out of them as soon as she started, so she stopped. Really! she thought fussily as she put them back. You'd think someone would take them outside and beat them once in a while.

"I'm done!" she shouted, and headed for the stairs. All she had to do now was strip her bed. Too bad for Nora if it woke her up. Maybe she'd get a pimple because her beauty sleep was cut short.

Nora hated pimples. She had an absolute fit whenever she got one, and spent hours trying to erase it with sticks and cover it with makeup. Sometimes, she wore little round patches on her face all night to make them disappear.

Once, she woke up with one on the tip of her nose and refused to go to school. Sophie hadn't blamed her. It had been impossible to look at anything else on Nora's face. Everyone at school would have gone cross-eyed talking to her.

Sophie didn't understand why Nora even got pimples if she hated them so much. Sophie was never going to get them. She was going to have a clear, spotless face for her whole life and drive Nora crazy.

John was still lying on his stomach in front of the TV with his eyes glued to the program and his feet in his yellow rubber boots tapping in time to the music. Here she was, working her fingers to the bone, and John got to lie there like Little Lord Fauntleroy, doing nothing. Sophie loved the book about the little boy who was poor until he found out he was an earl and went to live in a mansion in England. Sophie planned on being a queen herself, some day. But there wasn't room for royalty in the Hartley family now. Especially not on Saturday morning.

"Mom said you have to strip your bed," she told him.

"Did not," said John.

"Did, too."

John didn't bother turning around.

"Only *babies* don't have to strip their beds,"

Sophie said, and continued up the stairs. She stomped down the hall to her room as loudly as she could and threw open her bedroom door, letting it bang against the wall, but it was all wasted. The room was empty. Nora's bed had been neatly made. The dirty sheets were already in a pile on the rug along with Nora's dirty clothes.

No fair! thought Sophie grumpily as she plunked down on the edge of her bed. First, Nora got to sleep late. Then, when she woke up and realized it was Saturday, she got to be happy.

Nora loved cleaning their room. Or, at least, her side of their room. Every week, she used her mother's feather duster on her lamp shade, lemon oil on her dresser, and ammonia and water on the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. By the time she was finished, their room smelled like the inside of the cabinet under the kitchen sink where Mrs. Hartley kept the cleaning products.

Nora had read somewhere that if you put perfume on a light bulb it made the whole

room smell when you turned on the light, so now their room stunk whenever Nora was doing her homework, too. Sophie had complained that the fumes were giving her a headache, but all her mother did was tell her to open her window.

Sophie plucked at one of the many loose threads on her old bedspread until it snapped.

That was another thing.

For a long time, she and Nora had had matching bedspreads. Then Nora bought herself a colorful paisley spread with beads and sequins all over it—and pillows to match—with the money she made baby-sitting. Now Nora's bed looked like the "after" picture in a magazine, and Sophie's looked like the "before."

Nora was a fanatic about the dumb spread. She folded it back carefully every night before she got into bed, and had an absolute fit if anyone even sat on it.

A few weeks before, when Mrs. Hartley had been trying again to discourage John from his idea of joining the army, she had told him

that if he became a soldier he was going to have to make his bed so that the inspecting officer could bounce a coin off his blanket. All John said was, "I'll take Nora with me. That's how she makes her bed."

Sophie was thinking about bouncing something heavier off Nora's bed—like a book, maybe, or the lamp—when Nora came sailing back into the room with her hair wet from the shower.

"Don't even think about it," she said with a quick flick of her hair. "That spread needs to be dry-cleaned. If I see one fingerprint, you're going to pay for it."

Sophie stood up and tugged listlessly at her sheets. "What?" she protested. "I'm making my bed."

"You are so *transparent*," Nora said in a superior voice as she bent to pick up her dirty laundry. "I'm going down to get the vacuum cleaner. You can use it when I'm through and take it back."

"Transparent" is what Nora called everyone these days. The French teacher who gave Nora

a C because he was jealous of her superior French accent was transparent; the boy who sat behind her in English class and threw things at her because he was trying to flirt with her was transparent. She had even called Mr. Hartley transparent one night at dinner during their weekly argument, and had been sent away from the table.

Sophie could tell it was an insult by Nora's voice. She had her mother write the word down so she could look it up in the dictionary and learned it meant "easy to see through" or "obvious." That's exactly what Sophie had thought it meant.

"You're not the boss of me," she said to Nora's back.

"Like a shallow pool . . ." Nora said airily as she drifted from the room.

"You be quiet," Sophie said crossly.

That was one more thing Nora had started doing since she turned thirteen: uttering seemingly harmless phrases at Sophie over and over again—always when there was no grown-up around to hear them—until they became

insults. Sophie didn't like it one bit. It didn't hurt as much as the kicking and hitting she and Nora used to do, but it was much more annoying. Not only was it hard to combat, it was almost impossible to get Nora in trouble.

"... and then she called me a shallow pool," Sophie had told her parents indignantly the first time Nora said it. "You need to punish her."

"Those are harsh words," her father agreed solemnly. "What do you think?" he said to Mrs. Hartley, sitting across the room on the couch. "Is it the guillotine for old Nora?"

"That's far too good for her," said Mrs. Hartley.

The way they laughed together had made it even worse.

Sophie pulled her bedspread up over her week-old sheets and got a clean pillowcase out of the linen closet in the hall to substitute it for her old one. Her mother had taken to sniffing Sophie's pillow every week, even when Sophie swore she'd stripped her sheets.

Someone must have ratted and told Mrs. Hartley that Sophie only changed her sheets once a month. *Someone* being Nora.

Her bed finished, Sophie sat down on the edge and, balancing on her elbows, leaned back and stretched her legs across the space between the two beds to do a light tap dance on the edge of Nora's spread with her bare feet.

Nora had said no fingerprints. She didn't say anything about feet.

When Sophie arrived at Alice's house, she found out that Alice and her mother had gone shopping.

"You just missed them," Alice's dad told her cheerfully, as if knowing how close she had come was supposed to make Sophie feel better. Hearing that her other friend, Jenna, had gone with them made matters even worse.

Sophie pedaled furiously back home to complain. After she put her bike in the garage and started for the house, though, she heard the vacuum cleaner roaring. Knowing that her