

Chapter the First

Beginnings, and the Bazaar

I

“Hole!” said Mr. Polly, and then for a change, and with greatly increased emphasis: “’Ole!” He paused, and then broke out with one of his private and peculiar idioms. “Oh! Beastly Silly Wheeze of a Hole!”

He was sitting on a stile between two threadbare looking fields, and suffering acutely from indigestion.

He suffered from indigestion now nearly every afternoon in his life, but as he lacked introspection he projected the associated discomfort upon the world. Every afternoon he discovered afresh that life as a whole and every aspect of life that presented itself was “beastly”. And this afternoon, lured by the delusive blueness of a sky that was blue because the wind was in the east, he had come out in the hope of snatching something of the joyousness of spring. The mysterious alchemy of mind and body refused, however, to permit any joyousness whatever in the spring.

He had had a little difficulty in finding his cap before he came out. He wanted his cap — the new golf cap — and Mrs. Polly must needs fish out his old soft brown felt hat. “*Ere’s* your ’at,” she said in a tone of insincere encouragement.

He had been routing among the piled newspapers under the kitchen dresser, and had turned quite hopefully and taken the thing. He put it on. But it didn’t feel right. Nothing felt right. He put a trembling hand upon the crown of the thing and pressed it on his head, and tried it askew to the right and then askew to the left.

Then the full sense of the indignity offered him came home to him. The hat masked the upper sinister quarter of his face, and he spoke with a wrathful eye regarding his wife from under the brim. In a voice thick with fury he said: “I s’pose you’d like me to wear that silly Mud Pie for ever, eh? I tell you I won’t. I’m sick of it. I’m pretty near sick of everything, comes to that.... Hat!”

He clutched it with quivering fingers. “Hat!” he repeated. Then he flung it to the ground, and kicked it with extraordinary fury across the kitchen. It flew up against the door and dropped to the ground with its ribbon band half off.

“Shan’t go out!” he said, and sticking his hands into his jacket pockets discovered the missing cap in the right one.

There was nothing for it but to go straight upstairs without a word, and out, slamming the shop door hard.

“Beauty!” said Mrs. Polly at last to a tremendous silence, picking up and dusting the rejected headdress. “Tantrums” she added “I ’aven’t patience.” And moving with the slow reluctance of a deeply offended woman, she began to pile together the simple apparatus of their recent meal, for transportation to the scullery sink.

The repast she had prepared for him did not seem to her to justify his ingratitude. There had been the cold pork from Sunday and some nice cold potatoes, and Rashdall’s Mixed Pickles, of which he was inordinately fond. He had eaten three gherkins, two onions, a small cauliflower head and several capers with every appearance of appetite, and indeed with avidity; and then there had been cold suet pudding to follow, with treacle, and then a nice bit of cheese. It was the pale, hard sort of cheese he liked; red cheese he declared was indigestible. He had also had three big slices of greyish baker’s bread, and had drunk the best part of the jugful of beer.... But there seems to be no pleasing some people.

“Tantrums!” said Mrs. Polly at the sink, struggling with the mustard on his plate and expressing the only solution of the problem that occurred to her.

And Mr. Polly sat on the stile and hated the whole scheme of life — which was at once excessive and inadequate as a solution. He hated Foxbourne, he hated Foxbourne High Street, he hated his shop and his wife and his neighbours — every blessed neighbour — and with indescribable bitterness he hated himself.

“Why did I ever get in this silly Hole?” he said. “Why did I ever?”

He sat on the stile, and looked with eyes that seemed blurred with impalpable flaws at a world in which even the spring buds were wilted, the sunlight metallic and the shadows mixed with blue-black ink.

To the moralist I know he might have served as a figure of sinful discontent, but that is because it is the habit of moralists to ignore material circumstances — if indeed one may speak of a recent meal as a circumstance — with Mr. Polly *circum*. Drink, indeed, our teachers will criticise nowadays both as regards quantity and quality, but neither church nor state nor school will raise a warning finger between a man and his hunger and his wife’s catering. So on nearly every day in his life Mr. Polly fell into a violent rage and hatred against the outer world in the afternoon, and never suspected that it was this inner world to which I am with such masterly delicacy alluding, that was thus reflecting its sinister disorder upon the things without. It is a pity that some human beings are not more transparent. If Mr. Polly, for example, had been transparent or even passably translucent, then perhaps he might have realised from the *Laocoon* struggle he would have glimpsed, that indeed he was not so much a human being as a civil war.

Wonderful things must have been going on inside Mr. Polly. Oh! Wonderful things. It must have been like a badly managed industrial city during a period

of depression; agitators, acts of violence, strikes, the forces of law and order doing their best, rushings to and fro, upheavals, the *Marseillaise*, tumbrils, the rumble and the thunder of the tumbrils....

I do not know why the east wind aggravates life to unhealthy people. It made Mr. Polly's teeth seem loose in his head, and his skin feel like a misfit, and his hair a dry, stringy exasperation....

Why cannot doctors give us an antidote to the east wind?

"Never have the sense to get your hair cut till it's too long" said Mr. Polly, catching sight of his shadow, "you blighted, degenerated Paintbrush! Ugh!" and he flattened down the projecting tails with an urgent hand.

II

Mr. Polly's age was exactly thirty five years and a half. He was a short, compact figure, and a little inclined to a localised *embonpoint*. His face was not unpleasing; the features fine, but a trifle too pointed about the nose to be classically perfect. The corners of his sensitive mouth were depressed. His eyes were ruddy brown and troubled, and the left one was round with more of wonder in it than its fellow. His complexion was dull and yellowish. That, as I have explained, on account of those civil disturbances. He was, in the technical sense of the word, clean shaved, with a small sallow patch under the right ear and a cut on the chin. His brow had the little puckerings of a thoroughly discontented man, little wrinklins and lumps, particularly over his right eye, and he sat with his hands in his pockets, a little askew on the stile and swung one leg. "Hole!" he repeated presently.

He broke into a quavering song. "Ro-o-o-tten Be-e-astly Silly Hole!"

His voice thickened with rage, and the rest of his discourse was marred by an unfortunate choice of epithets.

He was dressed in a shabby black morning coat and vest; the braid that bound these garments was a little loose in places; his collar was chosen from stock and with projecting corners, technically a "wing-poke"; that and his tie, which was new and loose and rich in colouring, had been selected to encourage and stimulate customers — for he dealt in gentlemen's outfitting. His golf cap, which was also from stock and aslant over his eye, gave his misery a desperate touch. He wore brown leather boots — because he hated the smell of blacking.

Perhaps after all it was not simply indigestion that troubled him.

Behind the superficialities of Mr. Polly's being, moved a larger and vaguer distress. The elementary education he had acquired had left him with the impression that arithmetic was a fluky science and best avoided in practical affairs, but even the absence of bookkeeping and a total inability to distinguish

between capital and interest could not blind him for ever to the fact that the little shop in the High Street was not paying. An absence of returns, a constriction of credit, a depleted till, the most valiant resolves to keep smiling, could not prevail for ever against these insistent phenomena. One might bustle about in the morning before dinner, and in the afternoon after tea and forget that huge dark cloud of insolvency that gathered and spread in the background, but it was part of the desolation of these afternoon periods, these grey spaces of time after meals, when all one's courage had descended to the unseen battles of the pit, that life seemed stripped to the bone and one saw with a hopeless clearness.

Let me tell the history of Mr. Polly from the cradle to these present difficulties.

“First the infant, mewling and puking in its nurse's arms.”

There had been a time when two people had thought Mr. Polly the most wonderful and adorable thing in the world, had kissed his toenails, saying “myum, myum,” and marvelled at the exquisite softness and delicacy of his hair, had called to one another to remark the peculiar distinction with which he bubbled, had disputed whether the sound he had made was *just da da*, or truly and intentionally *dadda*, had washed him in the utmost detail, and wrapped him up in soft, warm blankets, and smothered him with kisses. A regal time that was, and four and thirty years ago; and a merciful forgetfulness barred Mr. Polly from ever bringing its careless luxury, its autocratic demands and instant obedience, into contrast with his present condition of life. These two people had worshipped him from the crown of his head to the soles of his exquisite feet. And also they had fed him rather unwisely, for no one had ever troubled to teach his mother anything about the mysteries of a child's upbringing — though of course the monthly nurse and her charwoman gave some valuable hints — and by his fifth birthday the perfect rhythms of his nice new interior were already darkened with perplexity

His mother died when he was seven.

He began only to have distinctive memories of himself in the time when his education had already begun.

I remember seeing a picture of Education — in some place. I think it was Education, but quite conceivably it represented the Empire teaching her Sons, and I have a strong impression that it was a wall painting upon some public building in Manchester or Birmingham or Glasgow, but very possibly I am mistaken about that. It represented a glorious woman with a wise and fearless face stooping over her children and pointing them to far horizons. The sky displayed the pearly warmth of a summer dawn, and all the painting was marvellously bright as if with the youth and hope of the delicately beautiful children in the foreground. She was telling them, one felt, of the great prospect of life that opened before them, of the spectacle of the world, the splendours of sea and mountain they might travel and see, the joys of skill they might acquire, of effort and the pride of effort and the devotions and nobilities it was theirs to

achieve. Perhaps even she whispered of the warm triumphant mystery of love that comes at last to those who have patience and unblemished hearts.... She was reminding them of their great heritage as English children, rulers of more than one fifth of mankind, of the obligation to do and be the best that such a pride of empire entails, of their essential nobility and knighthood and the restraints and the charities and the disciplined strength that is becoming in knights and rulers....

The education of Mr. Polly did not follow this picture very closely. He went for some time to a National School, which was run on severely economical lines to keep down the rates by a largely untrained staff, he was set sums to do that he did not understand, and that no one made him understand, he was made to read the catechism and Bible with the utmost industry and an entire disregard of punctuation or significance, and caused to imitate writing copies and drawing copies, and given object lessons upon sealing wax and silkworms and potato bugs and ginger and iron and such like things, and taught various other subjects his mind refused to entertain, and afterwards, when he was about twelve, he was jerked by his parent to "finish off" in a private school of dingy aspect and still dingier pretensions, where there were no object lessons, and the studies of bookkeeping and French were pursued (but never effectually overtaken) under the guidance of an elderly gentleman who wore a nondescript gown and took snuff, wrote copperplate, explained nothing, and used a cane with remarkable dexterity and gusto.

Mr. Polly went into the National School at six and he left the private school at fourteen, and by that time his mind was in much the same state that you would be in, dear reader, if you were operated upon for appendicitis by a well-meaning, boldly enterprising, but rather overworked and underpaid butcher boy, who was superseded towards the climax of the operation by a left-handed clerk of high principles but intemperate habits — that is to say, it was in a thorough mess. The nice little curiosities and willingnesses of a child were in a jumbled and thwarted condition, hacked and cut about — the operators had left, so to speak, all their sponges and ligatures in the mangled confusion — and Mr. Polly had lost much of his natural confidence, so far as figures and sciences and languages and the possibilities of learning things were concerned. He thought of the present world no longer as a wonderland of experiences, but as geography and history, as the repeating of names that were hard to pronounce, and lists of products and populations and heights and lengths, and as lists and dates — oh! and boredom indescribable. He thought of religion as the recital of more or less incomprehensible words that were hard to remember, and of the Divinity as of a limitless Being having the nature of a schoolmaster and making infinite rules, known and unknown rules, that were always ruthlessly enforced, and with an infinite capacity for punishment and, most horrible of all to think of, limitless powers of espial. (So to the best of his ability he did not think of that unrelenting eye.) He was uncertain about the spelling and pronunciation of most of the words in our beautiful but abundant and perplexing tongue — that especially was a pity because words attracted him, and under happier conditions he might have used them well — he was always doubtful whether it was eight sevens or nine eights that was sixty-three — (he

knew no method for settling the difficulty) and he thought the merit of a drawing consisted in the care with which it was “lined in.” “Lining in” bored him beyond measure.

But the *indigestions* of mind and body that were to play so large a part in his subsequent career were still only beginning. His liver and his gastric juice, his wonder and imagination kept up a fight against the things that threatened to overwhelm soul and body together. Outside the regions devastated by the school curriculum he was still intensely curious. He had cheerful phases of enterprise, and about thirteen he suddenly discovered reading and its joys. He began to read stories voraciously, and books of travel, provided they were also adventurous. He got these chiefly from the local institute, and he also “took in”, irregularly but thoroughly, one of those inspiring weeklies that dull people used to call “penny dreadfuls”, admirable weeklies crammed with imagination that the cheap boys’ “comics” of today have replaced. At fourteen, when he emerged from the valley of the shadow of education, there survived something, indeed it survived still, obscured and thwarted, at five and thirty, that pointed — not with a visible and prevailing finger like the finger of that beautiful woman in the picture, but pointed nevertheless — to the idea that there was interest and happiness in the world. Deep in the being of Mr. Polly, deep in that darkness, like a creature which has been beaten about the head and left for dead but still lives, crawled a persuasion that over and above the things that are jolly and “bits of all right”, there was beauty, there was delight, that somewhere — magically inaccessible perhaps, but still somewhere, were pure and easy and joyous states of body and mind.

He would sneak out on moonless winter nights and stare up at the stars, and afterwards find it difficult to tell his father where he had been.

He would read tales about hunters and explorers, and imagine himself riding mustangs as fleet as the wind across the prairies of Western America, or coming as a conquering and adored white man into the swarming villages of Central Africa. He shot bears with a revolver — a cigarette in the other hand — and made a necklace of their teeth and claws for the chief’s beautiful young daughter. Also he killed a lion with a pointed stake, stabbing through the beast’s heart as it stood over him.

He thought it would be splendid to be a diver and go down into the dark green mysteries of the sea.

He led stormers against well-nigh impregnable forts, and died on the ramparts at the moment of victory. (His grave was watered by a nation’s tears.)

He rammed and torpedoed ships, one against ten.

He was beloved by queens in barbaric lands, and reconciled whole nations to the Christian faith.

He was martyred, and took it very calmly and beautifully — but only once or twice after the Revivalist week. It did not become a habit with him.

He explored the Amazon, and found, newly exposed by the fall of a great tree, a rock of gold.

Engaged in these pursuits he would neglect the work immediately in hand, sitting somewhat slackly on the form and projecting himself in a manner tempting to a schoolmaster with a cane.... And twice he had books confiscated.

Recalled to the realities of life, he would rub himself or sigh deeply as the occasion required, and resume his attempts to write as good as copperplate. He hated writing; the ink always crept up his fingers and the smell of ink offended him. And he was filled with unexpressed doubts. *Why* should writing slope down from right to left? *Why* should downstrokes be thick and upstrokes thin? *Why* should the handle of one's pen point over one's right shoulder?

His copy books towards the end foreshadowed his destiny and took the form of commercial documents. "*Dear Sir,*" they ran "*Referring to your esteemed order of the 26th ult., we beg to inform you*" and so on.

The compression of Mr. Polly's mind and soul in the educational institutions of his time, was terminated abruptly by his father between his fourteenth and fifteenth birthday. His father — who had long since forgotten the time when his son's little limbs seemed to have come straight from God's hand, and when he had kissed five minute toenails in a rapture of loving tenderness — remarked:

"It's time that dratted boy did something for a living."

And a month or so later Mr. Polly began that career in business that led him at last to the sole proprietorship of a bankrupt outfitter's shop — and to the stile on which he was sitting.

III

Mr. Polly was not naturally interested in hosiery and gentlemen's outfitting. At times, indeed, he urged himself to a spurious curiosity about that trade, but presently something more congenial came along and checked the effort. He was apprenticed in one of those large, rather low class establishments which sell everything, from pianos and furniture to books and millinery, a department store in fact, The Port Burdock Drapery Bazaar at Port Burdock, one of the three townships that are grouped around the Port Burdock naval dockyards. There he remained six years. He spent most of the time inattentive to business, in a sort of uncomfortable happiness, increasing his indigestion.

On the whole he preferred business to school; the hours were longer but the tension was not nearly so great. The place was better aired, you were not kept in for no reason at all, and the cane was not employed. You watched the growth

of your moustache with interest and impatience, and mastered the beginnings of social intercourse. You talked, and found there were things amusing to say. Also you had regular pocket money, and a voice in the purchase of your clothes, and presently a small salary. And there were girls. And friendship! In the retrospect Port Burdock sparkled with the facets of quite a cluster of remembered jolly times.

(“Didn’t save much money though” said Mr. Polly.)

The first apprentices’ dormitory was a long bleak room with six beds, six chests of drawers and looking glasses and a number of boxes of wood or tin; it opened into a still longer and bleaker room of eight beds, and this into a third apartment with yellow grained paper and American cloth tables, which was the dining room by day and the men’s sitting and smoking room after nine. Here Mr. Polly, who had been an only child, first tasted the joys of social intercourse. At first there were attempts to bully him on account of his refusal to consider face washing a diurnal duty, but two fights with the apprentices next above him, established a useful reputation for choler, and the presence of girl apprentices in the shop somehow raised his standard of cleanliness to a more acceptable level. He didn’t of course have very much to do with the feminine staff in his department, but he spoke to them casually as he traversed foreign parts of the Bazaar, or got out of their way politely, or helped them to lift down heavy boxes, and on such occasions he felt their scrutiny. Except in the course of business or at meal times the men and women of the establishment had very little opportunity of meeting; the men were in their rooms and the girls in theirs. Yet these feminine creatures, at once so near and so remote, affected him profoundly. He would watch them going to and fro, and marvel secretly at the beauty of their hair or the roundness of their necks or the warm softness of their cheeks or the delicacy of their hands. He would fall into passions for them at dinner time, and try and show devotions by his manner of passing the bread and margarine at tea. There was a very fair haired, fair skinned apprentice in the adjacent haberdashery to whom he said “good-morning” every morning, and for a period it seemed to him the most significant event in his day. When she said, “I *do* hope it will be fine tomorrow,” he felt it marked an epoch. He had had no sisters, and was innately disposed to worship womankind. But he did not betray as much to Platt and Parsons.

To Platt and Parsons he affected an attitude of seasoned depravity towards womankind. Platt and Parsons were his contemporary apprentices in departments of the drapery shop, and the three were drawn together into a close friendship by the fact that all their names began with P. They decided they were the Three Ps, and went about together of an evening with the bearing of desperate dogs. Sometimes, when they had money, they went into public houses and had drinks. Then they would become more desperate than ever, and walk along the pavement under the gas lamps arm in arm singing. Platt had a good tenor voice, and had been in a church choir, and so he led the singing; Parsons had a serviceable bellow, which roared and faded and roared again very wonderfully; Mr. Polly’s share was an extraordinary lowing noise, a sort of flat recitative which he called “singing seconds.” They would have sung

catches if they had known how to do it, but as it was they sang melancholy music hall songs about dying soldiers and the old folks far away.

They would sometimes go into the quieter residential quarters of Port Burdock, where policemen and other obstacles were infrequent, and really let their voices soar like hawks and feel very happy. The dogs of the district would be stirred to hopeless emulation, and would keep it up for long after the Three Ps had been swallowed up by the night. One jealous brute of an Irish terrier made a gallant attempt to bite Parsons, but was beaten by numbers and solidarity.

The Three Ps took the utmost interest in each other and found no other company so good. They talked about everything in the world, and would go on talking in their dormitory after the gas was out until the other men were reduced to throwing boots; they skulked from their departments in the slack hours of the afternoon to gossip in the packing room of the warehouse; on Sundays and Bank holidays they went for long walks together, talking.

Platt was white faced and dark, and disposed to undertones and mystery and a curiosity about society and the *demi monde*. He kept himself *au courant* by reading a penny paper of infinite suggestion called *Modern Society*. Parsons was of an ampler build, already promising fatness, with curly hair and a lot of rolling, rollicking, curly features, and a large blob shaped nose. He had a great memory and a real interest in literature. He knew great portions of Shakespeare and Milton by heart, and would recite them at the slightest provocation. He read everything he could get hold of, and if he liked it he read it aloud. It did not matter who else liked it. At first Mr. Polly was disposed to be suspicious of this literature, but was carried away by Parsons' enthusiasm. The Three Ps went to a performance of "Romeo and Juliet" at the Port Burdock Theatre Royal, and hung over the gallery fascinated. After that they made a sort of password of: "Do you bite your thumbs at Us, Sir?"

To which the countersign was: "We bite our thumbs."

For weeks the glory of Shakespeare's Verona lit Mr. Polly's life. He walked as though he carried a sword at his side, and swung a mantle from his shoulders. He went through the grimy streets of Port Burdock with his eye on the first floor windows — looking for balconies. A ladder in the yard flooded his mind with romantic ideas. Then Parsons discovered an Italian writer, whose name Mr. Polly rendered as "Bocashieu," and after some excursions into that author's remains the talk of Parsons became infested with the word "*amours*," and Mr. Polly would stand in front of his hosiery fixtures trifling with paper and string and thinking of perennial picnics under dark olive trees in the everlasting sunshine of Italy.

And about that time it was that all Three Ps adopted turn-down collars and large, loose, artistic silk ties, which they tied very much on one side and wore with an air of defiance. And a certain swashbuckling carriage.

And then came the glorious revelation of that great Frenchman whom Mr. Polly called "Rabooloose." The Three Ps thought the birth feast of Gargantua the most glorious piece of writing in the world, and I am not certain they were wrong, and on wet Sunday evenings where there was danger of hymn singing they would get Parsons to read it aloud.

Towards the several members of the Y. M. C. A. who shared the dormitory, the Three Ps always maintained a sarcastic and defiant attitude.

"We got a perfect right to do what we like in our corner" Platt maintained. "You do what you like in yours."

"But the language!" objected Morrison, the white faced, earnest eyed improver, who was leading a profoundly religious life under great difficulties.

"*Language, man!*" roared Parsons "Why, it's *Literature!*"

"Sunday isn't the time for Literature."

"It's the only time we've got. And besides —"

The horrors of religious controversy would begin....

Mr. Polly stuck loyally to the Three Ps, but in the secret places of his heart he was torn. A fire of conviction burnt in Morrison's eyes and spoke in his urgent persuasive voice; he lived the better life manifestly, chaste in word and deed, industrious, studiously kindly. When the junior apprentice had sore feet and homesickness Morrison washed the feet and comforted the heart, and he helped other men to get through with their work when he might have gone early, a superhuman thing to do. Polly was secretly a little afraid to be left alone with this man and the power of the spirit that was in him. He felt watched.

Platt, also struggling with things his mind could not contrive to reconcile, said "that confounded hypocrite."

"He's no hypocrite" said Parsons, "he's no hypocrite, O' Man. But he's got no blessed Joy de Vive; that's what's wrong with him. Let's go down to the Harbour Arms and see some of those blessed old captains getting drunk."

"Short of sugar, O' Man" said Mr. Polly, slapping his trouser pocket.

"Oh, *carm* on" said Parsons. "Always do it on tuppence for a bitter."

"Lemme get my pipe on" said Platt, who had recently taken to smoking with great ferocity. "Then I'm with you."

Pause and struggle.

“Don’t ram it down, O’ Man” said Parsons, watching with knitted brows. “Don’t ram it down. Give it Air. Seen my stick, O’ Man? Right O.”

And leaning on his cane he composed himself in an attitude of sympathetic patience towards Platt’s incendiary efforts.

IV

Jolly days of companionship they were for the incipient bankrupt on the stile to look back upon.

The interminable working hours of the Bazaar had long since faded from his memory — except for one or two conspicuous rows and one or two larks — but the rare Sundays and holidays shone out like diamonds among pebbles. They shone with the mellow splendour of evening skies reflected in calm water, and athwart them all went old Parsons bellowing an interpretation of life, gesticulating, appreciating and making appreciate, expounding books, talking of that mystery of his, the “Joy de Vive”.

There were some particularly splendid walks on Bank holidays. The Three Ps would start on Sunday morning early and find a room in some modest inn and talk themselves asleep, and return singing through the night, or having an “argy bargy” about the stars, on Monday evening. They would come over the hills out of the pleasant English countryside in which they had wandered, and see Port Burdock spread out below, a network of interlacing street lamps and shifting tram lights against the black, beacon gemmed immensity of the harbour waters.

“Back to the collar, O’ Man” Parsons would say. There is no satisfactory plural to O’ Man, so he always used it in the singular.

“Don’t mention it” said Platt.

And once they got a boat for the whole summer day, and rowed up past the moored ironclads and the black old hulks and the various shipping of the harbour, past a white troopship and past the trim front and the ships and interesting vistas of the dockyard to the shallow channels and rocky weedy wildernesses of the upper harbour. And Parsons and Mr. Polly had a great dispute and quarrel that day as to how far a big gun could shoot.

The country over the hills behind Port Burdock is all that an old-fashioned, scarcely disturbed English countryside should be. In those days the bicycle was still rare and costly and the motor car had yet to come and stir up rural serenities. The Three Ps would take footpaths haphazard across fields, and plunge into unknown winding lanes between high hedges of honeysuckle and dog rose. Greatly daring, they would follow green bridle paths through primrose studded undergrowths, or wander waist deep in the bracken of beech woods. About twenty miles from Port Burdock there came a region of hop gardens and hoar crowned farms, and further on, to be reached only by cheap tickets at

Bank Holiday times, was a sterile ridge of very clean roads and red sand pits and pines and gorse and heather. The Three Ps could not afford to buy bicycles and they found boots the greatest item of their skimpy expenditure. They threw appearances to the winds at last and got readymade workingmen's hobnails. There was much discussion and strong feeling over this step in the dormitory.

There is no countryside like the English countryside for those who have learnt to love it; its firm yet gentle lines of hill and dale, its ordered confusion of features, its deer parks and Down land, its castles and stately houses, its hamlets and old churches, its farms and ricks and great barns and ancient trees, its pools and ponds and shining threads of rivers; its flower starred hedgerows, its orchards and woodland patches, its village greens and kindly inns. Other countrysides have their pleasant aspects, but none such variety, none that shine so steadfastly throughout the year. Picardy is pink and white and pleasant in the blossom time, Burgundy goes on with its sunshine and wide hillsides and cramped vineyards, a beautiful tune repeated and repeated, Italy gives salitas and wayside chapels and chestnuts and olive orchards, the Ardennes has its woods and gorges — Touraine and the Rhineland, the wide Campagna with its distant Apennines, and the neat prosperities and mountain backgrounds of South Germany, all clamour their especial merits at one's memory. And there are the hills and fields of Virginia, like an England grown very big and slovenly, the woods and big river sweeps of Pennsylvania, the trim New England landscape, a little bleak and rather fine like the New England mind, and the wide rough country roads and hills and woodland of New York State. But none of these change scene and character in three miles of walking, nor have so mellow a sunlight nor so diversified a cloudland, nor confess the perpetual refreshment of the strong soft winds that blow from off the sea as our Mother England does.

It was good for the Three Ps to walk through such a land and forget for a time that indeed they had no footing in it all, that they were doomed to toil behind counters in such places as Port Burdock for the better part of their lives. They would forget the customers and shopwalkers and department buyers and everything, and become just happy wanderers in a world of pleasant breezes and song birds and shady trees.

The arrival at the inn was a great affair. No one, they were convinced, would take them for drapers, and there might be a pretty serving girl or a jolly old lady, or what Parsons called a "bit of character" drinking in the bar.

There would always be weighty enquiries as to what they could have, and it would work out always at cold beef and pickles, or fried ham and eggs and shandygaff, two pints of beer and two bottles of ginger beer foaming in a huge round bellied jug.

The glorious moment of standing lordly in the inn doorway, and staring out at the world, the swinging sign, the geese upon the green, the duck pond, a waiting waggon, the church tower, a sleepy cat, the blue heavens, with the sizzle of the frying audible behind one! The keen smell of the bacon! The trotting of

feet bearing the repast; the click and clatter as the tableware is finally arranged!
A clean white cloth!

“Ready, Sir!” or “Ready, Gentlemen.” Better hearing that than “Forward Polly!
look sharp!”

The going in! The sitting down! The falling to!

“Bread, O’ Man?”

“Right ’O! Don’t bag all the crust, O’ Man.”

Once a simple mannered girl in a pink print dress stayed and talked with them as they ate; led by the gallant Parsons they professed to be all desperately in love with her, and courted her to say which she preferred of them, it was so manifest she did prefer one and so impossible to say which it was held her there, until a distant maternal voice called her away. Afterwards as they left the inn she waylaid them at the orchard corner and gave them, a little shyly, three keen yellow-green apples — and wished them to come again someday, and vanished, and reappeared looking after them as they turned the corner — waving a white handkerchief. All the rest of that day they disputed over the signs of her favour, and the next Sunday they went there again.

But she had vanished, and a mother of forbidding aspect afforded no explanations.

If Platt and Parsons and Mr. Polly live to be a hundred, they will none of them forget that girl as she stood with a pink flush upon her, faintly smiling and yet earnest, parting the branches of the hedgerows and reaching down apple in hand. Which of them was it, had caught her spirit to attend to them?...

And once they went along the coast, following it as closely as possible, and so came at last to Foxbourne, that easternmost suburb of Brayling and Hampsted-on-the-Sea.

Foxbourne seemed a very jolly little place to Mr. Polly that afternoon. It has a clean sandy beach instead of the mud and pebbles and coaly *défilements* of Port Burdock, a row of six bathing machines, and a shelter on the parade in which the Three Ps sat after a satisfying but rather expensive lunch that had included celery. Rows of verandad villas proffered apartments, they had feasted in an hotel with a porch painted white and gay with geraniums above, and the High Street with the old church at the head had been full of an agreeable afternoon stillness.

“Nice little place for business” said Platt sagely from behind his big pipe.

It stuck in Mr. Polly’s memory.

V

Mr. Polly was not so picturesque a youth as Parsons. He lacked richness in his voice, and went about in those days with his hands in his pockets looking quietly speculative.

He specialised in slang and the disuse of English, and he played the rôle of an appreciative stimulant to Parsons. Words attracted him curiously, words rich in suggestion, and he loved a novel and striking phrase. His school training had given him little or no mastery of the mysterious pronunciation of English and no confidence in himself. His schoolmaster indeed had been both unsound and variable. New words had terror and fascination for him; he did not acquire them, he could not avoid them, and so he plunged into them. His only rule was not to be misled by the spelling. That was no guide anyhow. He avoided every recognised phrase in the language and mispronounced everything in order that he shouldn't be suspected of ignorance, but whim.

“Sesquippedan” he would say. “Sesquippedan verboojuice.”

“Eh?” said Platt.

“Eloquent Rapsodooce.”

“Where?” asked Platt.

“In the warehouse, O' Man. All among the tablecloths and blankets. Carlyle. He's reading aloud. Doing the High Froth. Spuming! Windmilling! Waw, waw! It's a sight worth seeing. He'll bark his blessed knuckles one of these days on the fixtures, O' Man.”

He held an imaginary book in one hand and waved an eloquent gesture. “So too shall every Hero inasmuch as notwithstanding for evermore come back to Reality” he parodied the enthusiastic Parsons, “so that in fashion and thereby, upon things and not *under* things articularly He stands.”

“I should laugh if the Governor dropped on him” said Platt. “He'd never hear him coming.”

“The O' Man's drunk with it — fair drunk” said Polly. “I never did. It's worse than when he got on to Raboloose.”

Chapter the Second

The Dismissal of Parsons

I

Suddenly Parsons got himself dismissed.

He got himself dismissed under circumstances of peculiar violence, that left a deep impression on Mr. Polly's mind. He wondered about it for years afterwards, trying to get the rights of the case.

Parsons' apprenticeship was over; he had reached the status of an Improver, and he dressed the window of the Manchester department. By all the standards available he dressed it very well. By his own standards he dressed it wonderfully. "Well, O' Man" he used to say "there's one thing about my position here — I *can* dress a window."

And when trouble was under discussion he would hold that "little Fluffums" — which was the apprentices' name for Mr. Garvace, the senior partner and managing director of the Bazaar — would think twice before he got rid of the only man in the place who could make a windowful of Manchester goods *tell*.

Then like many a fellow artist he fell a prey to theories.

"The art of window dressing is in its infancy, O' Man — in its blooming Infancy. All balance and stiffness like a blessed Egyptian picture. No Joy in it, no blooming Joy! Conventional. A shop window ought to get hold of people, *grip* 'em as they go along. It stands to reason. Grip!"

His voice would sink to a kind of quiet bellow. "Do they grip?"

Then after a pause, a savage roar; "*Naw!*"

"He's got a Heavy on" said Mr. Polly. "Go it, O' Man; let's have some more of it."

"Look at old Morrison's dress stuff windows! Tidy, tasteful, correct, I grant you, but Bleak!" He let out the word reinforced to a shout; "Bleak!"

"Bleak!" echoed Mr. Polly.

"Just pieces of stuff in rows, rows of tidy little puffs, perhaps one bit just unrolled, quiet tickets."

"Might as well be in church, O' Man" said Mr. Polly.

“A window ought to be exciting” said Parsons; “it ought to make you say: El-lo! when you see it.”

He paused, and Platt watched him over a snorting pipe.

“Rockcockyo,” said Mr. Polly.

“We want a new school of window dressing” said Parsons, regardless of the comment. “A New School! The Port Burdock school. Day after tomorrow I change the Fitzallan Street stuff. This time, it’s going to be a change. I mean to have a crowd or bust!”

And as a matter of fact he did both.

His voice dropped to a note of self-reproach. “I’ve been timid, O’ Man. I’ve been holding myself in. I haven’t done myself Justice. I’ve kept down the simmering, seething, teeming ideas.... All that’s over now.”

“Over” gulped Polly.

“Over for good and all, O’ Man.”

II

Platt came to Polly, who was sorting up collar boxes. “O’ Man’s doing his Blooming Window.”

“What window?”

“What he said.”

Polly remembered.

He went on with his collar boxes with his eye on his senior, Mansfield. Mansfield was presently called away to the counting house, and instantly Polly shot out by the street door, and made a rapid transit along the street front past the Manchester window, and so into the silk room door. He could not linger long, but he gathered joy, a swift and fearful joy, from his brief inspection of Parsons’ unconscious back. Parsons had his tail coat off and was working with vigour; his habit of pulling his waistcoat straps to the utmost brought out all the agreeable promise of corpulence in his youthful frame. He was blowing excitedly and running his fingers through his hair, and then moving with all the swift eagerness of a man inspired. All about his feet and knees were scarlet blankets, not folded, not formally unfolded, but — the only phrase is — shied about. And a great bar sinister of roller towelling stretched across the front of the window on which was a ticket, and the ticket said in bold black letters: “LOOK!”

So soon as Mr. Polly got into the silk department and met Platt he knew he had not lingered nearly long enough outside. "Did you see the boards at the back?" said Platt.

He hadn't. "The High Egrugious is fairly On" he said, and dived down to return by devious subterranean routes to the outfitting department.

Presently the street door opened and Platt, with an air of intense devotion to business assumed to cover his adoption of that unusual route, came in and made for the staircase down to the warehouse. He rolled up his eyes at Polly. "Oh *Lor!*" he said and vanished.

Irresistible curiosity seized Polly. Should he go through the shop to the Manchester department, or risk a second transit outside?

He was impelled to make a dive at the street door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mansfield.

"Lill Dog," said Polly with an air of lucid explanation, and left him to get any meaning he could from it.

Parsons was worth the subsequent trouble. Parsons really was extremely rich. This time Polly stopped to take it in.

Parsons had made a huge symmetrical pile of thick white and red blankets twisted and rolled to accentuate their woolly richness, heaped up in a warm disorder, with large window tickets inscribed in blazing red letters: "Cosy Comfort at Cut Prices" and "Curl up and Cuddle below Cost". Regardless of the daylight he had turned up the electric light on that side of the window to reflect a warm glow upon the heap, and behind, in pursuit of contrasted bleakness, he was now hanging long strips of grey silesia and chilly coloured linen dusterings.

It was wonderful, but —

Mr. Polly decided that it was time he went in. He found Platt in the silk department, apparently on the verge of another plunge into the exterior world. "Cosy Comfort at Cut Prices" said Polly. "Allittritions Artful Aid."

He did not dare go into the street for the third time, and he was hovering feverishly near the window when he saw the governor, Mr. Garvace, that is to say, the managing director of the Bazaar, walking along the pavement after his manner to assure himself all was well with the establishment he guided.

Mr. Garvace was a short stout man, with that air of modest pride that so often goes with corpulence, choleric and decisive in manner, and with hands that looked like bunches of fingers. He was red haired and ruddy, and after the custom of such *complexions*, hairs sprang from the tip of his nose. When he

wished to bring the power of the human eye to bear upon an assistant, he projected his chest, knitted one brow and partially closed the left eyelid.

An expression of speculative wonder overspread the countenance of Mr. Polly. He felt he must *see*. Yes, whatever happened he must *see*.

“Want to speak to Parsons, Sir” he said to Mr. Mansfield, and deserted his post hastily, dashed through the intervening departments and was in position behind a pile of Bolton sheeting as the governor came in out of the street.

“What on Earth do you think you are doing with that window, Parsons?” began Mr. Garvace.

Only the legs of Parsons and the lower part of his waistcoat and an intervening inch of shirt were visible. He was standing inside the window on the steps, hanging up the last strip of his background from the brass rail along the ceiling. Within, the Manchester shop window was cut off by a partition rather like the partition of an old-fashioned church pew from the general space of the shop. There was a panelled barrier, that is to say, with a little door like a pew door in it. Parsons’ face appeared, staring with round eyes at his employer.

Mr. Garvace had to repeat his question.

“Dressing it, Sir — on new lines.”

“Come out of it” said Mr. Garvace.

Parsons stared, and Mr. Garvace had to repeat his command.

Parsons, with a dazed expression, began to descend the steps slowly.

Mr. Garvace turned about. “Where’s Morrison? Morrison!”

Morrison appeared.

“Take this window over” said Mr. Garvace pointing his bunch of fingers at Parsons. “Take all this muddle out and dress it properly.”

Morrison advanced and hesitated.

“I beg your pardon, Sir” said Parsons with an immense politeness, “but this is *my* window.”

“Take it all out” said Mr. Garvace, turning away.

Morrison advanced. Parsons shut the door with a click that arrested Mr. Garvace.

“Come out of that window” he said. “You can’t dress it. If you want to play the fool with a window ——”

“This window’s All Right” said the genius in window dressing, and there was a little pause.

“Open the door and go right in,” said Mr. Garvace to Morrison.

“You leave that door alone, Morrison” said Parsons.

Polly was no longer even trying to hide behind the stack of Bolton sheetings. He realised he was in the presence of forces too stupendous to heed him.

“Get him out” said Mr. Garvace.

Morrison seemed to be thinking out the ethics of his position. The idea of loyalty to his employer prevailed with him. He laid his hand on the door to open it; Parsons tried to disengage his hand. Mr. Garvace joined his effort to Morrison’s. Then the heart of Polly leapt and the world blazed up to wonder and splendour. Parsons disappeared behind the partition for a moment and reappeared instantly, gripping a thin cylinder of rolled huckaback. With this he smote at Morrison’s head. Morrison’s head ducked under the resounding impact, but he clung on and so did Mr. Garvace. The door came open, and then Mr. Garvace was staggering back, hand to head; his autocratic, his sacred baldness, smitten. Parsons was beyond all control — a strangeness, a marvel. Heaven knows how the artistic struggle had strained that richly endowed temperament. “Say I can’t dress a window, you thundering old Humbug” he said, and hurled the huckaback at his master. He followed this up by hurling first a blanket, then an armful of silesia, then a window support out of the window into the shop. It leapt into Polly’s mind that Parsons hated his own effort and was glad to demolish it. For a crowded second Polly’s mind was concentrated upon Parsons, infuriated, active, like a figure of earthquake with its coat off, shying things headlong.

Then he perceived the back of Mr. Garvace and heard his gubernatorial voice crying to no one in particular and everybody in general: “Get him out of the window. He’s mad. He’s dangerous. Get him out of the window.”

Then a crimson blanket was for a moment over the head of Mr. Garvace, and his voice, muffled for an instant, broke out into unwonted expletive.

Then people had arrived from all parts of the Bazaar. Luck, the ledger clerk, blundered against Polly, and said “Help him!” Somerville from the silks vaulted the counter, and seized a chair by the back. Polly lost his head. He clawed at the Bolton sheeting before him, and if he could have detached a piece he would certainly have hit somebody with it. As it was he simply upset the pile. It fell away from Polly, and he had an impression of somebody squeaking as it went down. It was the sort of impression one disregards. The collapse of the pile of goods just sufficed to end his subconscious efforts to get something to hit

somebody with, and his whole attention focussed itself upon the struggle in the window. For a splendid instant Parsons towered up over the active backs that clustered about the shop window door, an active whirl of gesture, tearing things down and throwing them, and then he went under. There was an instant's furious struggle, a crash, a second crash and the crack of broken plate glass. Then a stillness and heavy breathing.

Parsons was overpowered....

Polly, stepping over scattered pieces of Bolton sheeting, saw his transfigured friend with a dark cut, that was not at present bleeding, on the forehead, one arm held by Somerville and the other by Morrison.

"You — you — you — you annoyed me," said Parsons, sobbing for breath.

III

There are events that detach themselves from the general stream of occurrences and seem to partake of the nature of revelations. Such was this Parsons affair. It began by seeming grotesque; it ended disconcertingly. The fabric of Mr. Polly's daily life was torn, and beneath it he discovered depths and terrors.

Life was not altogether a lark.

The calling in of a policeman seemed at the moment a pantomime touch. But when it became manifest that Mr. Garvace was in a fury of vindictiveness, the affair took on a different complexion. The way in which the policeman made a note of everything and aspirated nothing impressed the sensitive mind of Polly profoundly. Polly presently found himself straightening up ties to the refrain of "'E then 'It you on the 'Ed and ——"

In the dormitory that night Parsons had become heroic. He sat on the edge of the bed with his head bandaged, packing very slowly and insisting over and again: "He ought to have left my window alone, O' Man. He didn't ought to have touched my window."

Polly was to go to the police court in the morning as a witness. The terror of that ordeal almost overshadowed the tragic fact that Parsons was not only summoned for assault, but "swapped", and packing his box. Polly knew himself well enough to know he would make a bad witness. He felt sure of one fact only, namely, that "'E then 'It 'Im on the 'Ed and ——" All the rest danced about in his mind now, and how it would dance about on the morrow Heaven only knew. Would there be a cross examination? Is it perjocery to make a slip? People didsometimes perjuice themselves. Serious offence.

Platt was doing his best to help Parsons, and inciting public opinion against Morrison. But Parsons would not hear of anything against Morrison. "He was

all right, O' Man — according to his lights" said Parsons. "It isn't him I complain of."

He speculated on the morrow. "I shall 'ave to pay a fine" he said. "No good trying to get out of it. It's true I hit him. I hit him" — he paused and seemed to be seeking an exquisite accuracy. His voice sank to a confidential note; — "On the head — about here."

He answered the suggestion of a bright junior apprentice in a corner of the dormitory. "What's the Good of a Cross summons?" he replied; "with old Corks, the chemist, and Mottishead, the house agent, and all that lot on the Bench? Humble Pie, that's my meal tomorrow, O' Man. Humble Pie."

Packing went on for a time.

"But Lord! what a Life it is!" said Parsons, giving his deep notes scope. "Ten thirty five a man trying to do his Duty, mistaken perhaps, but trying his best; ten forty — Ruined! Ruined!" He lifted his voice to a shout. "Ruined!" and dropped it to "Like an earthquake."

"Heated altaclation" said Polly.

"Like a blooming earthquake!" said Parsons, with the notes of a rising wind.

He meditated gloomily upon his future and a colder chill invaded Polly's mind. "Likely to get another crib, ain't I — with assaulted the guvnor on my reference. I suppose, though, he won't give me refs. Hard enough to get a crib at the best of times," said Parsons.

"You ought to go round with a show, O' Man" said Mr. Polly.

Things were not so dreadful in the police court as Mr. Polly had expected. He was given a seat with other witnesses against the wall of the court, and after an interesting larceny case Parsons appeared and stood, not in the dock, but at the table. By that time Mr. Polly's legs, which had been tucked up at first under his chair out of respect to the court, were extended straight before him and his hands were in his trouser pockets. He was inventing names for the four magistrates on the bench, and had got to "the Grave and Reverend Signor with the palatial Boko" when his thoughts were recalled to gravity by the sound of his name. He rose with alacrity and was fielded by an expert policeman from a brisk attempt to get into the vacant dock. The clerk to the Justices repeated the oath with incredible rapidity.

"Right 'O" said Mr. Polly, but quite respectfully, and kissed the book.

His evidence was simple and quite audible after one warning from the superintendent of police to "speak up." He tried to put in a good word for Parsons by saying he was "naturally of a choleraic disposition", but the start and the slow grin of enjoyment upon the face of the grave and Reverend Signor

with the palatial Boko suggested that the word was not so good as he had thought it. The rest of the bench was frankly puzzled and there were hasty consultations.

“You mean ’E ’As a ’Ot temper,” said the presiding magistrate.

“I mean ’E ’As a ’Ot temper” replied Polly, magically incapable of aspirates for the moment.

“You don’t mean ’E ketches cholera.”

“I mean — he’s easily put out.”

“Then why can’t you say so?” said the presiding magistrate.

Parsons was bound over.

He came for his luggage while everyone was in the shop, and Garvace would not let him invade the business to say goodbye. When Mr. Polly went upstairs for margarine and bread and tea, he slipped on into the dormitory at once to see what was happening further in the Parsons case. But Parsons had vanished. There was no Parsons, no trace of Parsons. His cubicle was swept and garnished. For the first time in his life Polly had a sense of irreparable loss.

A minute or so after Platt dashed in.

“Ugh!” he said, and then discovered Polly. Polly was leaning out of the window and did not look around. Platt went up to him.

“He’s gone already,” said Platt. “Might have stopped to say goodbye to a chap.”

There was a little pause before Polly replied. He thrust his finger into his mouth and gulped.

“Bit on that beastly tooth of mine,” he said, still not looking at Platt. “It’s made my eyes water, something chronic. Any one might think I’d been doing a blooming Pipe, by the look of me.”