

Chapter the Third

Cribs

I

Port Burdock was never the same place for Mr. Polly after Parsons had left it. There were no chest notes in his occasional letters, and little of the "Joy de Vive" got through by them. Parsons had gone, he said, to London, and found a place as warehouseman in a cheap outfitting shop near St. Paul's Churchyard, where references were not required. It became apparent as time passed that new interests were absorbing him. He wrote of socialism and the rights of man, things that had no appeal for Mr. Polly. He felt strangers had got hold of his Parsons, were at work upon him, making him into someone else, something less picturesque.... Port Burdock became a dreariness full of faded memories of Parsons and work a bore. Platt revealed himself alone as a tiresome companion, obsessed by romantic ideas about intrigues and vices and "society women".

Mr. Polly's depression manifested itself in a general slackness. A certain impatience in the manner of Mr. Garvace presently got upon his nerves. Relations were becoming strained. He asked for a rise of salary to test his position, and gave notice to leave when it was refused.

It took him two months to place himself in another situation, and during that time he had quite a disagreeable amount of loneliness, disappointment, anxiety and humiliation.

He went at first to stay with a married cousin who had a house at Easewood. His widowed father had recently given up the music and bicycle shop (with the post of organist at the parish church) that had sustained his home, and was living upon a small annuity as a guest with this cousin, and growing a little tiresome on account of some mysterious internal discomfort that the local practitioner diagnosed as imagination. He had aged with mysterious rapidity and become excessively irritable, but the cousin's wife was a born manager, and contrived to get along with him. Our Mr. Polly's status was that of a guest pure and simple, but after a fortnight of congested hospitality in which he wrote nearly a hundred letters beginning:

Sir:

Referring to your advt. in the "Christian World" for an improver in Gents' outfitting I beg to submit myself for the situation. Have had six years' experience....

and upset a bottle of ink over a toilet cover and the bedroom carpet, his cousin took him for a walk and pointed out the superior advantages of apartments in London from which to swoop upon the briefly yawning vacancy.

“Helpful” said Mr. Polly; “very helpful, O’ Man indeed. I might have gone on there for weeks” and packed.

He got a room in an institution that was partly a benevolent hostel for men in his circumstances and partly a high minded but forbidding coffee house and a centre for pleasant Sunday afternoons. Mr. Polly spent a critical but pleasant Sunday afternoon in a back seat, inventing such phrases as:

“Soulful Owner of the Exorbiant Largenial Development.” — An Adam’s Apple being in question.

“Earnest Joy.”

“Exultant, Urgent Loogoobuosity.”

A manly young curate, marking and misunderstanding his preoccupied face and moving lips, came and sat by him and entered into conversation with the idea of making him feel more at home. The conversation was awkward and disconnected for a minute or so, and then suddenly a memory of the Port Burdock Bazaar occurred to Mr. Polly, and with a baffling whisper of “Lill’ dog” and a reassuring nod, he rose up and escaped, to wander out relieved and observant into the varied London streets.

He found the collection of men he found waiting about in wholesale establishments in Wood Street and St. Paul’s Churchyard (where they interview the buyers who have come up from the country) interesting and stimulating, but far too strongly charged with the suggestion of his own fate to be really joyful. There were men in all degrees between confidence and distress, and in every stage between extravagant smartness and the last stages of decay. There were sunny young men full of an abounding and elbowing energy, before whom the soul of Polly sank in hate and dismay. “Smart Juniors” said Polly to himself, “full of Smart Juniosity. The Shoveacious Cult.” There were hungry looking individuals of thirty five or so that he decided must be “Proletelerians” — he had often wanted to find someone who fitted that attractive word. Middle-aged men, “too Old at Forty”, discoursed in the waiting rooms on the outlook in the trade; it had never been so bad, they said, while Mr. Polly wondered if “De-juiced” was a permissible epithet. There were men with an overweening sense of their importance, manifestly annoyed and angry to find themselves still disengaged, and inclined to suspect a plot, and men so faint hearted one was terrified to imagine their behaviour when it came to an interview. There was a fresh faced young man with an unintelligent face who seemed to think himself equipped against the world beyond all misadventure by a collar of exceptional height, and another who introduced a note of gaiety by wearing a flannel shirt and a check suit of remarkable virulence. Every day Mr. Polly looked round to mark how many of the familiar faces had gone, and the deepening anxiety (reflecting his own) on the faces that remained, and every day some new type joined the drifting shoal. He realised how small a chance his poor letter from Easewood ran against this hungry cluster of competitors at the fountain head.

At the back of Mr. Polly's mind while he made his observations was a disagreeable flavour of dentist's parlour. At any moment his name might be shouted, and he might have to haul himself into the presence of some fresh specimen of employer, and to repeat once more his passionate protestation of interest in the business, his possession of a capacity for zeal — zeal on behalf of anyone who would pay him a yearly salary of twenty six pounds a year.

The prospective employer would unfold his ideals of the employee. "I want a smart, willing young man, thoroughly willing — who won't object to take trouble. I don't want a slacker, the sort of fellow who has to be pushed up to his work and held there. I've got no use for him."

At the back of Mr. Polly's mind, and quite beyond his control, the insubordinate phrasemaker would be proffering such combinations as "Chubby Chops" or "Chubby Charmer" as suitable for the gentleman, very much as a hat salesman proffers hats.

"I don't think you'd find much slackness about *me*, sir," said Mr. Polly brightly, trying to disregard his deeper self.

"I want a young man who means getting on."

"Exactly, sir. Excelsior."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said excelsior, sir. It's a sort of motto of mine. From Longfellow. Would you want me to serve through?"

The chubby gentleman explained and reverted to his ideals, with a faint air of suspicion. "Do *you* mean getting on?" he asked.

"I hope so, sir," said Mr. Polly.

"Get on or get out, eh?"

Mr. Polly made a rapturous noise, nodded appreciation, and said indistinctly — "*Quite_* my style."

"Some of my people have been with me twenty years" said the employer. "My Manchester buyer came to me as a boy of twelve. You're a Christian?"

"Church of England" said Mr. Polly.

"H'm" said the employer a little checked. "For good all round business work I should have preferred a Baptist. Still — "

He studied Mr. Polly's tie, which was severely neat and businesslike, as became an aspiring outfitter. Mr. Polly's conception of his own pose and

expression was rendered by that uncontrollable phrasemonger at the back as "Obsequies Deference".

"I am inclined," said the prospective employer in a conclusive manner, "to look up your reference."

Mr. Polly stood up abruptly.

"Thank you," said the employer and dismissed him.

"Chump chops! How about chump chops?" said the phrasemonger with an air of inspiration.

"I hope then to hear from you, sir" said Mr. Polly in his best salesman manner.

"If everything is satisfactory" said the prospective employer.

II

A man whose brain devotes its hinterland to making odd phrases and nicknames out of ill-conceived words, whose conception of life is a lump of auriferous rock to which all the value is given by rare veins of unbusinesslike joy, who reads Boccaccio and Rabelais and Shakespeare with gusto, and uses "Stertoraneous Shower" and "Smart Junior" as terms of bitterest opprobrium, is not likely to make a great success under modern business conditions. Mr. Polly dreamt always of picturesque and mellow things, and had an instinctive hatred of the strenuous life. He would have resisted the spell of ex-President Roosevelt, or General Baden Powell, or Mr. Peter Keary, or the late Dr. Samuel Smiles, quite easily; and he loved Falstaff and Hudibras and coarse laughter, and the old England of Washington Irving and the memory of Charles the Second's courtly days. His progress was necessarily slow. He did not get rises; he lost situations; there was something in his eye employers did not like; he would have lost his places oftener if he had not been at times an exceptionally brilliant salesman, rather carefully neat, and a slow but very fair window dresser.

He went from situation to situation, he invented a great wealth of nicknames, he conceived enmities and made friends — but none so richly satisfying as Parsons. He was frequently but mildly and discursively in love, and sometimes he thought of that girl who had given him a yellow-green apple. He had an idea, amounting to a flattering certainty, whose youthful freshness it was had stirred her to self-forgetfulness. And sometimes he thought of Foxbourne sleeping prosperously in the sun. And he began to have moods of discomfort and lassitude and ill temper due to the beginnings of indigestion.

Various forces and suggestions came into his life and swayed him for longer and shorter periods.

He went to Canterbury and came under the influence of Gothic architecture. There was a blood affinity between Mr. Polly and the Gothic; in the middle ages he would no doubt have sat upon a scaffolding and carved out penetrating and none too flattering portraits of church dignitaries upon the capitals, and when he strolled, with his hands behind his back, along the cloisters behind the cathedral, and looked at the rich grass plot in the centre, he had the strangest sense of being at home — far more than he had ever been at home before. “Portly *capóns*” he used to murmur to himself, under the impression that he was naming a characteristic type of medieval churchman.

He liked to sit in the nave during the service, and look through the great gates at the candles and choristers, and listen to the organ-sustained voices, but the transepts he never penetrated because of the charge for admission. The music and the long vista of the fretted roof filled him with a vague and mystical happiness that he had no words, even mispronounceable words, to express. But some of the smug monuments in the aisles got a wreath of epithets: “Metrorious urnfuls”, “funererial claims”, “dejected angelosity”, for example. He wandered about the precincts and speculated about the people who lived in the ripe and cosy houses of grey stone that cluster there so comfortably. Through green doors in high stone walls he caught glimpses of level lawns and blazing flower beds; mullioned windows revealed shaded reading lamps and disciplined shelves of brown bound books. Now and then a dignitary in gaiters would pass him, “Portly capon”, or a drift of white robed choir boys cross a distant arcade and vanish in a doorway, or the pink and cream of some girlish dress flit like a butterfly across the cool still spaces of the place. Particularly he responded to the ruined arches of the Benedictine’s Infirmary and the view of Bell Harry tower from the school buildings. He was stirred to read the Canterbury Tales, but he could not get on with Chaucer’s old-fashioned English; it fatigued his attention, and he would have given all the story telling very readily for a few adventures on the road. He wanted these nice people to live more and yarn less. He liked the Wife of Bath very much. He would have liked to have known that woman.

At Canterbury, too, he first to his knowledge saw Americans.

His shop did a good class trade in Westgate Street, and he would see them go by on the way to stare at Chaucer’s “Chequers”, and then turn down Mercery Lane to Prior Goldstone’s gate. It impressed him that they were always in a kind of quiet hurry, and very determined and methodical people — much more so than any English he knew.

“Cultured Rapacity” he tried.

“Vorocious Return to the Heritage.”

He would expound them incidentally to his attendant apprentices. He had overheard a little lady putting her view to a friend near the Christchurch gate. The accent and intonation had hung in his memory, and he would reproduce them more or less accurately. “Now does this Marlowe monument really and

truly *matter?*” he had heard the little lady enquire. “We’ve no time for side shows and second rate stunts, Mamie. We want just the Big Simple Things of the place, just the Broad Elemental Canterbury *praposition*. What is it saying to us? I want to get right hold of that, and then have tea in the very room that Chaucer did, and hustle to get that four eighteen train back to London.”

He would go over these precious phrases, finding them full of an indescribable flavour. “Just the Broad Elemental Canterbury *praposition*” he would repeat....

He would try to imagine Parsons confronted with Americans. For his own part he knew himself to be altogether inadequate....

Canterbury was the most congenial situation Mr. Polly ever found during these wander years, albeit a very desert so far as companionship went.

III

It was after Canterbury that the universe became really disagreeable to Mr. Polly. It was brought home to him, not so much vividly as with a harsh and ungainly insistence, that he was a failure in his trade. It was not the trade he ought to have chosen, though what trade he ought to have chosen was by no means clear.

He made great but irregular efforts and produced a forced smartness that, like a cheap dye, refused to stand sunshine. He acquired a sort of parsimony also, in which acquisition he was helped by one or two phases of absolute impecuniosity. But he was hopeless in competition against the naturally gifted, the born hustlers, the young men who meant to get on.

He left the Canterbury place very regretfully. He and another commercial gentleman took a boat one Sunday afternoon at Sturry-on-the-Stour, when the wind was in the west, and sailed it very happily eastward for an hour. They had never sailed a boat before and it seemed simple and wonderful. When they turned they found the river too narrow for tacking and the tide running out like a sluice. They battled back to Sturry in the course of six hours (at a shilling the first hour and sixpence for each hour afterwards) rowing a mile in an hour and a half or so, until the turn of the tide came to help them, and then they had a night walk to Canterbury, and found themselves remorselessly locked out.

The Canterbury employer was an amiable, religious-spirited man and he would probably not have dismissed Mr. Polly if that unfortunate tendency to phrase things had not shocked him. “A Tide’s a Tide, Sir” said Mr. Polly, feeling that things were not so bad. “I’ve no lune-attic power to alter that.”

It proved impossible to explain to the Canterbury employer that this was not a highly disrespectful and blasphemous remark.

“And besides, what good are you to me this morning, do you think?” said the Canterbury employer “with your arms pulled out of their sockets?”

So Mr. Polly resumed his observations in the Wood Street warehouses once more, and had some dismal times. The shoal of fish waiting for the crumbs of employment seemed larger than ever.

He took counsel with himself. Should he “chuck” the outfitting? It wasn’t any good for him now, and presently when he was older and his youthful smartness had passed into the dullness of middle age it would be worse. What else could he do?

He could think of nothing. He went one night to a music hall and developed a vague idea of a comic performance; the comic men seemed violent rowdies and not at all funny; but when he thought of the great pit of the audience yawning before him he realised that his was an altogether too delicate talent for such a use. He was impressed by the charm of selling vegetables by auction in one of those open shops near London Bridge, but admitted upon reflection his general want of technical knowledge. He made some enquiries about emigration, but none of the colonies were in want of shop assistants without capital. He kept up his attendance in Wood Street.

He subdued his ideal of salary by the sum of five pounds a year, and was taken at that into a driving establishment in Clapham, which dealt chiefly in ready-made suits, fed its assistants in an underground dining room and kept them until twelve on Saturdays. He found it hard to be cheerful there. His fits of indigestion became worse, and he began to lie awake at night and think. Sunshine and laughter seemed things lost for ever; picnics and shouting in the moonlight.

The chief shopwalker took a dislike to him and nagged him. “Nar then Polly!” “Look alive Polly!” became the burthen of his days. “As smart a chap as you could have” said the chief shopwalker “but no *Zest*. No *Zest*! No *Vim*! What’s the matter with you?”

During his night vigils Mr. Polly had a feeling — A young rabbit must have very much the feeling, when after a youth of gambolling in sunny woods and furtive jolly raids upon the growing wheat and exciting triumphant bolts before ineffectual casual dogs, it finds itself at last for a long night of floundering effort and perplexity, in a net — for the rest of its life.

He could not grasp what was wrong with him. He made enormous efforts to diagnose his case. Was he really just a “lazy slacker” who ought to “buck up”? He couldn’t find it in him to believe it. He blamed his father a good deal — it is what fathers are for — in putting him to a trade he wasn’t happy to follow, but he found it impossible to say what he ought to have followed. He felt there had been something stupid about his school, but just where that came in he couldn’t say. He made some perfectly sincere efforts to “buck up” and “shove” ruthlessly. But that was infernal — impossible. He had to admit himself

miserable with all the misery of a social misfit, and with no clear prospect of more than the most incidental happiness ahead of him. And for all his attempts at self-reproach or self-discipline he felt at bottom that he wasn't at fault.

As a matter of fact all the elements of his troubles had been adequately diagnosed by a certain highbrowed, spectacled gentleman living at Highbury, wearing a gold *pince-nez*, and writing for the most part in the beautiful library of the Reform Club. This gentleman did not know Mr. Polly personally, but he had dealt with him generally as "one of those ill-adjusted units that abound in a society that has failed to develop a collective intelligence and a collective will for order, commensurate with its complexities."

But phrases of that sort had no appeal for Mr. Polly.

Chapter the Fourth

Mr. Polly an Orphan

I

Then a great change was brought about in the life of Mr. Polly by the death of his father. His father had died suddenly — the local practitioner still clung to his theory that it was imagination he suffered from, but compromised in the certificate with the appendicitis that was then so fashionable — and Mr. Polly found himself heir to a debateable number of pieces of furniture in the house of his cousin near Easewood Junction, a family Bible, an engraved portrait of Garibaldi and a bust of Mr. Gladstone, an invalid gold watch, a gold locket formerly belonging to his mother, some minor jewellery and *bric-a-brac*, a quantity of nearly valueless old clothes and an insurance policy and money in the bank amounting altogether to the sum of three hundred and ninety five pounds.

Mr. Polly had always regarded his father as an immortal, as an eternal fact, and his father being of a reserved nature in his declining years had said nothing about the insurance policy. Both wealth and bereavement therefore took Mr. Polly by surprise and found him a little inadequate. His mother's death had been a childish grief and long forgotten, and the strongest affection in his life had been for Parsons. An only child of sociable tendencies necessarily turns his back a good deal upon home, and the aunt who had succeeded his mother was an economist and furniture polisher, a knuckle rapper and sharp silencer, no friend for a slovenly little boy. He had loved other little boys and girls transitorily, none had been frequent and familiar enough to strike deep roots in his heart, and he had grown up with a tattered and dissipated affectionateness that was becoming wildly shy. His father had always been a stranger, an irritable stranger with exceptional powers of intervention and comment, and an air of being disappointed about his offspring. It was shocking to lose him; it was like an unexpected hole in the universe, and the writing of "Death" upon the sky, but it did not tear Mr. Polly's heartstrings at first so much as rouse him to a pitch of vivid attention.

He came down to the cottage at Easewood in response to an urgent telegram, and found his father already dead. His cousin Johnson received him with much solemnity and ushered him upstairs, to look at a stiff, straight, shrouded form, with a face unwontedly quiet and, as it seemed, with its pinched nostrils, scornful.

"Looks peaceful" said Mr. Polly, disregarding the scorn to the best of his ability.

"It was a merciful relief" said Mr. Johnson.

There was a pause.

“Second — Second Departed I’ve ever seen. Not counting mummies” said Mr. Polly, feeling it necessary to say something.

“We did all we could.”

“No doubt of it, O’ Man” said Mr. Polly.

A second long pause followed, and then, much to Mr. Polly’s great relief, Johnson moved towards the door.

Afterwards Mr. Polly went for a solitary walk in the evening light, and as he walked, suddenly his dead father became real to him. He thought of things far away down the perspective of memory, of jolly moments when his father had skylarked with a wildly excited little boy, of a certain annual visit to the Crystal Palace pantomime, full of trivial glittering incidents and wonders, of his father’s dread back while customers were in the old, minutely known shop. It is curious that the memory which seemed to link him nearest to the dead man was the memory of a fit of passion. His father had wanted to get a small sofa up the narrow winding staircase from the little room behind the shop to the bedroom above, and it had jammed. For a time his father had coaxed, and then groaned like a soul in torment and given way to blind fury, had sworn, kicked and struck at the offending piece of furniture and finally wrenched it upstairs, with considerable incidental damage to lath and plaster and one of the castors. That moment when self-control was altogether torn aside, the shocked discovery of his father’s perfect humanity, had left a singular impression on Mr. Polly’s queer mind. It was as if something extravagantly vital had come out of his father and laid a warmly passionate hand upon his heart. He remembered that now very vividly, and it became a clue to endless other memories that had else been dispersed and confusing.

A weakly wilful being struggling to get obdurate things round impossible corners — in that symbol Mr. Polly could recognise himself and all the trouble of humanity.

He hadn’t had a particularly good time, poor old chap, and now it was all over. Finished....

Johnson was the sort of man who derives great satisfaction from a funeral, a melancholy, serious, practical minded man of five and thirty, with great powers of advice. He was the up line ticket clerk at Easewood Junction, and felt the responsibilities of his position. He was naturally thoughtful and reserved, and greatly sustained in that by an innate rectitude of body and an overhanging and forward inclination of the upper part of his face and head. He was pale but freckled, and his dark grey eyes were deeply set. His lightest interest was cricket, but he did not take that lightly. His chief holiday was to go to a cricket match, which he did as if he was going to church, and he watched critically, applauded sparingly, and was darkly offended by any unorthodox play. His convictions upon all subjects were taciturnly inflexible. He was an obstinate

player of draughts and chess, and an earnest and persistent reader of the *British Weekly*. His wife was a pink, short, wilfully smiling, managing, ingratiating, talkative woman, who was determined to be pleasant, and take a bright hopeful view of everything, even when it was not really bright and hopeful. She had large blue expressive eyes and a round face, and she always spoke of her husband as Harold. She addressed sympathetic and considerate remarks about the deceased to Mr. Polly in notes of brisk encouragement. "He was really quite cheerful at the end" she said several times, with congratulatory gusto, "quite cheerful."

She made dying seem almost agreeable.

Both these people were resolved to treat Mr. Polly very well, and to help his exceptional incompetence in every possible way, and after a simple supper of ham and bread and cheese and pickles and cold apple tart and small beer had been cleared away, they put him into the armchair almost as though he was an invalid, and sat on chairs that made them look down on him, and opened a directive discussion of the arrangements for the funeral. After all a funeral is a distinct social opportunity, and rare when you have no family and few relations, and they did not want to see it spoilt and wasted.

"You'll have a hearse of course" said Mrs. Johnson. "Not one of them combinations with the driver sitting on the coffin. Disrespectful I think they are. I can't fancy how people can bring themselves to be buried in combinations." She flattened her voice in a manner she used to intimate aesthetic feeling. "I *do* like them glass hearses" she said. "So refined and nice they are."

"Podger's hearse you'll have" said Johnson conclusively. "It's the best in Easewood."

"Everything that's right and proper" said Mr. Polly.

"Podger's ready to come and measure at any time" said Johnson.

"Then you'll want a mourner's carriage or two, according as to whom you're going to invite" said Mr. Johnson.

"Didn't think of inviting anyone" said Polly.

"Oh! you'll *have* to ask a few friends," said Mr. Johnson. "You can't let your father go to his grave without asking a few friends."

"Funeral baked meats like" said Mr. Polly.

"Not baked, but of course you'll have to give them something. Ham and chicken's very suitable. You don't want a lot of cooking with the ceremony coming into the middle of it. I wonder who Alfred ought to invite, Harold. Just the immediate relations; one doesn't want a great crowd of people and one doesn't want not to show respect."

“But he hated our relations — most of them.”

“He’s not hating them *now*,” said Mrs. Johnson, “you may be sure of that. It’s just because of that I think they ought to come — all of them — even your Aunt Mildred.”

“Bit vultorial, isn’t it?” said Mr. Polly unheeded.

“Wouldn’t be more than twelve or thirteen people if they *all* came” said Mr. Johnson.

“We could have everything put out ready in the back room and the gloves and whiskey in the front room, and while we were all at the ceremony, Bessie could bring it all into the front room on a tray and put it out nice and proper. There’d have to be whiskey and sherry or port for the ladies....”

“Where’ll you get your mourning?” asked Johnson abruptly.

Mr. Polly had not yet considered this by-product of sorrow. “Haven’t thought of it yet, O’ Man.”

A disagreeable feeling spread over his body as though he was blackening as he sat. He hated black garments.

“I suppose I must have mourning” he said.

“Well!” said Johnson with a solemn smile.

“Got to see it through” said Mr. Polly indistinctly.

“If I were you,” said Johnson, “I should get ready-made trousers. That’s all you really want. And a black satin tie and a top hat with a deep mourning band. And gloves.”

“Jet cuff links he ought to have — as chief mourner” said Mrs. Johnson.

“Not obligatory” said Johnson.

“It shows respect” said Mrs. Johnson.

“It shows respect of course” said Johnson.

And then Mrs. Johnson went on with the utmost gusto to the details of the “casket”, while Mr. Polly sat more and more deeply and droopingly into the armchair, assenting with a note of protest to all they said. After he had retired for the night he remained for a long time perched on the edge of the sofa which was his bed, staring at the prospect before him. “Chasing the O’ Man about up to the last” he said.

He hated the thought and elaboration of death as a healthy animal must hate it. His mind struggled with unwonted social problems.

“Got to put ’em away somehow, I suppose” said Mr. Polly.

“Wish I’d looked him up a bit more while he was alive” said Mr. Polly.

II

Bereavement came to Mr. Polly before the realisation of opulence and its anxieties and responsibilities. That only dawned upon him on the morrow — which chanced to be Sunday — as he walked with Johnson before church time about the tangle of struggling building enterprise that constituted the rising urban district of Easewood. Johnson was off duty that morning, and devoted the time very generously to the admonitory discussion of Mr. Polly’s worldly outlook.

“Don’t seem to get the hang of the business somehow” said Mr. Polly. “Too much blooming humbug in it for my way of thinking.”

“If I were you” said Mr. Johnson “I should push for a first class place in London — take almost nothing and live on my reserves. That’s what I should do.”

“Come the Heavy” said Mr. Polly.

“Get a better class reference.”

There was a pause. “Think of investing your money?” asked Johnson.

“Hardly got used to the idea of having it yet, O’ Man.”

“You’ll have to do something with it. Give you nearly twenty pounds a year if you invest it properly.”

“Haven’t seen it yet in that light” said Mr. Polly defensively.

“There’s no end of things you could put it into.”

“It’s getting it out again I shouldn’t feel sure of. I’m no sort of Fiancianier. Sooner back horses.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Not my style, O’ Man.”

“It’s a nest egg” said Johnson.

Mr. Polly made an indeterminate noise.

“There’s building societies” Johnson threw out in a speculative tone. Mr. Polly, with detached brevity, admitted there were.

“You might lend it on mortgage” said Johnson. “Very safe form of investment.”

“Shan’t think anything about it — not till the O’ Man’s underground” said Mr. Polly with an inspiration.

They turned a corner that led towards the junction.

“Might do worse” said Johnson, “than put it into a small shop.”

At the moment this remark made very little appeal to Mr. Polly. But afterwards it developed. It fell into his mind like some small obscure seed, and germinated.

“These shops aren’t in a bad position” said Johnson.

The row he referred to gaped in the late painful stage in building before the healing touch of the plasterer assuages the roughness of the brickwork. The space for the shop yawned an oblong gap below, framed above by an iron girder; “windows and fittings to suit tenant” a board at the end of the row promised; and behind was the door space and a glimpse of stairs going up to the living rooms above. “Not a bad position,” said Johnson, and led the way into the establishment. “Room for fixtures there” he said, pointing to the blank wall. The two men went upstairs to the little sitting room or best bedroom (it would have to be) above the shop. Then they descended to the kitchen below.

“Rooms in a new house always look a bit small” said Johnson.

They came out of the house again by the prospective back door, and picked their way through builder’s litter across the yard space to the road again. They drew nearer the junction to where a pavement and shops already open and active formed the commercial centre of Easewood. On the opposite side of the way the side door of a flourishing little establishment opened, and a man and his wife and a little boy in a sailor suit came into the street. The wife was a pretty woman in brown with a floriferous straw hat, and the group was altogether very Sundayfied and shiny and spick and span. The shop itself had a large plate glass window whose contents were now veiled by a buff blind on which was inscribed in scrolly letters: “Rymer, Pork Butcher and Provision Merchant”, and then with voluptuous elaboration: “The World-Famed Easewood Sausage”.

Greetings were exchanged between Mr. Johnson and this distinguished comestible.

“Off to church already?” said Johnson.

“Walking across the fields to Little Dorington” said Mr. Rymer.

“Very pleasant walk” said Johnson.

“Very” said Mr. Rymer.

“Hope you’ll enjoy it” said Mr. Johnson.

“That chap’s done well” said Johnson *sotto voce* as they went on. “Came here with nothing — practically, four years ago. And as thin as a lath. Look at him now!

“He’s worked hard of course” said Johnson, improving the occasion.

Thought fell between the cousins for a space.

“Some men can do one thing” said Johnson “and some another.... For a man who sticks to it, there’s a lot to be done in a shop.”

III

All the preparations for the funeral ran easily and happily under Mrs. Johnson’s skilful hands. On the eve of the sad event she produced a reserve of black sateen, the kitchen steps and a box of tin tacks, and decorated the house with festoons and bows of black in the best possible taste. She tied up the knocker with black crape, and put a large bow over the corner of the steel engraving of Garibaldi, and swathed the bust of Mr. Gladstone, that had belonged to the deceased, with inky swathings. She turned the two vases that had views of Tivoli and the Bay of Naples round, so that these rather brilliant landscapes were hidden and only the plain blue enamel showed, and she anticipated the long contemplated purchase of a tablecloth for the front room, and substituted a violet-purple cover for the now very worn and faded raptures and roses in plushette that had hitherto done duty there. Everything that loving consideration could do to impart a dignified solemnity to her little home was done.

She had released Mr. Polly from the irksome duty of issuing invitations, and as the moments of assembly drew near she sent him and Mr. Johnson out into the narrow long strip of garden at the back of the house, to be free to put a finishing touch or so to her preparations. She sent them out together because she had a queer little persuasion at the back of her mind that Mr. Polly wanted to bolt from his sacred duties, and there was no way out of the garden except through the house.

Mr. Johnson was a steady, successful gardener, and particularly good with celery and peas. He walked slowly along the narrow path down the centre pointing out to Mr. Polly a number of interesting points in the management of

peas, wrinkles neatly applied and difficulties wisely overcome, and all that he did for the comfort and propitiation of that fitful but rewarding vegetable. Presently a sound of nervous laughter and raised voices from the house proclaimed the arrival of the earlier guests, and the worst of that anticipatory tension was over.

When Mr. Polly re-entered the house he found three entirely strange young women with pink faces, demonstrative manners and emphatic mourning, engaged in an incoherent conversation with Mrs. Johnson. All three kissed him with great gusto after the ancient English fashion. "These are your cousins Larkins" said Mrs. Johnson; "that's Annie (unexpected hug and smack), that's Miriam (resolute hug and smack), and that's Minnie (prolonged hug and smack)."

"Right-'O" said Mr. Polly, emerging a little crumpled and breathless from this hearty introduction. "I see."

"Here's Aunt Larkins" said Mrs. Johnson, as an elderly and stouter edition of the three young women appeared in the doorway.

Mr. Polly backed rather faint heartedly, but Aunt Larkins was not to be denied. Having hugged and kissed her nephew resoundingly she gripped him by the wrists and scanned his features. She had a round, sentimental, freckled face. "I should 'ave known 'im anywhere" she said with fervour.

"Hark at mother!" said the cousin called Annie. "Why, she's never set eyes on him before!"

"I should 'ave known 'im anywhere" said Mrs. Larkins, "for Lizzie's child. You've got her eyes! It's a Resemblance! And as for *_never seeing 'im* — I've *dandled* him, Miss Imperence. I've dandled him."

"You couldn't dandle him now, Ma!" Miss Annie remarked with a shriek of laughter.

All the sisters laughed at that. "The things you say, Annie!" said Miriam, and for a time the room was full of mirth.

Mr. Polly felt it incumbent upon him to say something. "*My dandling days are over*" he said.

The reception of this remark would have convinced a far more modest character than Mr. Polly that it was extremely witty.

Mr. Polly followed it up by another one almost equally good. "My turn to dandle" he said, with a sly look at his aunt, and convulsed everyone.

"Not me" said Mrs. Larkins, taking his point, "*thank you,*" and achieved a climax.

It was queer, but they seemed to be easy people to get on with anyhow. They were still picking little ripples and giggles of mirth from the idea of Mr. Polly dandling Aunt Larkins when Mr. Johnson, who had answered the door, ushered in a stooping figure, who was at once hailed by Mrs. Johnson as "Why! Uncle Pentstemon!" Uncle Pentstemon was rather a shock. His was an aged rather than venerable figure; Time had removed the hair from the top of his head and distributed a small dividend of the plunder in little bunches carelessly and impartially over the rest of his features; he was dressed in a very big old frock coat and a long cylindrical top hat, which he had kept on; he was very much bent, and he carried a rush basket from which protruded coy intimations of the lettuces and onions he had brought to grace the occasion. He hobbled into the room, resisting the efforts of Johnson to divest him of his various encumbrances, halted and surveyed the company with an expression of profound hostility, breathing hard. Recognition quickened in his eyes.

"You here" he said to Aunt Larkins and then; "You *would* be.... These your gals?"

"They are" said Aunt Larkins "and better gals ——"

"That Annie?" asked Uncle Pentstemon, pointing a horny thumbnail.

"Fancy your remembering her name!"

"She mucked up my mushroom bed, the baggage!" said Uncle Pentstemon ungenially "and I give it to her to rights. Trowned her I did — fairly. I remember her. Here's some green stuff for you, Grace. Fresh it is and wholesome. I shall be wanting the basket back and mind you let me have it.... Have you nailed him down yet? You always was a bit in front of what was needful."

His attention was drawn inward by a troublesome tooth, and he sucked at it spitefully. There was something potent about this old man that silenced everyone for a moment or so. He seemed a fragment from the ruder agricultural past of our race, like a lump of soil among things of paper. He put his basket of vegetables very deliberately on the new violet tablecloth, removed his hat carefully and dabbled his brow, and wiped out his hat brim with a crimson and yellow pocket handkerchief.

"I'm glad you were able to come, Uncle" said Mrs. Johnson.

"Oh, I *came*" said Uncle Pentstemon. "I *came*."

He turned on Mrs. Larkins. "Gals in service?" he asked.

"They aren't and they won't be" said Mrs. Larkins.

"No" he said with infinite meaning, and turned his eye on Mr. Polly.

“You Lizzie’s boy?” he said.

Mr. Polly was spared much self-exposition by the tumult occasioned by further arrivals.

“Ah! here’s May Punt!” said Mrs. Johnson, and a small woman dressed in the borrowed mourning of a large woman and leading a very small long haired observant little boy — it was his first funeral — appeared, closely followed by several friends of Mrs. Johnson who had come to swell the display of respect and made only vague, confused impressions upon Mr. Polly’s mind. (Aunt Mildred, who was an unexplained family scandal, had declined Mrs. Johnson’s hospitality.)

Everybody was in profound mourning, of course, mourning in the modern English style, with the dyer’s handiwork only too apparent, and hats and jackets of the current cut. There was very little crape, and the costumes had none of the goodness and specialisation and genuine enjoyment of mourning for mourning’s sake that a similar continental gathering would have displayed. Still that congestion of strangers in black sufficed to stun and confuse Mr. Polly’s impressionable mind. It seemed to him much more extraordinary than anything he had expected.

“Now, gals” said Mrs. Larkins “see if you can help”, and the three daughters became confusingly active between the front room and the back.

“I hope everyone’ll take a glass of sherry and a biscuit” said Mrs. Johnson. “We don’t stand on ceremony” and a decanter appeared in the place of Uncle Pentstemon’s vegetables.

Uncle Pentstemon had refused to be relieved of his hat; he sat stiffly down on a chair against the wall with that venerable headdress between his feet, watching the approach of anyone jealously. “Don’t you go squashing my hat” he said. Conversation became confused and general. Uncle Pentstemon addressed himself to Mr. Polly. “You’re a little chap” he said, “a puny little chap. I never did agree to Lizzie marrying him, but I suppose bygones must be bygones now. I suppose they made you a clerk or something.”

“Outfitter” said Mr. Polly.

“I remember. Them girls pretend to be dressmakers.”

“They *are* dressmakers,” said Mrs. Larkins across the room.

“I *will* take a glass of sherry. They ’old to it, you see.”

He took the glass Mrs. Johnson handed him, and poised it critically between a horny finger and thumb. “You’ll be paying for this” he said to Mr. Polly. “Here’s to you.... Don’t you go treading on my hat, young woman. You brush your skirts

against it and you take a shillin' off its value. It ain't the sort of 'at you see nowadays."

He drank noisily.

The sherry presently loosened everybody's tongue, and the early coldness passed.

"There ought to have been a *post mortem*" Polly heard Mrs. Punt remarking to one of Mrs. Johnson's friends, and Miriam and another were lost in admiration of Mrs. Johnson's decorations. "So very nice and refined," they were both repeating at intervals.

The sherry and biscuits were still being discussed when Mr. Podger, the undertaker, arrived, a broad, cheerfully sorrowful, clean shaven little man, accompanied by a melancholy faced assistant. He conversed for a time with Johnson in the passage outside; the sense of his business stilled the rising waves of chatter and carried off everyone's attention in the wake of his heavy footsteps to the room above.

IV

Things crowded upon Mr. Polly. Everyone, he noticed, took sherry with a solemn avidity, and a small portion even was administered sacramentally to the Punt boy. There followed a distribution of black kid gloves, and much trying on and humouring of fingers. "Good gloves" said one of Mrs. Johnson's friends.

"There's a little pair there for Willie" said Mrs. Johnson triumphantly. Everyone seemed gravely content with the amazing procedure of the occasion. Presently Mr. Podger was picking Mr. Polly out as Chief Mourner to go with Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Larkins and Annie in the first mourning carriage.

"Right 'O," said Mr. Polly, and repented instantly of the alacrity of the phrase.

"There'll have to be a walking party" said Mrs. Johnson cheerfully. "There's only two coaches. I daresay we can put in six in each, but that leaves three over."

There was a generous struggle to be pedestrian, and the two other Larkins girls, confessing coyly to tight new boots and displaying a certain eagerness, were added to the contents of the first carriage.

"It'll be a squeeze" said Annie.

"I don't mind a squeeze" said Mr. Polly.

He decided privately that the proper phrase for the result of that remark was "Hysterical catechunations."

Mr. Podger re-entered the room from a momentary supervision of the bumping business that was now proceeding down the staircase.

“Bearing up” he said cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. “Bearing up!”

That stuck very vividly in Mr. Polly’s mind, and so did the close wedged drive to the churchyard, bunched in between two young women in confused dull and shiny black, and the fact that the wind was bleak and that the officiating clergyman had a cold, and sniffed between his sentences. The wonder of life! The wonder of everything! What had he expected that this should all be so astoundingly different.

He found his attention converging more and more upon the Larkins cousins. The interest was reciprocal. They watched him with a kind of suppressed excitement and became risible with his every word and gesture. He was more and more aware of their personal quality. Annie had blue eyes and a red, attractive mouth, a harsh voice and a habit of extreme liveliness that even this occasion could not suppress; Minnie was fond, extremely free about the touching of hands and suchlike endearments; Miriam was quieter and regarded him earnestly. Mrs. Larkins was very happy in her daughters, and they had the naïve affectionateness of those who see few people and find a strange cousin a wonderful outlet. Mr. Polly had never been very much kissed, and it made his mind swim. He did not know for the life of him whether he liked or disliked all or any of the Larkins cousins. It was rather attractive to make them laugh; they laughed at anything.

There they were tugging at his mind, and the funeral tugging at his mind, too, and the sense of himself as Chief Mourner in a brand new silk hat with a broad mourning band. He watched the ceremony and missed his responses, and strange feelings twisted at his heartstrings.

V

Mr. Polly walked back to the house because he wanted to be alone. Miriam and Minnie would have accompanied him, but finding Uncle Pentstemon beside the Chief Mourner they went on in front.

“You’re wise” said Uncle Pentstemon.

“Glad you think so” said Mr. Polly, rousing himself to talk.

“I likes a bit of walking before a meal” said Uncle Pentstemon, and made a kind of large hiccup. “That sherry rises” he remarked. “Grocer’s stuff, I expect.”

He went on to ask how much the funeral might be costing, and seemed pleased to find Mr. Polly didn’t know.

“In that case” he said impressively “it’s pretty certain to cost more’n you expect, my boy.”

He meditated for a time. “I’ve seen a mort of undertakers” he declared; “a mort of undertakers.”

The Larkins girls attracted his attention.

“Let’s lodgin’s and chars” he commented. “Leastways she goes out to cook dinners. And look at ‘em!

“Dressed up to the nines. If it ain’t borryd clothes, that is. And they goes out to work at a factory!”

“Did you know my father much, Uncle Pentstemon?” asked Mr. Polly.

“Couldn’t stand Lizzie throwin’ herself away like that” said Uncle Pentstemon, and repeated his hiccup on a larger scale.

“That *weren’t* good sherry,” said Uncle Pentstemon with the first note of pathos Mr. Polly had detected in his quavering voice.

The funeral in the rather cold wind had proved wonderfully appetising, and every eye brightened at the sight of the cold collation that was now spread in the front room. Mrs. Johnson was very brisk, and Mr. Polly, when he re-entered the house found everybody sitting down. “Come along, Alfred,” cried the hostess cheerfully. “We can’t very well begin without you. Have you got the bottled beer ready to open, Betsy? Uncle, you’ll have a drop of whisky, I expect.”

“Put it where I can mix for myself,” said Uncle Pentstemon, placing his hat very carefully out of harm’s way on the bookcase.

There were two cold boiled chickens, which Johnson carved with great care and justice, and a nice piece of ham, some brawn and a steak and kidney pie, a large bowl of salad and several sorts of pickles, and afterwards came cold apple tart, jam roll and a good piece of Stilton cheese, lots of bottled beer, some lemonade for the ladies and milk for Master Punt; a very bright and satisfying meal. Mr. Polly found himself seated between Mrs. Punt, who was much preoccupied with Master Punt’s table manners, and one of Mrs. Johnson’s school friends, who was exchanging reminiscences of school days and news of how various common friends had changed and married with Mrs. Johnson. Opposite him was Miriam and another of the Johnson circle, and also he had brawn to carve and there was hardly room for the helpful Betsy to pass behind his chair, so that altogether his mind would have been amply distracted from any mortuary broodings, even if a wordy warfare about the education of the modern young woman had not sprung up between Uncle Pentstemon and Mrs. Larkins and threatened for a time, in spite of a word or so in season from Johnson, to wreck all the harmony of the sad occasion.

The general effect was after this fashion:

First an impression of Mrs. Punt on the right speaking in a refined undertone: "You didn't, I suppose, Mr. Polly, think to 'ave your poor dear father post-mortemed —"

Lady on the left side breaking in: "I was just reminding Grace of the dear dead days beyond recall —"

Attempted reply to Mrs. Punt: "Didn't think of it for a moment. Can't give you a piece of this brawn, can I?"

Fragment from the left: "Grace and Beauty they used to call us and we used to sit at the same desk —"

Mrs. Punt, breaking out suddenly: "Don't *swallow* your fork, Willy. You see, Mr. Polly, I used to 'ave a young gentleman, a medical student, lodging with me —"

Voice from down the table: "'Am, Alfred? I didn't give you very much."

Bessie became evident at the back of Mr. Polly's chair, struggling wildly to get past. Mr. Polly did his best to be helpful. "Can you get past? Lemme sit forward a bit. Urr-oo! Right 'O."

Lady to the left going on valiantly and speaking to everyone who cares to listen, while Mrs. Johnson beams beside her: "There she used to sit as bold as brass, and the fun she used to make of things no one *could* believe — knowing her now. She used to make faces at the mistress through the —"

Mrs. Punt keeping steadily on: "The contents of the stummik at any rate *ought* to be examined."

Voice of Mr. Johnson. "Elfrid, pass the mustid down."

Miriam leaning across the table: "Elfrid!"

"Once she got us all kept in. The whole school!"

Miriam, more insistently: "Elfrid!"

Uncle Pentstemon, raising his voice defiantly: "Trounce 'er again I would if she did as much now. That I would! Dratted mischief!"

Miriam, catching Mr. Polly's eye: "Elfrid! This lady knows Canterbury. I been telling her you been there."

Mr. Polly: "Glad you know it."

The lady shouting: "I like it."

Mrs. Larkins, raising her voice: "I won't 'ave my girls spoken of, not by nobody, old or young."

Pop! Imperfectly located.

Mr. Johnson at large: "Ain't the beer up! It's the 'eated room."

Bessie: "Scuse me, sir, passing so soon again, but — " Rest inaudible. Mr. Polly, accommodating himself: "Urr-oo! Right? Right 'O."

The knives and forks, probably by some secret common agreement, clash and clatter together and drown every other sound.

"Nobody 'ad the least idea 'ow 'E died — nobody.... Willie, don't *golp* so. You ain't in a 'urry, are you? You don't want to ketch a train or anything — *golping* like that!"

"D'you remember, Grace, 'ow one day we 'ad writing lesson...."

"Nicer girls no one ever 'ad — though I say it who shouldn't."

Mrs. Johnson in a shrill clear hospitable voice: "Harold, won't Mrs. Larkins 'ave a teeny bit more fowl?"

Mr. Polly rising to the situation. "Or some brawn, Mrs. Larkins?" Catching Uncle Pentstemon's eye: "Can't send *you* some brawn, sir?"

"Elfrid!"

Loud hiccup from Uncle Pentstemon, momentary consternation followed by giggle from Annie.

The narration at Mr. Polly's elbow pursued a quiet but relentless course. "Directly the new doctor came in he said: 'Everything must be took out and put in spirits — everything.'"

Willie — audible ingurgitation.

The narration on the left was flourishing up to a climax. " 'Ladies' she sez, 'dip their pens *in* their ink and keep their noses out of it!'

"Elfrid!" — persuasively.

"Certain people may cast snacks at other people's daughters, never having had any of their own, though two poor souls of wives dead and buried through their goings on — "

Johnson ruling the storm: “We don’t want old scores dug up on such a day as this —”

“Old scores you may call them, but worth a dozen of them that put them to their rest, poor dears.”

“Elfrid!” — with a note of remonstrance.

“If you choke yourself, my lord, not another mouthful do you ’ave. No nice puddin’! Nothing!”

“And kept us in, she did, every afternoon for a week!”

It seemed to be the end, and Mr. Polly replied with an air of being profoundly impressed: “Really!”

“Elfrid!” — a little disheartened.

“And then they ’ad it! They found he’d swallowed the very key to unlock the drawer —”

“Then don’t let people go casting snacks!”

“*Who’s* casting snacks!”

“Elfrid! This lady wants to *know*, ’ave the Prossers left Canterbury?”

“No wish to make myself disagreeable, not to God’s ’umblest worm —”

“Alf, you aren’t very busy with that brawn up there!”

And so on for the hour.

The general effect upon Mr. Polly at the time was at once confusing and exhilarating; but it led him to eat copiously and carelessly, and long before the end, when after an hour and a quarter a movement took the party, and it pushed away its cheese plates and rose sighing and stretching from the remains of the repast, little streaks and bands of dyspeptic irritation and melancholy were darkening the serenity of his mind.

He stood between the mantel shelf and the window — the blinds were up now — and the Larkins sisters clustered about him. He battled with the oncoming depression and forced himself to be extremely facetious about two noticeable rings on Annie’s hand. “They ain’t real” said Annie coquettishly. “Got ’em out of a prize packet.”

“Prize packet in trousers, I expect” said Mr. Polly, and awakened inextinguishable laughter.

“Oh! the things you say!” said Minnie, slapping his shoulder.

Suddenly something he had quite extraordinarily forgotten came into his head.

“Bless my heart!” he cried, suddenly serious.

“What’s the matter?” asked Johnson.

“Ought to have gone back to shop — three days ago. They’ll make no end of a row!”

“Lor’, you *are* a Treat!” said cousin Annie, and screamed with laughter at a delicious idea. “You’ll get the Chuck.” she said.

Mr. Polly made a convulsing grimace at her.

“I’ll die!” she said. “I don’t believe you care a bit!”

Feeling a little disorganized by her hilarity and a shocked expression that had come to the face of cousin Miriam, he made some indistinct excuse and went out through the back room and scullery into the little garden. The cool air and a very slight drizzle of rain was a relief — anyhow. But the black mood of the replete dyspeptic had come upon him. His soul darkened hopelessly. He walked with his hands in his pockets down the path between the rows of exceptionally cultured peas and unreasonably, overwhelmingly, he was smitten by sorrow for his father. The heady noise and muddle and confused excitement of the feast passed from him like a curtain drawn away. He thought of that hot and angry and struggling creature who had tugged and sworn so foolishly at the sofa upon the twisted staircase, and who was now lying still and hidden, at the bottom of a wall-sided oblong pit beside the heaped gravel that would presently cover him. The stillness of it! the wonder of it! the infinite reproach! Hatred for all these people — all of them — possessed Mr. Polly’s soul.

“Hen-witted gigglers” said Mr. Polly.

He went down to the fence, and stood with his hands on it staring away at nothing. He stayed there for what seemed a long time. From the house came a sound of raised voices that subsided, and then Mrs. Johnson calling for Bessie.

“Gowlish gusto” said Mr. Polly. “Jumping it in. Funererial Games. Don’t hurt *him* of course. Doesn’t matter to *him*....”

Nobody missed Mr. Polly for a long time.

When at last he reappeared among them his eye was almost grim, but nobody noticed his eye. They were looking at watches, and Johnson was being omniscient about trains. They seemed to discover Mr. Polly afresh just at the moment of parting, and said a number of more or less appropriate things. But

Uncle Pentstemon was far too worried about his rush basket, which had been carelessly mislaid, he seemed to think with larcenous intentions, to remember Mr. Polly at all. Mrs. Johnson had tried to fob him off with a similar but inferior basket — his own had one handle mended with string according to a method of peculiar virtue and inimitable distinction known only to himself — and the old gentleman had taken her attempt as the gravest reflection upon his years and intelligence. Mr. Polly was left very largely to the Larkins trio. Cousin Minnie became shameless and kept kissing him goodbye — and then finding out it wasn't time to go. Cousin Miriam seemed to think her silly, and caught Mr. Polly's eye sympathetically. Cousin Annie ceased to giggle and lapsed into a nearly sentimental state. She said with real feeling that she had enjoyed the funeral more than words could tell.