

Chapter the Tenth

Miriam Revisited

I

One summer afternoon about five years after his first coming to the Potwell Inn Mr. Polly found himself sitting under the pollard willow fishing for dace. It was a plumper, browner and healthier Mr. Polly altogether than the miserable bankrupt with whose dyspeptic portrait our novel opened. He was fat, but with a fatness more generally diffused, and the lower part of his face was touched to gravity by a small square beard. Also he was balder.

It was the first time he had found leisure to fish, though from the very outset of his Potwell career he had promised himself abundant indulgence in the pleasures of fishing. Fishing, as the golden page of English literature testifies, is a meditative and retrospective pursuit, and the varied page of memory, disregarded so long for sake of the teeming duties I have already enumerated, began to unfold itself to Mr. Polly's consideration. A speculation about Uncle Jim died for want of material, and gave place to a reckoning of the years and months that had passed since his coming to Potwell, and that to a philosophical review of his life. He began to think about Miriam, remotely and impersonally. He remembered many things that had been neglected by his conscience during the busier times, as, for example, that he had committed arson and deserted a wife. For the first time he looked these long neglected facts in the face.

It is disagreeable to think one has committed Arson, because it is an action that leads to jail. Otherwise I do not think there was a grain of regret for that in Mr. Polly's composition. But deserting Miriam was in a different category. Deserting Miriam was mean.

This is a history and not a glorification of Mr. Polly, and I tell of things as they were with him. Apart from the disagreeable twinge arising from the thought of what might happen if he was found out, he had not the slightest remorse about that fire. Arson, after all, is an artificial crime. Some crimes are crimes in themselves, would be crimes without any law, the cruelties, mockery, the breaches of faith that astonish and wound, but the burning of things is in itself neither good nor bad. A large number of houses deserve to be burnt, most modern furniture, an overwhelming majority of pictures and books — one might go on for some time with the list. If our community was collectively anything more than a feeble idiot, it would burn most of London and Chicago, for example, and build sane and beautiful cities in the place of these pestilential heaps of rotten private property. I have failed in presenting Mr. Polly altogether if I have not made you see that he was in many respects an artless child of Nature, far more untrained, undisciplined and spontaneous than an ordinary savage. And he was really glad, for all that little drawback of fear, that he had the courage to set fire to his house and fly and come to the Potwell Inn.

But he was not glad he had left Miriam. He had seen Miriam cry once or twice in his life, and it had always reduced him to abject commiseration. He now imagined her crying. He perceived in a perplexed way that he had made himself responsible for her life. He forgot how she had spoilt his own. He had hitherto rested in the faith that she had over a hundred pounds of insurance money, but now, with his eye meditatively upon his float, he realised a hundred pounds does not last for ever. His conviction of her incompetence was unflinching; she was bound to have fooled it away somehow by this time. And then!

He saw her humping her shoulders and sniffing in a manner he had always regarded as detestable at close quarters, but which now became harrowingly pitiful.

“Damn!” said Mr. Polly, and down went his float and he flicked up a victim to destruction and took it off the hook.

He compared his own comfort and health with Miriam’s imagined distress.

“Ought to have done something for herself” said Mr. Polly, rebaiting his hook. “She was always talking of doing things. Why couldn’t she?”

He watched the float oscillating gently towards quiescence.

“Silly to begin thinking about her” he said. “Damn silly!”

But once he had begun thinking about her he had to go on.

“Oh blow!” cried Mr. Polly presently, and pulled up his hook to find another fish had just snatched at it in the last instant. His handling must have made the poor thing feel itself unwelcome.

He gathered his things together and turned towards the house.

All the Potwell Inn betrayed his influence now, for here indeed he had found his place in the world. It looked brighter, so bright indeed as to be almost skittish, with the white and green paint he had lavished upon it. Even the garden palings were striped white and green, and so were the boats, for Mr. Polly was one of those who find a positive sensuous pleasure in the laying on of paint. Left and right were two large boards which had done much to enhance the inn’s popularity with the lighter minded variety of pleasure seekers. Both marked innovations. One bore in large letters the single word “Museum,” the other was as plain and laconic with “Omlets!” The spelling of the latter word was Mr. Polly’s own, but when he had seen a whole boatload of men, intent on Lammam for lunch, stop open mouthed, and stare and grin and come in and ask in a marked sarcastic manner for “omlets”, he perceived that his inaccuracy had done more for the place than his utmost cunning could have contrived. In a year or so the inn was known both up and down the river by its new name of “Omlets”, and Mr. Polly, after some secret irritation, smiled and was content. And the fat woman’s *omelettes* were things to remember.

(You will note I have changed her epithet. Time works upon us all.)

She stood upon the steps as he came towards the house, and smiled at him richly.

“Caught many?” she asked.

“Got an idea” said Mr. Polly. “Would it put you out very much if I went off for a day or two for a bit of a holiday? There won’t be much doing now until Thursday.”

II

Feeling recklessly secure behind his beard Mr. Polly surveyed the Fishbourne High Street once again. The north side was much as he had known it except that Rusper had vanished. A row of new shops replaced the destruction of the great fire. Mantell and Throbson’s had risen again upon a more flamboyant pattern, and the new fire station was in the Swiss-Teutonic style and with much red paint. Next door in the place of Rumbold’s was a branch of the Colonial Tea Company, and then a Salmon and Gluckstein Tobacco Shop, and then a little shop that displayed sweets and professed a “Tea Room Upstairs.” He considered this as a possible place in which to prosecute enquiries about his lost wife, wavering a little between it and the God’s Providence Inn down the street. Then his eye caught a name over the window, “Polly” he read “& Larkins! Well, I’m — astonished!”

A momentary faintness came upon him. He walked past and down the street, returned and surveyed the shop again.

He saw a middle-aged, rather untidy woman standing behind the counter, who for an instant he thought might be Miriam terribly changed, and then recognised as his sister-in-law Annie, filled out and no longer hilarious. She stared at him without a sign of recognition as he entered the shop.

“Can I have tea?” said Mr. Polly.

“Well” said Annie, “you *can*. But our Tea Room’s upstairs.... My sister’s been cleaning it out — and it’s a bit upset.”

“It *would* be,” said Mr. Polly softly.

“I beg your pardon?” said Annie.

“I said *I* didn’t mind. Up here?”

“I daresay there’ll be a table” said Annie, and followed him up to a room whose conscientious disorder was intensely reminiscent of Miriam.

“Nothing like turning everything upside down when you’re cleaning” said Mr. Polly cheerfully.

“It’s my sister’s way” said Annie impartially. “She’s gone out for a bit of air, but I daresay she’ll be back soon to finish. It’s a nice light room when it’s tidy. Can I put you a table over there?”

“Let *me*,” said Mr. Polly, and assisted. He sat down by the open window and drummed on the table and meditated on his next step while Annie vanished to get his tea. After all, things didn’t seem so bad with Miriam. He tried over several gambits in imagination.

“Unusual name” he said as Annie laid a cloth before him. Annie looked interrogation.

“Polly. Polly & Larkins. Real, I suppose?”

“Polly’s my sister’s name. She married a Mr. Polly.”

“Widow I presume?” said Mr. Polly.

“Yes. This five years — come October.”

“Lord!” said Mr. Polly in unfeigned surprise.

“Found drowned he was. There was a lot of talk in the place.”

“Never heard of it” said Mr. Polly. “I’m a stranger — rather.”

“In the Medway near Maidstone. He must have been in the water for days. Wouldn’t have known him, my sister wouldn’t, if it hadn’t been for the name sewn in his clothes. All whitey and eat away he was.”

“Bless my heart! Must have been rather a shock for her!”

“It *was* a shock” said Annie, and added darkly: “But sometimes a shock’s better than a long agony.”

“No doubt” said Mr. Polly.

He gazed with a rapt expression at the preparations before him. “So I’m drowned” something was saying inside him. “Life insured?” he asked.

“We started the tea rooms with it” said Annie.

Why, if things were like this, had remorse and anxiety for Miriam been implanted in his soul? No shadow of an answer appeared.

“Marriage is a lottery” said Mr. Polly.

“*She* found it so” said Annie. “Would you like some jam?”

“I’d like an egg,” said Mr. Polly. “I’ll have two. I’ve got a sort of feeling —. As though I wanted keeping up.... Wasn’t particularly good sort, this Mr. Polly?”

“He was a *wearing* husband,” said Annie. “I’ve often pitied my sister. He was one of that sort —”

“Dissolute?” suggested Mr. Polly faintly.

“No” said Annie judiciously; “not exactly dissolute. Feeble’s more the word. Weak, ’e was. Weak as water. ‘Ow long do you like your eggs boiled?”

“Four minutes exactly” said Mr. Polly.

“One gets talking” said Annie.

“One does” said Mr. Polly, and she left him to his thoughts.

What perplexed him was his recent remorse and tenderness for Miriam. Now he was back in her atmosphere all that had vanished, and the old feeling of helpless antagonism returned. He surveyed the piled furniture, the economically managed carpet, the unpleasing pictures on the wall. Why had he felt remorse? Why had he entertained this illusion of a helpless woman crying aloud in the pitiless darkness for him? He peered into the unfathomable mysteries of the heart, and ducked back to a smaller issue. *Was* he feeble?

The eggs came up. Nothing in Annie’s manner invited a resumption of the discussion.

“Business brisk?” he ventured to ask.

Annie reflected. “It is” she said, “and it isn’t. It’s like that.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Polly, and squared himself to his egg. “Was there an inquest on that chap?”

“What chap?”

“What was his name? — Polly!”

“Of course.”

“You’re sure it was him?”

“What you mean?”

Annie looked at him hard, and suddenly his soul was black with terror.

“Who else could it have been — in the very cloes ’e wore?”

“Of course” said Mr. Polly, and began his egg. He was so agitated that he only realised its condition when he was half way through it and Annie safely downstairs.

“Lord!” he said, reaching out hastily for the pepper. “One of Miriam’s! Management! I haven’t tasted such an egg for five years.... Wonder where she gets them! Picks them out, I suppose!”

He abandoned it for its fellow.

Except for a slight mustiness the second egg was very palatable indeed. He was getting on to the bottom of it as Miriam came in. He looked up. “Nice afternoon” he said at her stare, and perceived she knew him at once by the gesture and the voice. She went white and shut the door behind her. She looked as though she was going to faint. Mr. Polly sprang up quickly and handed her a chair. “My God!” she whispered, and crumpled up rather than sat down.

“It’s *you*” she said.

“No” said Mr. Polly very earnestly. “It isn’t. It just looks like me. That’s all.”

“I *knew* that man wasn’t you — all along. I tried to think it was. I tried to think perhaps the water had altered your wrists and feet and the colour of your hair.”

“Ah!”

“I’d always feared you’d come back.”

Mr. Polly sat down by his egg. “I haven’t come back” he said very earnestly. “Don’t you think it.”

“Ow we’ll pay back the insurance now I *don’t* know.” She was weeping. She produced a handkerchief and covered her face.

“Look here, Miriam” said Mr. Polly. “I haven’t come back and I’m not coming back. I’m — I’m a Visitant from Another World. You shut up about me and I’ll shut up about myself. I came back because I thought you might be hard up or in trouble or some silly thing like that. Now I see you again — I’m satisfied. I’m satisfied completely. See? I’m going to absquatulate, see? Hey Presto right away.”

He turned to his tea for a moment, finished his cup noisily, stood up.

“Don’t you think you’re going to see me again” he said “for you ain’t.”

He moved to the door.

“That *was* a tasty egg,” he said, hovered for a second and vanished.

Annie was in the shop.

“The missus has had a bit of a shock” he remarked. “Got some sort of fancy about a ghost. Can’t make it out quite. So Long!”

And he had gone.

III

Mr. Polly sat beside the fat woman at one of the little green tables at the back of the Potwell Inn, and struggled with the mystery of life. It was one of those evenings, serenely luminous, amply and atmospherically still, when the river bend was at its best. A swan floated against the dark green masses of the further bank, the stream flowed broad and shining to its destiny, with scarce a ripple — except where the reeds came out from the headland — the three poplars rose clear and harmonious against a sky of green and yellow. And it was as if it was all securely within a great warm friendly globe of crystal sky. It was as safe and enclosed and fearless as a child that has still to be born. It was an evening full of the quality of tranquil, unqualified assurance. Mr. Polly’s mind was filled with the persuasion that indeed all things whatsoever must needs be satisfying and complete. It was incredible that life has ever done more than seemed to jar, that there could be any shadow in life save such velvet softnesses as made the setting for that silent swan, or any murmur but the ripple of the water as it swirled round the chained and gently swaying punt. And the mind of Mr. Polly, exalted and made tender by this atmosphere, sought gently, but sought, to draw together the varied memories that came drifting, half submerged, across the circle of his mind.

He spoke in words that seemed like a bent and broken stick thrust suddenly into water, destroying the mirror of the shapes they sought. “Jim’s not coming back again ever” he said. “He got drowned five years ago.”

“Where?” asked the fat woman, surprised.

“Miles from here. In the Medway. Away in Kent.”

“Lor!” said the fat woman.

“It’s right enough” said Mr. Polly.

“How d’you know?”

“I went to my home.”

“Where?”

“Don’t matter. I went and found out. He’d been in the water some days. He’d got my clothes and they’d said it was me.”

“*They?*”

“It don’t matter. I’m not going back to them.”

The fat woman regarded him silently for some time. Her expression of scrutiny gave way to a quiet satisfaction. Then her brown eyes went to the river.

“Poor Jim,” she said. “E ’adn’t much Tact — ever.”

She added mildly: “I can’t ’ardly say I’m sorry.”

“Nor me” said Mr. Polly, and got a step nearer the thought in him. “But it don’t seem much good his having been alive, does it?”

“E wasn’t much good” the fat woman admitted. “Ever.”

“I suppose there were things that were good to him,” Mr. Polly speculated. “They weren’t *our* things.”

His hold slipped again. “I often wonder about life” he said weakly.

He tried again. “One seems to start in life” he said, “expecting something. And it doesn’t happen. And it doesn’t matter. One starts with ideas that things are good and things are bad — and it hasn’t much relation to what *is* good and what is bad. I’ve always been the skeptaceous sort, and it’s always seemed rot to me to pretend we know good from evil. It’s just what I’ve *never* done. No Adam’s apple stuck in *my* throat, ma’am. I don’t own to it.”

He reflected.

“I set fire to a house — once.”

The fat woman started.

“I don’t feel sorry for it. I don’t believe it was a bad thing to do — any more than burning a toy like I did once when I was a baby. I nearly killed myself with a razor. Who hasn’t? — anyhow gone as far as thinking of it? Most of my time I’ve been half dreaming. I married like a dream almost. I’ve never really planned my life or set out to live. I happened; things happened to me. It’s so with everyone. Jim couldn’t help himself. I shot at him and tried to kill him. I dropped the gun and he got it. He very nearly had me. I wasn’t a second too soon — ducking.... Awkward — that night was.... M’mm.... But I don’t blame him — come to that. Only I don’t see what it’s all up to....

“Like children playing about in a nursery. Hurt themselves at times....

“There’s something that doesn’t mind us” he resumed presently. “It isn’t what we try to get that we get, it isn’t the good we think we do is good. What makes us happy isn’t our trying, what makes others happy isn’t our trying. There’s a sort of character people like and stand up for and a sort they won’t. You got to work it out and take the consequences.... Miriam was always trying.”

“Who was Miriam?” asked the fat woman.

“No one you know. But she used to go about with her brows knit trying not to do whatever she wanted to do — if ever she did want to do anything —”

He lost himself.

“You can’t help being fat” said the fat woman after a pause, trying to get up to his thoughts.

“You can’t,” said Mr. Polly.

“It helps and it hinders.”

“Like my upside down way of talking.”

“The magistrates wouldn’t ’ave kept on the license to me if I ’adn’t been fat....”

“Then what have we done” said Mr. Polly “to get an evening like this? Lord! look at it!” He sent his arm round the great curve of the sky.

“If I was an Italian I should come out here and sing. I whistle sometimes, but bless you, it’s singing I’ve got in my mind. Sometimes I think I live for sunsets.”

“I don’t see that it does you any good always looking at sunsets like you do” said the fat woman.

“Nor me. But I do. Sunsets and things I was made to like.”

“They don’t ’elp you,” said the fat woman thoughtfully.

“Who cares?” said Mr. Polly.

A deeper strain had come to the fat woman. “You got to die someday” she said.

“Some things I can’t believe” said Mr. Polly suddenly “and one is your being a skeleton....” He pointed his hand towards the neighbour’s hedge. “Look at ’em — against the yellow — and they’re just stingin’ nettles. Nasty weeds — if you count things by their uses. And no help in the life hereafter. But just look at the look of them!”

“It isn’t only looks” said the fat woman.

“Whenever there’s signs of a good sunset and I’m not too busy,” said Mr. Polly “I’ll come and sit out here.”

The fat woman looked at him with eyes in which contentment struggled with some obscure reluctant protest, and at last turned them slowly to the black nettle pagodas against the golden sky.

“I wish we could” she said.

“I will.”

The fat woman’s voice sank nearly to the inaudible.

“Not always” she said.

Mr. Polly was some time before he replied. “Come here always when I’m a ghost” he replied.

“Spoil the place for others” said the fat woman, abandoning her moral solitudes for a more congenial point of view.

“Not my sort of ghost wouldn’t” said Mr. Polly, emerging from another long pause. “I’d be a sort of diaphalous feeling — just mellowish and warmish like....”

They said no more, but sat on in the warm twilight until at last they could scarcely distinguish each other’s faces. They were not so much thinking as lost in a smooth, still quiet of the mind. A bat flitted by.

“Time we was going in, O’ Party” said Mr. Polly, standing up. “Supper to get. It’s as you say, we can’t sit here for ever.”

The End