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H. G. WELLS
ATLANTIC EDITION**

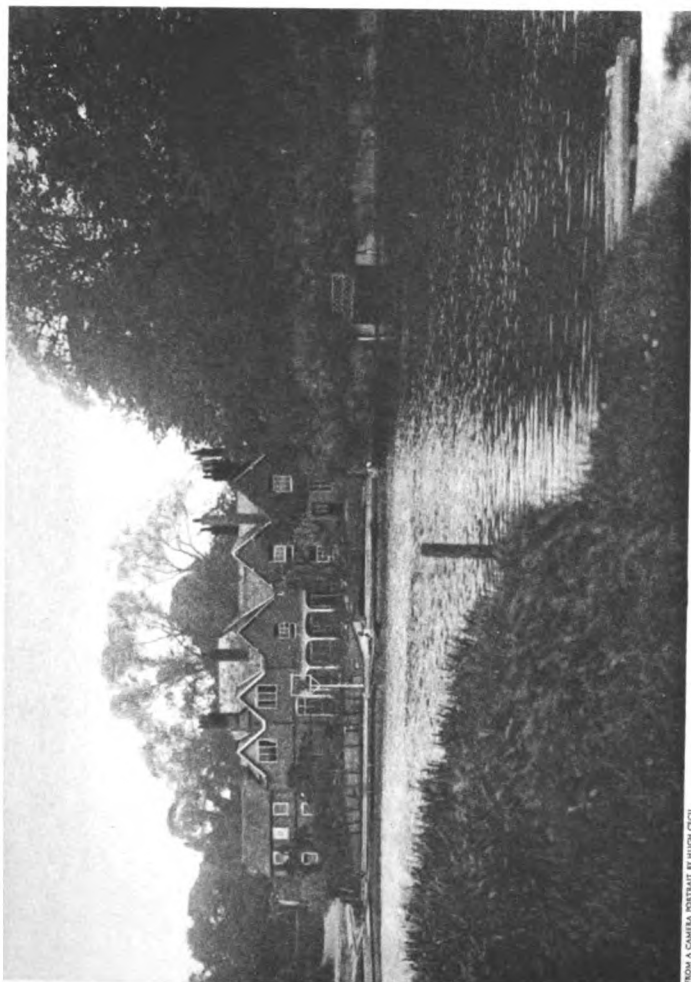
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**THE WORKS OF
H. G. WELLS
ATLANTIC EDITION
VOLUME XVII**



FROM A CAMERA PORTRAIT BY HUGH FESLE

THE INN AT MOULSFORD

BY
H. G. ...



LONDON

MCMXXVI



FROM A SERIES OF STUDIES BY HUGH FLETCHER

THE INN AT MOULSEFORD

THE HISTORY OF MR. POLLY
AND
BEALBY

BY
H. G. WELLS



LONDON
T. FISHER UNWIN, LTD.
MCMXXVI

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PREFACE TO VOLUME XVII

Two stories of very unequal value, "The History of Mr. Polly" and "Bealby," are printed together in this volume. Mr. Polly was invented in 1909-10; "Bealby" was written in the gloom of impending war and is a desperate attempt to keep cheerful. A small but influential group of critics maintain that "The History of Mr. Polly" is the writer's best book. He does not agree with them in that, but certainly it is his happiest book and the one he cares for most. It has many affinities with "Kipps," but it is done with a surer hand. "Bealby," as the music-hall people say, "gets the laugh" once or twice, but it betrays a writer intensely irritated by his world; the pompous statesman who falls down-stairs, the old popularity-hunting general, a character planned to reflect upon rather than rival Colonel Newcome, Miss Madeleine Philips and the caravan party are all most unlovingly drawn. And Captain Douglas flies off at last, to his army manoeuvres in France and hard work—like an author flying from the end of an irritating task. All the characters in "Bealby" are pelted with derision and misfortune. "Take that!" says the author as Shonts is torn to pieces and the caravan upsets. But "The History of Mr. Polly" is warm with a pervading affection, and even Miriam is left in peace and contentment at last to distribute eggs beyond refreshment to her unwary customers.

THE HISTORY OF MR. POLLY

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THE HISTORY OF MR. POLLY

CHAPTER I
BEGINNINGS AND THE BAZAAR

1



OLE!" 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 March 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 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.

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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 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 offered indignity 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 up-stairs 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 head-dress. "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.

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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 of him. He hated Fishbourne, he hated Fishbourne 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 circum-

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stances—if, indeed, one may speak of a recent meal as a circumstance—seeing that Mr. Polly was 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

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too long," said Mr. Polly, catching sight of his shadow, "you blighted, desgenerated Paintbrush! Ugh!" and he flattened down the projecting tails with an urgent hand.

2

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 large about the lower half of his face, and 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 fallow 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: "Roöötten Beëëastly 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

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vest; the braid that bound these garments was a little loose in places. His collar was chosen from stock and with projecting corners, what was called in those days 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, those gray 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.

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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 toe-nails, 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 dad-da, 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 the 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.

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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 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 of the restraints and charities and 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

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made to read the Catechism and Bible with the utmost industry and an entire disregard of punctuation or significance; caused to imitate writing copies and drawing copies; given object-lessons upon sealing-wax and silkworms and potato-bugs and ginger and iron and such-like things; taught various other subjects his mind refused to entertain; and afterwards, when he was about twelve, he was jerked by his parents 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 willingness 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

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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 thir-

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teen 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 to-day 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

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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 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 down-strokes be thick and up-strokes thin? *Why* should the handle of one's pen point over one's right shoulder?

His copy-books towards the end foreshadowed his

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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 toe-nails 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.

3

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 round the Port Burdock naval dockyards. There he remained six years.

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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. To begin with, 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

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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 to 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 to-morrow," 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 the creatures. 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

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that all their names began with P. They decided they were the three P's, 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 P's 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 P's 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

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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 Shakespear 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 he was carried away by Parsons' enthusiasm. The three P's 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 Shakespear'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 discov-

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ered 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 P's 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 swash-buckling carriage.

And then came the glorious revelation of that great Frenchman whom Mr. Polly called "Rabooloose." The three P's 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, when 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 P's always maintained a sarcastic and defiant attitude.

"We have 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."

BEGINNINGS AND THE BAZAAR

"It's the only time we've got. And besides——"
The horrors of religious controversy would begin. . . .

Mr. Polly stuck loyally by the three P's, but in the secret places of his heart he was torn. A fire of conviction burned 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. No one who has not worked for endless days of interminable hours, with scarce a gleam of rest or liberty between the toil and the sleep, can understand how superhuman. 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

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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.

4

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 P's 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 hill out of the pleasant English countryside in which they had wandered and see Port Burdock spread out below, a network of interlacing street-

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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 troop-ship, and past the trim front and the slips 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 P's would take footpaths haphazard across fields, and plunge into unknown winding lanes between high hedges of honeysuckle and dogrose. 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 hoast-crowned farms; and farther on, to be reached only by cheap tickets on Bank Holiday times, was a sterile ridge of very clean roads and red sandpits and pines, and gorse and heather. The three P's could not afford to buy bicycles, and they found

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boots the greatest item of their skimpy expenditure. They threw appearances to the winds at last, and got ready-made working-men's hobnails. There was much discussion and strong feeling over this step in the dormitory, and the three P's were held to have derogated from the dignity of the emporium.

There is no countryside like the English countryside for those who have learned to love it; its firm yet gentle lines of hill and dale, its ordered confusion of features, its deer parks and downland, 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 prosperity 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

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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 P's 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 shop-walkers 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 landlady, or what Parsons called a "bit of character" drinking in the bar.

There would always be weighty inquiries 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 wagon, 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!

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“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 yellow-green apples—and wished them to come again some day, 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 hedges and reaching down, apple in hand. . . .

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

Fishbourne seemed a very jolly little place to Mr.

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Polly that afternoon. It has a clean sandy beach, instead of the mud and pebbles and coaly defilements of Port Burdock, a row of six bathing-machines, and a shelter on the Parade in which the three P's sat after a satisfying but rather expensive lunch that had included celery. Rows of verandahed villas proffered apartments; they had feasted in a 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.

5

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 misuse 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

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avoided every recognised phrase in the language, and mispronounced everything in order that he should be suspected of whim rather than of ignorance.

“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 articulariously 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 II

THE DISMISSAL OF PARSONS

1

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's apprenticeship was over; he had reached the status of an Improver, and he dressed the window of the Manchester department. 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!"

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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 to-morrow 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.”

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2

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 their 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. Mr. Polly hadn't. "The High Egrugious is fairly

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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 asymmetrical pile of thick white-and-red blankets twisted and rolled to accentuate their woolly softness heaped up in a warm disorder, with large window tickets inscribed in blazing red letters: "Cosey 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 head, and behind, in pursuit of contrasted bleakness, he was now hanging long strips of grey silesia and chilly-coloured linen dusterling.

It was wonderful, but——

Mr. Polly decided that it was time he went in. He

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found Platt in the silk department, apparently on the verge of another plunge into the exterior world. "Cosey Comfort at Cut Prices," said Polly. "Alliterations 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*.

"Wanttospeak 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

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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.

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"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 leaped, 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 pitching first a blanket, then an armful of silesia, then a window support out of the window into the shop. It leaped into Polly's mind that Parsons hated his own effort and was glad to demolish it. For a crowded second his attention was

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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.

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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.

3

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 'Ead—'Ard."

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

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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 ’Ead—’Ard.” 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 did sometimes 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 to-morrow, 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 doing his

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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 gov'nor 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 trousers 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.

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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 every one was in the shop, and Garvace would not let him invade the business to say good-by. When Mr. Polly went up-stairs 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 round. Platt went up to him.

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“He’s gone already,” said Platt. “Might have stopped to say good-by 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 Piping my Eye, by the look of me.”

CHAPTER III

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 some one 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

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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 of his cousin, and growing a little tiresome on account of some mysterious internal discomfort that the local practitioner diagnosed as imagination. He had aged with unusual 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 variants of:

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 penny 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 down upon the briefly yawning vacancy.

"Helpful," said Mr. Polly; "very helpful, O' Man, indeed. I might have gone on here 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,

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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 met 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 into 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

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had often wanted to find some one 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 "Dejuiced" 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 fountainhead.

At the back of Mr. Polly's mind while he made his observations was a disagreeable flavour of a 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 capacity for zeal—zeal on behalf of any one who would pay him a salary of twenty-six pounds a year.

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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

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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.

2

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 Shakespear with gusto, and uses “Stertoraneous Shover” 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

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have resisted the spell of ex-President Roosevelt, or General Baden Powell, or Mr. Peter Keary, or the late Dr. Samuel Smiles quite easily—I doubt if even Mr. St. Loe Strachey could have inspired him; 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 Fishbourne sleeping prosperously in the sun. And he had 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-

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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 capons,” he used to murmur to himself, under the impression that he was naming a characteristic type of mediæval 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 cosey 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

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ruined arches of the Benedictines' Infirmary and the view of Bell Harry Tower from the school-building. 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 appreciated the wife of Bath very keenly. 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 inquire. "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

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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 specious phrases, finding them full of an indescribable flavour. “Just the Broad Elemental Canterbury Proposition,” 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.

3

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 un-gainly 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

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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 a simple and wonderful thing to do. 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

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smartness had passed into the dulness 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 inquiries 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 into a driving establishment in Clapham, which dealt chiefly in ready-made suits, fed its assistants in an underground dining-room, and kept open 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 shop-walker took a dislike to him and nagged him. "Nar, then, Polly!" "Look alive, Polly!" became the burden of his days. "As Smart a chap as you could have," said the chief shop-walker, "but no *Zest*. No *Zest*! No *Vim*! What's the matter with you?"

During his night vigils Mr. Polly had a feeling.

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. . . . 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 and 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 high-browed, spectacled gentleman living at Highbury, wearing a gold pince-nez, and writing for the most part in the beautiful library of the Climax 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

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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 IV

MR. POLLY AN ORPHAN

1

THEN a great change was brought about in the life of Mr. Polly by the death of his father. His father 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 debatable 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-à-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 fifty-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 turns

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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, the writing of "Death" upon the sky; but it did not at first tear Mr. Polly's heart-strings 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 up-stairs to look at a stiff, straight, shrouded form with a face unwontedly quiet and, it seemed by reason of 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.

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A second long pause followed, and then, 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, with an immense effort, wrenched it up-stairs, with considerable incidental damage to lath and plaster and one of the casters. 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

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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

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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 upon 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 spoiled 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 æsthetic 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 mourners' carriage or two, according to whom you're going to invite," said Mr. Johnson.

"Didn't think of inviting any one," said Mr. Polly.

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"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 Mr. 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 whisky 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 whisky, 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.

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"*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 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."

2

Bereavement came to Mr. Polly before the realisation of opulence and its anxieties and responsibilities.

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ties. 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.

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"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 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 up-stairs 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.

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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 small 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 elaborations, "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.

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“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.”

3

All the preparations for the funeral ran easily and happily under Mrs. Johnson’s skilful hands. On the eve of the sad occasion 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 round the two vases that had views of Tivoli and the Bay of Naples, so that these rather brilliant landscapes were hidden and only the plain blue enamel showed, and she anticipated the long contemplated purchase of a table-cloth 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

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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 the 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

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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 every one.

"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,

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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 thumb-nail.

"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. Trounced 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? Ah! You always was a bit in front of what was needful."

His attention was drawn inward by a troublesome

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tooth, and he sucked at it spitefully. There was something potent about this old man that silenced every one 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 packet of earthy vegetables very deliberately on the new violet table-cloth, removed his hat carefully, and dabbled his brow, and wiped out his hat brim with an abundant 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, fair-haired, sharp-nosed, 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 who left only vague, confused impressions upon Mr. Polly's mind. (Aunt Mildred, who was an unexplained family scandal, had declined Mrs. Johnson's hospitality to the relief of every one who understood—as Mrs. Johnson intimated—though who

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understood, and what, as my head master used to say, Mr. Polly could form no idea.)

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 every one'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 head-dress between his feet, watching the approach of any one 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."

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"Outfitter," said Mr. Polly.

"I remember. Them girls pretend to be dress-makers."

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

"I *will* take a glass of sherry," he remarked; and then mildly to Mr. Polly, "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 opening 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 every one's attention in the wake of his heavy footsteps to the room above.

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4

Things crowded upon Mr. Polly. Every one, 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. Every one 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 dare say 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.

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“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 such-like endearments; Miriam was dark and quieter than her sisters 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 anyhow; they laughed at anything.

There they were tugging at his mind, and the

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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 heart-strings.

5

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.

"Lets lodgin's and chars," he commented. "Least-ways 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.

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“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 the party 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, Bessie? Uncle, you’ll have a drop of whisky, I expect.”

“Put it where I can mix for myself; I can’t bear wimmin’s mixing,” 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 some 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 with Mrs. Johnson of school-days and

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news of how various common friends had changed and married. Opposite him was Miriam and another of the early Johnson circle, and also he had brawn to carve, and there was hardly room for the helpful Bessie 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. Lar-kins, 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, Willie—You see, Mr. Polly, I used to have a young gentleman, a medical student, lodging with me——"

Voice from down the table with a large softness: "Am, Elfred? I didn't give you very much 'am."

Bessie became evident at the back of Mr. Polly's chair, struggling wildly to get past. Mr. Polly did his

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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 every one who cared to listen, while Mrs. Johnson beamed 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 Mrs. 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

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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 was 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——"

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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.

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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.

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 convulsive grimace at her.

"I'll die!" she said. "I don't believe you care a bit."

Feeling a little disorganised 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

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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

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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 good-bye—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.

CHAPTER V

ROMANCE

1

MR. POLLY returned to Clapham from the funeral celebrations prepared for trouble, and took his dismissal in a manly spirit.

“You’ve merely antiseperated me by a hair,” he said politely.

And he told them in the dormitory that he meant to take a little holiday before his next crib, though a certain inherited reticence suppressed the fact of the legacy.

“You’ll do that all right,” said Ascough, the head of the boot-shop. “It’s quite the fashion just at present. Six Weeks in Wonderful Wood Street. They’re running excursions. . . .”

“A little holiday”; that was the form his sense of wealth took first—it made a little holiday possible. Holidays were his life, and the rest merely adulterated living. And now he might take a little holiday and have money for railway fares and money for meals, and money for inns. But— He wanted some one to take the holiday with.

For a time he cherished a design of hunting up Parsons, getting him to throw up his situation, and going with him to Stratford-on-Avon and Shrewsbury, and the Welsh mountains and the Wye, and a

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lot of places like that, for a really gorgeous, careless, illimitable old holiday of a month. But, alas! Parsons had gone from the St. Paul's Churchyard outfitter's long ago, and left no address.

Polly tried to think he would be almost as happy wandering alone, but he knew better. He had dreamt of casual encounters with delightfully interesting people by the wayside—even romantic encounters. Such things happened in Chaucer and "Bocashiew"; they happened with extreme facility in Mr. Richard le Gallienne's very detrimental book, "The Quest of the Golden Girl," which he had read at Canterbury; but he had no confidence they would happen in England—to him.

When, a month later, he came out of the Clapham side door at last into the bright sunshine of a fine London day, with a dazzling sense of limitless freedom upon him, he did nothing more adventurous than order the cabman to drive to Waterloo, and there take a ticket to Easewood.

He wanted—what *did* he want most in life? I think his distinctive craving is best expressed as fun—fun in companionship. He had already spent a pound or two upon three select feasts to his fellow assistants, sprat suppers they were, and there had been a great and very successful Sunday pilgrimage to Richmond, by Wandsworth and Wimbledon's open common, a trailing garrulous company walking about a solemnly happy host, to wonderful cold meat and salad at the Roebuck, a bowl of punch, punch! and a bill to correspond; but now it was a week-day, and he went down to Easewood with his bag and portmanteau in a soli-

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tary compartment, and looked out of the window upon a world in which every possible congenial seemed either toiling in a situation or else looking for one with a gnawing and hopelessly preoccupying anxiety. He stared out of the window at the exploitation roads of suburbs and rows of houses all very much alike, either emphatically and impatiently TO LET, or full of rather busy unsocial people. Near Wimbledon he had a glimpse of golf-links, and saw two elderly gentlemen, who, had they chosen, might have been gentlemen of grace and leisure, addressing themselves to smite hunted little white balls great distances with the utmost bitterness and dexterity. Mr. Polly could not understand them.

Every road, he remarked as freshly as though he had never observed it before, was bordered by inflexible palings or iron fences or severely disciplined hedges. He wondered if perhaps abroad there might be beautifully careless, unenclosed highroads. Perhaps after all the best way of taking a holiday is to go abroad.

He was haunted by the memory of what was either a half-forgotten picture or a dream; a carriage was drawn up by the wayside and four beautiful people, two men and two women graciously dressed, were dancing a formal ceremonious dance, full of bows and curtsies, to the music of a wandering fiddler they had encountered. They had been driving one way and he walking another—a happy encounter with this obvious result. They might have come straight out of happy Theleme, whose motto is: "Do what thou wilt." The driver had taken his two sleek horses

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out; they grazed unchallenged; and he sat on a stone clapping time with his hands while the fiddler played. The shade of the trees did not altogether shut out the sunshine, the grass in the wood was lush and full of still daffodils, the turf they danced on was starred with daisies.

Mr. Polly, dear heart! firmly believed that things like that could and did happen—somewhere. Only it puzzled him that morning that he never saw them happening. Perhaps they happened south of Guilford! Perhaps they happened in Italy. Perhaps they ceased to happen a hundred years ago. Perhaps they happened just round the corner—on week-days when all good Mr. Pollys are safely shut up in shops. And so dreaming of delightful impossibilities until his heart ached for them, he was rattled along in the suburban train to Johnson's discreet home and the briskly stimulating welcome of Mrs. Johnson.

2

Mr. Polly translated his restless craving for joy and leisure into Harold Johnsonese by saying that he meant to look about him for a bit before going into another situation. It was a decision Johnson very warmly approved. It was arranged that Mr. Polly should occupy his former room and board with the Johnsons in consideration of a weekly payment of eighteen shillings. And the next morning Mr. Polly went out early and reappeared with a purchase, a safety bicycle which he proposed to study and master in the sandy lane below the Johnsons' house. But

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over the struggles that preceded his mastery it is humane to draw a veil.

And also Mr. Polly bought a number of books; Rabelais for his own, and "The Arabian Nights," the works of Sterne, a pile of "Tales from Blackwood," cheap in a second-hand book-shop, the plays of William Shakespear, a second-hand copy of Belloc's "Path to Rome," an odd volume of "Purchas his Pilgrimes" and "The Life and Death of Jason."

"Better get yourself a good book on bookkeeping," said Johnson, turning over perplexing pages.

A belated spring, to make up for lost time, was now advancing with great strides. Sunshine and a stirring wind were poured out over the land, fleets of towering clouds sailed upon urgent tremendous missions across the blue sea of heaven, and presently Mr. Polly was riding a little unstably along unfamiliar Surrey roads, wondering always what was round the next corner, and marking the blackthorn and looking out for the first white flower-buds of the may. He was perplexed and distressed, as indeed are all right-thinking souls, that there is no may in early May.

He did not ride at the even pace sensible people use, who have marked out a journey from one place to another, and settled what time it will take them. He rode at variable speeds, and always as though he was looking for something that missing left life attractive still, but a little wanting in significance. And sometimes he was so unreasonably happy he had to whistle and sing, and sometimes he was incredibly, but not at all painfully, sad. His indigestion van-

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ished with air and exercise, and it was quite pleasant in the evening to stroll about the garden with Johnson and discuss plans for the future. Johnson was full of ideas. Moreover, Mr. Polly had marked the road that led to Stamton, that rising popular suburb; and as his bicycle legs grew strong his wheel, with a sort of inevitableness, carried him towards a row of houses in a back street in which his Larkins cousins made their home together.

He was received with great enthusiasm.

The street was a dingy little street, a *cul-de-sac* of very small houses in a row, each with an almost flattened bow window and a blistered brown door with a black knocker. He poised his bright new bicycle against the window, and knocked and stood waiting, and felt himself in his straw hat and black serge suit a very pleasant and prosperous-looking figure. The door was opened by Cousin Miriam. She was wearing a bluish print dress that brought out a kind of sallow warmth in her skin, and although it was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon her sleeves were tucked up, as if for some domestic task, above her elbows, showing her rather slender but very shapely yellowish arms. The loosely pinned bodice confessed a delicately rounded neck.

For a moment she regarded him with suspicion and a faint hostility, and then recognition dawned in her eyes.

"Why!" she said, "it's Cousin Elfrid!"

"Thought I'd look you up," he said.

"Fancy you coming to see us like this!" she answered.

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They stood confronting one another for a moment, while Miriam collected herself for the unexpected emergency.

“Explorations menanderings,” said Mr. Polly, indicating the bicycle.

Miriam’s face betrayed no appreciation of the remark.

“Wait a moment,” she said, coming to a rapid decision, “and I’ll tell Ma.”

She closed the door on him abruptly, leaving him a little surprised in the street. “Ma!” he heard her calling, and a swift speech followed, the import of which he didn’t catch. Then she reappeared. It seemed but an instant, but she was changed; the arms had vanished into sleeves, the apron had gone, a certain pleasing disorder of the hair had been at least reproofed.

“I didn’t mean to shut you out,” she said, coming out upon the step. “I just told Ma. How are you, Elfrid? You *are* looking well. I didn’t know you rode a bicycle. Is it a new one?”

She leaned upon his bicycle. “Bright it is!” she said. “What a trouble you must have to keep it clean!”

Mr. Polly was aware of a rustling transit along the passage, and of the house suddenly full of hushed but strenuous movement.

“It’s plated mostly,” said Mr. Polly.

“What d’you carry in that little bag thing?” she asked, and then branched off to: “We’re all in a mess to-day, you know. It’s my cleaning-up day to-day. I’m not a bit tidy, I know, but I *do* like to ’ave a go

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in at things now and then. *They'd* leave everything, I believe. If I let 'em. . . . You got to take us as you find us, Elfrid. Mercy we wasn't all out." She paused. She was talking against time. "I *am* glad to see you again," she repeated.

"Couldn't keep away," said Mr. Polly gallantly. "Had to come over and see my pretty cousins again."

Miriam did not answer for a moment. She coloured deeply. "You *do say* things!" she said.

She stared at Mr. Polly, and his unfortunate sense of fitness made him nod his head towards her, regard her firmly with a round brown eye, and add impressively: "I don't say *which* of them."

Her answering expression made him realise for an instant the terrible dangers he trifled with. Avidity flared up in her eyes. Minnie's voice came happily to dissolve the situation.

"'Ello, Elfrid!" she said from the door-step.

Her hair was just passably tidy, and she was a little effaced by a red blouse, but there was no mistaking the genuine brightness of her welcome.

He was to come in to tea, and Mrs. Larkins, exuberantly genial in a floriferous but dingy flannel dressing-gown, appeared to confirm that. He brought in his bicycle and put it in a narrow, empty, dingy passage, and every one crowded into a small, untidy kitchen, whose table had been hastily cleared of the débris of the midday repast.

"You must come in 'ere," said Mrs. Larkins, "for Miriam's turning out the front room. I never did see such a girl for cleanin' up. Miriam's 'Oliday's a scrub.

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You've caught us on the 'Op, as the sayin' is, but Welcome all the same. Pity Annie's at work to-day; she won't be 'ome till seven."

Miriam put chairs and attended to the fire; Minnie edged up to Mr. Polly and said, "I *am* glad to see you again, Elfrid," with a warm contiguous intimacy that betrayed a broken tooth. Mrs. Larkins got out tea-things, and descanted on the noble simplicity of their lives, and how he "mustn't mind our simple ways." They enveloped Mr. Polly with a geniality that intoxicated his amiable nature; he insisted upon helping to lay the things, and created enormous laughter by pretending not to know where plates and knives and cups ought to go. "Who'm I going to sit next?" he said, and developed voluminous amusement by attempts to arrange the plates so that he could rub elbows with all three. Mrs. Larkins had to sit down in the windsor chair by the grandfather clock (which was dark with dirt, and not going) to laugh at her ease at his well-acted perplexity.

They got seated at last, and Mr. Polly struck a vein of humour in telling them how he learned to ride the bicycle. He found the mere repetition of the word "wabble" sufficient to produce almost inextinguishable mirth.

"No foreseeing little accidentulous misadventures," he said, "none whatever."

(Giggle from Minnie.)

"Stout elderly gentleman—shirt-sleeves—large straw waste-paper basket sort of hat—starts to cross the road—going to the oil-shop—prodic refreshment of oil-can——"

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"Don't say you run 'im down," said Mrs. Larkins, gasping. "Don't say you run 'im down, Elfrid!"

"Run 'im down! Not me, Madam; I never run anything down. Wabble. Ring the bell. Wabble, wabble——"

(Laughter and tears.)

"No one's going to run him down. Hears the bell! Wabble. Gust of wind. Off comes the hat smack into the wheel. Wabble. *Lord! what's* going to happen? Hat across the road, old gentleman after it, bell, shriek. He ran into me. Didn't ring his bell, hadn't *got* a bell—just ran into me. Over I went clinging to his venerable head. Down he went with me clinging to him. Oil-can blump, blump into the road."

(Interlude while Minnie is attended to for crumb in the windpipe.)

"Well, what happened to the old man with the oil-can?" said Mrs. Larkins.

"We sat about among the debreece and had a bit of an argument. I told him he oughtn't to come out wearing such a dangerous hat—flying at things. Said if he couldn't control his hat, he ought to leave it at home. High old jawbacious argument we had, I tell you. 'I tell you, Sir—' 'I tell *you*, Sir.' Waw-waw-waw. Infuriacious. But that's the sort of thing that's constantly happening, you know—on a bicycle. People run into you, hens, and cats, and dogs, and things. Everything seems to have its mark on you; everything."

"*You* never run into anything."

"Never. Swelpme," said Mr. Polly very solemnly.

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"Never, 'e say!" squealed Minnie. "Hark at 'im!" and relapsed into a condition that urgently demanded back-thumping. "Don't be so silly," said Miriam, thumping hard.

Mr. Polly had never been such a social success before. They hung upon his every word—and laughed. What a family they were for laughter! And he loved laughter. The background he apprehended dimly; it was very much the sort of background his life had always had. There was a threadbare table-cloth on the table, and the slop-basin and teapot did not go with the cups and saucers, the plates were different again, the knives worn down, the butter lived in a greenish glass dish of its own. Behind was a dresser hung with spare and miscellaneous crockery, with a work-box and an untidy work-basket; there was an ailing musk-plant in the window, and the tattered and blotched wall-paper was covered by bright-coloured grocers' almanacs. Feminine wrappings hung from pegs upon the door, and the floor was covered with a varied collection of fragments of oil-cloth. The windsor chair he sat in was unstable—which presently afforded material for humour. "Steady, old nag," he said; "Whoa, my friskiacious palfrey!"

"The things he says! You never know what he won't say next!"

3

"You ain't talkin' of goin'!" cried Mrs. Larkins. "Supper at eight."

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"Stay to supper with *us*, now you 'ave come over," said Mrs. Larkins, with corroborating cries from Minnie. "'Ave a bit of a walk with the gals, and then come back to supper. You might all go and meet Annie while I straighten up, and lay things out."

"You're not to go touching the front room, mind," said Miriam.

"*Who's* going to touch yer front room?" said Mrs. Larkins, apparently forgetful for a moment of Mr. Polly.

Both girls dressed with some care while Mrs. Larkins sketched the better side of their characters, and then the three young people went out to see something of Stamton. In the streets their risible mood gave way to a self-conscious propriety that was particularly evident in Miriam's bearing. They took Mr. Polly to the Stamton wreckery-ation ground—that at least was what they called it—with its handsome custodian's cottage, its asphalt paths, its Jubilee drinking-fountain, its clumps of wallflower and daffodils, its charmingly artistic notice-boards with green borders and "art" lettering, and so to the new cemetery and a distant view of the Surrey hills, and round by the gas-works to the canal, to the factory that presently disgorged a surprised and radiant Annie.

"*El-lo!*" said Annie.

It is very pleasant to every properly constituted mind to be a centre of amiable interest for one's fellow creatures; and when one is a young man conscious of becoming mourning and a certain wit, and the fellow creatures are three young and ardent and sufficiently expressive young women who dispute for the honour

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of walking by one's side, one may be excused a secret exaltation. They did dispute.

"I'm going to 'ave 'im now," said Annie. "You two've been 'aving 'im all the safternoon. Besides, I've got something to say to 'im."

She had something to say to him. It came presently.

"I say," she said abruptly. "I *did* get them rings out of a prize packet."

"What rings?" asked Mr. Polly.

"What you saw at your poor father's funeral. You made out they meant something. They didn't—straight."

"Then some people have been very remiss about their chances," said Mr. Polly, understanding.

"They haven't had any chances," said Annie. "I don't believe in making oneself too free with people."

"Nor me," said Mr. Polly.

"I may be a bit larky and cheerful in my manner," Annie admitted. "But it don't *mean* anything. I ain't that sort."

"Right-o," said Mr. Polly.

4

It was past ten when Mr. Polly found himself riding back towards Easewood in a broad moonlight, and with a little Japanese lantern dangling from his handle-bar, making a fiery circle of pinkish light on and roundabout his front wheel. He was mightily pleased with himself and the day. There had been four-ale to drink at supper mixed with ginger beer,

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very free and jolly in a jug. No shadow fell upon the agreeable excitement of his mind until he faced the anxious and reproachful face of Johnson, who had been sitting up for him, smoking and trying to read the odd volume of "Purchas his Pilgrimes"—about the monk who went into Sarmatia and saw those limitless Tartar carts that carried tents.

"Not had an accident, Elfrid?" said Johnson.

The weakness of Mr. Polly's character came out in his reply.

"Not much," he said. "Pedal got a bit loose in Stamton, O' Man. Couldn't ride it; so I looked up the cousins while I waited."

"Not the Larkins lot?"

"Yes."

Johnson yawned hugely, and asked for and was given friendly particulars.

"Well," he said, "better get to bed. I been reading that book of yours; rum stuff. Can't make it out quite. Quite out of date, I should say, if you asked me."

"That's all right, O' Man," said Mr. Polly.

"Not a bit of use for anything that I can see."

"Not a bit."

"See any shops in Stamton?"

"Nothing to speak of," said Mr. Polly. "Goo' night, O' Man."

Before and after this brief conversation his mind ran on his cousins very warmly and prettily in the vein of high spring. Mr. Polly had been drinking at the poisoned fountains of English literature, fountains so unsuited to the needs of a decent clerk or

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shopman, fountains charged with the dangerous suggestion that it becomes a man of gaiety and spirit to make love gallantly and rather carelessly. It seemed to him that evening to be handsome and humorous and practicable to make love to all his cousins. It wasn't that he liked any of them particularly, but he liked something about them. He liked their youth and femininity, their resolute high spirits, and their interest in him.

They laughed at nothing and knew nothing, and Minnie had lost a tooth, and Annie screamed and shouted; but they were interesting, intensely interesting.

And Miriam wasn't so bad as the others. He had kissed them all, and had been kissed in addition several times by Minnie—"oscolatory exercises."

He buried his nose in his pillow and went to sleep—to dream of anything rather than getting on in the world, as a sensible young man in his position ought to have done.

5

And now Mr. Polly began to lead a double life. With the Johnsons he professed to be inclined, but not so conclusively inclined as to be inconvenient, to get a shop for himself—to be, to use the phrase he preferred, "looking for an opening." He would ride off in the afternoon upon that research, remarking that he was going to "cast a strategical eye" on Chertsey or Weybridge. But if not all roads, still a great majority of them led by however devious ways to Stamton, and to laughter and increasing famili-

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arity. Relations developed with Annie and Minnie and Miriam. Their various characters were increasingly interesting. The laughter became perceptibly less abundant, something of the fizz had gone from the first opening, still these visits remained wonderfully friendly and upholding. Then back he would come to grave but evasive discussions with Johnson.

Johnson was really anxious to get Mr. Polly "into something." His was a reserved, honest character, and he would really have preferred to see his lodger doing things for himself than receive his money for housekeeping. He hated waste, anybody's waste, much more than he desired profit. But Mrs. Johnson was all for Mr. Polly's loitering. She seemed much the more human and likeable of the two to Mr. Polly.

He tried at times to work up enthusiasm for the various avenues to well-being his discussion with Johnson opened. But they remained disheartening prospects. He imagined himself wonderfully smartened up, acquiring style and value in a London shop; but the picture was stiff and unconvincing. He tried to rouse himself to enthusiasm by the idea of his property increasing by leaps and bounds, by twenty pounds a year or so, let us say, each year, in a well-placed little shop, the corner shop Johnson favoured. There was a certain picturesque interest in imagining cutthroat economies, but his heart told him there would be little in practising them.

And then it happened to Mr. Polly that real Romance came out of dreamland into his life, intoxicated and gladdened him with sweetly beautiful suggestions—and left him. She came and left him as that dear

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lady leaves so many of us, alas! not sparing him one jot or one tittle of the hollowness of her retreating aspect.

It was all the more to Mr. Polly's taste that the thing should happen as things happen in books.

In a resolute attempt not to get to Stamton that day, he had turned due southward from Easewood towards a country where the abundance of bracken jungles, lady's smock, stitchwort, bluebells, and grassy stretches by the wayside under shady trees does much to compensate the lighter type of mind for the absence of promising "openings." He turned aside from the road, wheeled his machine along a faintly marked attractive trail through bracken until he came to a heap of logs against a high old stone wall with a damaged coping and wallflower plants already gone to seed. He sat down, balanced the straw hat on a convenient lump of wood, lit a cigarette, and abandoned himself to agreeable musings and the friendly observation of a cheerful little brown-and-gray bird his stillness presently encouraged to approach him.

"This is All Right," said Mr. Polly softly to the little brown-and-gray bird. "Business—later."

He reflected that he might go on in this way for four or five years, and then be scarcely worse off than he had been in his father's lifetime.

"Vile Business," said Mr. Polly.

Then Romance appeared. Or to be exact, Romance became audible.

Romance began as a series of small but increasingly vigorous movements on the other side of the wall,

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then a voice murmuring, then as a falling of little fragments on the other side and as ten pink fingertips, scarcely apprehended before Romance became startingly and emphatically a leg, remained for a time a fine, slender, actively struggling limb, brown-stockinged, and wearing a brown toe-worn shoe, and then. . . . A handsome, red-haired girl wearing a short dress of blue linen was sitting astride the wall, panting, considerably disarranged by her climbing, and as yet unaware of Mr. Polly. . . .

His fine instincts made him turn his head away and assume an attitude of negligent contemplation, with his ears and mind alive to every sound behind him.

“Goodness!” said a voice, with a sharp note of surprise.

Mr. Polly was on his feet in an instant. “Dear me! Can I be of any assistance?” he said, with deferential gallantry.

“I don’t know,” said the young lady, and regarded him calmly with clear blue eyes. “I didn’t know there was any one here,” she added.

“Sorry,” said Mr. Polly, “if I am intrudacious. I didn’t know you didn’t want me to be here.”

She reflected for a moment on the word.

“It isn’t that,” she said, surveying him. “I oughtn’t to get over the wall,” she explained. “It’s out of bounds; at least in term time. But this being holidays——”

Her manner placed the matter before him.

“Holidays is different,” said Mr. Polly.

“I don’t want to actually *break* the rules,” she said.

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“Leave them behind you,” said Mr. Polly, with a catch of the breath, “where they are safe.” And marvelling at his own wit and daring, and indeed trembling within himself, he held out a hand for her.

She brought another brown leg from the unknown, and arranged her skirt with a dexterity altogether feminine.

“I think I’ll stay on the wall,” she decided. “So long as some of me’s in bounds——”

She continued to regard him with an irresistible smile of satisfaction. Mr. Polly smiled in return.

“You bicycle?” she said.

Mr. Polly admitted the fact, and she said she did too.

“All my people are in India,” she explained. “It’s beastly rot—I mean it’s frightfully dull being left here alone.”

“All *my* people,” said Mr. Polly, “are in heaven!”

“I say!”

“Fact,” said Mr. Polly. “Got nobody.”

“And that’s why——” She checked her artless comment on his mourning. “I say,” she said in a sympathetic voice, “I *am* sorry. I really am. Was it a fire, or a ship—or something?”

Her sympathy was very delightful. He shook his head. “The ordinary tables of mortality,” he said. “First one, and then another.”

Behind his outward melancholy, delight was dancing wildly.

“Are *you* lonely?” asked the girl.

Mr. Polly nodded.

“I was just sitting there in melancholic retro-

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spectatiousness," he said, indicating the logs; and again a swift thoughtfulness swept across her face.

"There's no harm in our talking," she reflected.

"It's a kindness. Won't you get down?"

She reflected, and surveyed the turf below and the scene around, and him.

"I'll stay on the wall," she said, "if only for bounds' sake."

She certainly looked quite adorable on the wall. She had a fine neck and pointed chin that was particularly admirable from below, and pretty eyes and fine eyebrows are never so pretty as when they look down upon one. But no calculation of that sort, thank Heaven, was going on beneath her ruddy shock of hair.

6

"Let's talk," she said, and for a time they were both tongue-tied.

Mr. Polly's literary proclivities had taught him that under such circumstances a strain of gallantry was demanded. And something in his blood repeated that lesson.

"You make me feel like one of those old knights," he said, "who rode about the country looking for dragons and beautiful maidens and chivalresque adventures."

"Oh!" she said. "Why?"

"Beautiful maiden," he said.

She flushed under her freckles with the quick bright flush those pretty red-haired people have.

"Nonsense!" she said.

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"You are. I'm not the first to tell you that. A beautiful maiden imprisoned in an enchanted school."

"*You* wouldn't think it enchanted."

"And here am I—clad in steel. Well, not exactly, but my fiery war-horse is, anyhow. Ready to ab-squatulate all the dragons, and rescue you."

She laughed, a jolly laugh, that showed delightfully gleaming teeth. "I wish you could *see* the dragons," she said, with great enjoyment. Mr. Polly felt they were a sun's distance from the world of every day.

"Fly with me!" he dared.

She stared for a moment, and then went off into peals of laughter. "*You are* funny!" she said. "Why, I haven't known you five minutes."

"One doesn't—in this medeval world. My mind is made up, anyhow."

He was proud and pleased with his joke, and quick to change his key neatly. "I wish one could," he said.

"I wonder if people ever did."

"If there were people like you."

"We don't even know each other's names," she remarked, with a descent to matters of fact.

"Yours is the prettiest name in the world."

"How do you know?"

"It must be—anyhow."

"It *is* rather pretty, you know. It's Christabel."

"What did I tell you?"

"And yours?"

"Poorer than I deserve. It's Alfred."

"*I* can't call you Alfred."

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"Well, Polly."

"It's a girl's name!"

For a moment he went out of tune. "I wish it was," he said, and could have bitten out his tongue at the Larkins sound of it.

"I shan't forget it," she remarked consolingly.

"I say," she said, in the pause that followed, "why are you riding about the country on a bicycle?"

"I'm doing it because I like it."

She sought to estimate his social status on her limited basis of experience. He stood leaning with one hand against the wall, looking up at her and tingling with daring thoughts. He was a littleish man, you must remember, but neither mean-looking nor unhandsome in those days, sunburned by his holiday and now warmly flushed. He had an inspiration to simple speech that no practised trifier with love could have bettered. "There *is* love at first sight," he said, and said it sincerely.

She stared at him with eyes round and big with excitement.

"I think," she said slowly, and without any signs of fear or retreat, "I ought to get back over the wall."

"It needn't matter to you," he said; "I'm just a nobody. But I know you are the best and most beautiful thing I've ever spoken to." His breath caught against something. "No harm in telling you that," he said.

"I should have to go back if I thought you were serious," she said after a pause, and they both smiled together.

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After that they talked in a fragmentary way for some time. The blue eyes surveyed Mr. Polly with kindly curiosity from under a broad, finely modelled brow, much as an exceptionally intelligent cat might survey a new sort of dog. She meant to find out all about him. She asked questions that riddled the honest knight in armour below, and probed ever nearer to the hateful secret of the shop and his normal servitude. And when he made a flourish and mispronounced a word, a thoughtful shade passed like the shadow of a cloud across her face.

“Boom!” came the sound of a gong.

“Lordy!” cried the girl, and flashed a pair of brown legs at him and was gone.

Then her pink finger-tips reappeared, and the top of her red hair. “Knight,” she cried from the other side of the wall. “Knight there!”

“Lady!” he answered.

“Come again to-morrow.”

“At your command. But——”

“Yes?”

“Just one finger.”

“What do you mean?”

“To kiss.”

The rustle of retreating footsteps and silence. . . .

But after he had waited next day for twenty minutes she reappeared, a little out of breath with the effort to surmount the wall, and head first this time. And it seemed to him she was lighter and more daring and altogether prettier than the dreams and enchanted memories that had filled the interval.

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7

From first to last their acquaintance lasted ten days, but into that time Mr. Polly packed ten years of dreams.

"He don't seem," said Johnson, "to take a serious interest in anything. That shop at the corner's bound to be snapped up if he don't look out."

The girl and Mr. Polly did not meet on every one of those ten days; one was Sunday and she could not come, and on the eighth the school reassembled and she made vague excuses. All their meetings amounted to this, that she sat on the wall, more or less in bounds as she expressed it, and let Mr. Polly fall in love with her and try to express it below. She sat in a state of irresponsible exaltation, watching him, and at intervals prodding a vivisectioning point of encouragement into him, with that strange passive cruelty which is natural and proper in her sex and age.

And Mr. Polly fell in love, as though the world had given way beneath him and he had dropped through into another, into a world of luminous clouds and of a desolate, hopeless wilderness of desiring and of wild valleys of unreasonable ecstasy, a world whose infinite miseries were finer and in some inexplicable way sweeter than the purest gold of the daily life, whose joys—they were indeed but the merest remote glimpses of joy—were brighter than a dying martyr's vision of heaven. Her smiling face looked down upon him out of the sky, her careless pose was the living body of life. It was senseless, it was utterly foolish, but all that was best and richest in Mr. Polly's nature

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broke like a wave and foamed up at the girl's feet, and died, and never touched her. And she sat on the wall and marvelled at him, and was amused, and once, suddenly moved and wrung by his pleading, she bent down rather shamefacedly and gave him a freckled, tennis-blistered little paw to kiss. And she looked into his eyes and suddenly felt a perplexity, a curious swimming of the mind that made her recoil and stiffen, and wonder afterwards and dream. . . .

And then with some instinct of self-protection she went and told her three best friends, great students of character all, of this remarkable phenomenon she had discovered on the other side of the wall.

"Look here," said Mr. Polly, "I'm wild for the love of you! I can't keep up this gesticulations game any more. I'm not a Knight. Treat me as a human man. You may sit up there smiling, but I'd die in torments to have you mine for an hour. I'm nobody and nothing. But look here! Will you wait for me five years? You're just a girl yet, and it wouldn't be hard."

"Shut up!" said Christabel, in an aside he did not hear, and something he did not see touched her hand.

"I've always been just dilletentytating about till now, but I could work. I've just woke up. Wait till I've got a chance with the money I've got."

"But you haven't got much money!"

"I've got enough to take a chance with, some sort of chance. I'd find a chance. I'll do that, anyhow. I'll go away. I mean what I say. I'll stop trifling and shirking. If I don't come back it won't matter. If I do——"

Her expression had become uneasy. Suddenly she bent down towards him.

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"Don't!" she said in an undertone.

"Don't—what?"

"Don't go on like this! You're different. Go on being the knight who wants to kiss my hand as his—what did you call it?" The ghost of a smile curved her face. "Gurdrum!"

"But——"

Then through a pause they both stared at each other, listening.

A muffled tumult on the other side of the wall asserted itself.

"Shut up, Rosie!" said a voice.

"I tell you I will see! I can't half hear. Give me a leg up!"

"You Idiot! He'll see you. You're spoiling everything."

The bottom dropped out of Mr. Polly's world. He felt as people must feel who are going to faint.

"You've got some one——" he said, aghast.

She found life inexpressible to Mr. Polly. She addressed some unseen hearers. "You filthy little Beasts!" she cried, with a sharp note of agony in her voice, and swung herself back over the wall and vanished. There was a squeal of pain and fear, and a swift, fierce altercation.

For a couple of seconds he stood agape.

Then a wild resolve to confirm his worst sense of what was on the other side of the wall made him seize a log, put it against the stones, clutch the parapet with insecure fingers, and lug himself to a momentary balance on the wall.

Romance and his goddess had vanished.

A red-haired girl with a pigtail was wringing the

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wrist of a schoolfellow, who shrieked with pain and cried, "Mercy! mercy! O-o-o! Christabel!"

"You Idiot!" cried Christabel. "You giggling Idiot!"

Two other young ladies made off through the beech-trees from this outburst of savagery.

Then the grip of Mr. Polly's fingers gave, and he hit his chin against the stones and slipped clumsily to the ground again, scraping his cheek against the wall, and hurting his shin against the log by which he had reached the top. Just for a moment he crouched against the wall.

He swore, staggered to the pile of logs, and sat down.

He remained very still for some time, with his lips pressed together.

"Fool!" he said at last. "You Blithering Fool!" and began to rub his shin as though he had just discovered his bruises.

Afterwards he found his face was wet with blood—which was none the less red stuff from the heart because it came from slight abrasions.

CHAPTER VI

MIRIAM

1

It is an illogical consequence of one human being's ill-treatment that we should fly immediately to another, but that is the way with us. It seemed to Mr. Polly that only a human touch could assuage the smart of his humiliation. Moreover, it had, for some undefined reason, to be a feminine touch, and the number of women in his world was limited.

He thought of the Larkins family—the Larkins whom he had not been near now for ten long days. Healing people they seemed to him now—healing, simple people. They had good hearts, and he had neglected them for a mirage. If he rode over to them he would be able to talk bosh, and laugh, and forget the whirl of memories and thoughts that was spinning round and round so unendurably in his brain.

"Law!" said Mrs. Larkins, "come in! You're quite a stranger, Elfrid!"

"Been seeing to business," said the unveracious Polly.

"None of 'em ain't at 'ome, but Miriam's just out to do a bit of shopping. Won't let me shop, she won't, because I'm so keerless. She's a wonderful manager, that girl. Minnie's got some work at the carpet place. 'Ope it won't make 'er ill again. She's the loving delikit sort, is Minnie. . . . Come into

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the front parlour. It's a bit untidy, but you got to take us as you find us. Wot you been doing to your face?"

"Bit of a scraze with the bicycle," said Mr. Polly.

"Ow?"

"Trying to pass a carriage on the wrong side, and he drew up and ran me against a wall."

Mrs. Larkins scrutinised it. "You ought to 'ave some one look after your scrazes," she said. "That's all red and rough. It ought to be cold-creamed. Bring your bicycle into the passage and come in."

She "straightened up a bit." That is to say, she increased the dislocation of a number of scattered articles, put a work-basket on the top of several books, swept two or three dogs'-eared numbers of *The Lady's Own Novelist* from the table into the broken armchair, and proceeded to sketch together the tea-things with various such interpolations as: "Law, if I ain't forgot the butter!" All the while she talked of Annie's good spirits and cleverness with her millinery, and of Minnie's affection, and Miriam's relative love of order and management. Mr. Polly stood by the window uneasily, and thought how good and sincere was the Larkins' tone. It was well to be back again.

"You're a long time finding that shop of yours," said Mrs. Larkins.

"Don't do to be too precipitous," said Mr. Polly.

"No," said Mrs. Larkins, "once you got it you got it. Like choosing a 'usband. You better see you got it good. I kept Larkins 'esitating two years, I did, until I felt sure of him. A 'ansom man 'e was, as you

MIRIAM

can see by the looks of the girls, but 'ansom is as 'ansom does. You'd like a bit of jam to your tea, I expect? I 'ope they'll keep *their* men waiting when the time comes. I tell them if they think of marrying, it only shows they don't know when they're well off. Here's Miriam!"

Miriam entered with several parcels in a net, and a peevish expression. "Mother," she said, "you might 'ave prevented my going out with the net with the broken handle. I've been cutting my fingers with the string all the way 'ome." Then she discovered Mr. Polly and her face brightened.

"'Ello, Elfrid!" she said. "Where you been all this time?"

"Looking round," said Mr. Polly.

"Found a shop?"

"One or two likely ones. But it takes time."

"You've got the wrong cups, Mother."

She went into the kitchen, disposed of her purchases, and returned with the right cups. "What you done to your face, Elfrid?" she asked, and came and scrutinised his scratches. "All rough it is."

He repeated his story of the accident, and she was sympathetic in a pleasant, homely way.

"You *are* quiet to-day," she said, as they sat down to tea.

"Meditatious," said Mr. Polly.

Quite by accident he touched her hand on the table, and she answered his touch.

"Why not?" thought Mr. Polly, and looking up, caught Mrs. Larkins' eye and flushed guiltily. But Mrs. Larkins, with unusual restraint, said nothing.

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She made a grimace, enigmatical, but in its essence friendly.

Presently Minnie came in with some vague grievance against the manager of the carpet-making place about his method of estimating piece-work. Her account was redundant, defective, and highly technical, but redeemed by a certain earnestness. "I'm never within sixpence of what I reckon to be," she said. "It's a bit too 'ot." Then Mr. Polly, feeling that he was being conspicuously dull, launched into a description of the shop he was looking for and the shops he had seen. His mind warmed up as he talked.

"Found your tongue again," said Mrs. Larkins.

He had. He began to embroider the subject and work upon it. For the first time it assumed picturesque and desirable qualities in his mind. It stimulated him to see how readily and willingly they accepted his sketches. Bright ideas appeared in his mind from nowhere. He was suddenly enthusiastic.

"When I get this shop of mine I shall have a cat. Must make a home for a cat, you know."

"What, to catch the mice?" said Mrs. Larkins.

"No—sleep in the window. A venerable signor of a cat. Tabby. Cat's no good if it isn't tabby. Cat I'm going to have, and a canary! Didn't think of that before, but a cat and a canary seem to go, you know. Summer weather I shall sit at breakfast in the little room behind the shop, sun streaming in the window to rights, cat on a chair, canary singing, and—Mrs. Polly. . . ."

"'Ello!" said Mrs. Larkins.

"Mrs. Polly frying an extra bit of bacon. Bacon

MIRIAM

singing, cat singing, canary singing, kettle singing.
Mrs. Polly——”

“But who’s Mrs. Polly going to be?” said Mrs. Larkins.

“Figment of imagination, M’am,” said Mr. Polly. “Put in to fill up picture. No face to figure—as yet. Still, that’s how it will be, I can assure you. I think I must have a bit of garden. Johnson’s the man for a garden, of course,” he said, going off at a tangent, “but I don’t mean a fierce sort of garden. Earnest industry. Anxious moments. Fervous digging. Shan’t go in for that sort of garden, M’am. No! Too much Backache for me. My garden will be just a patch of ’sturtiums and sweetpea. Red-bricked yard, clothes-line. Trellis put up in odd time. Humorous wind-vane. Creeper up the back of the house.”

“Virginia creeper?” asked Miriam.

“Canary creeper,” said Mr. Polly.

“You *will* ’ave it nice,” said Miriam desirously.

“Rather,” said Mr. Polly. “Ting-a-ling-a-ling. Shop!”

He straightened himself up, and they all laughed.

“Smart little shop,” he said. “Counter. Desk. All complete. Umbrella-stand. Carpet on the floor. Cat asleep on the counter. Ties and hose on a rail over the counter. All right.”

“I wonder you don’t set about it right off,” said Miriam.

“Mean to get it exactly right, M’am,” said Mr. Polly.

“Have to have a Tom-cat,” said Mr. Polly, and paused for an expectant moment. “Wouldn’t do to

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open shop one morning, you know, and find the window full of kittens. Can't sell kittens. . . ."

When tea was over he was left alone with Minnie for a few minutes, and an odd intimation of an incident occurred that left Mr. Polly rather scared and shaken. A silence fell between them—an uneasy silence. He sat with his elbows on the table looking at her. All the way from Easewood to Stamton his erratic imagination had been running upon neat ways of proposing marriage. I don't know why it should have done, but it had. It was a kind of secret exercise that had not had any definite aim at the time, but which now recurred to him with extraordinary force. He couldn't think of anything in the world that wasn't the gambit to a proposal. It was almost irresistibly fascinating to think how immensely a few words from him would excite and revolutionise Minnie. She was sitting at the table with a work-basket among the tea-things, mending a glove in order to avoid her share of clearing away.

"I like cats," said Minnie, after a thoughtful pause. "I'm always saying to Mother, I wish we 'ad a cat. But we couldn't 'ave a cat 'ere—not with no yard."

"Never had a cat myself," said Mr. Polly. "No!"

"I'm fond of them," said Minnie.

"I like the look of them," said Mr. Polly. "Can't exactly call myself fond."

"I expect I shall get one some day. When about you get your shop."

"I shall have my shop all right before long," said Mr. Polly. "Trust me. Canary-bird and all."

MIRIAM

She shook her head. "I shall get a cat first," she said. "You never mean anything you say."

"Might get 'em together," said Mr. Polly, with his sense of a neat thing outrunning his discretion.

"Why! 'ow do you mean?" said Minnie, suddenly alert.

"Shop and cat thrown in," said Mr. Polly in spite of himself, and his head swam, and he broke out into a cold sweat as he said it.

He found her eyes fixed on him with an eager expression. "Mean to say—?" she began, as if for verification. He sprang to his feet, and turned to the window. "Little dog!" he said, and moved doorward hastily. "Eating my bicycle tire, I believe," he explained. And so escaped.

He saw his bicycle in the hall and cut it dead.

He heard Mrs. Larkins in the passage behind him as he opened the front door.

He turned to her. "Thought my bicycle was on fire," he said. "Outside. Funny fancy! All right reely. Little dog outside. . . . Miriam ready?"

"What for?"

"To go and meet Annie."

Mrs. Larkins stared at him. "You're stopping for a bit of supper!"

"If I may," said Mr. Polly.

"You're a rum un," said Mrs. Larkins, and called: "Miriam!"

Minnie appeared at the door of the room looking infinitely perplexed. "There ain't a little dog anywhere, Elfrid," she said.

Mr. Polly passed his hand over his brow. "I had

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a most curious sensation. Felt exactly as though something was up somewhere. That's why I said Little Dog. All right now."

He bent down and pinched his bicycle tire.

"You was saying something about a cat, Elfrid," said Minnie.

"Give you one," he answered, without looking up. "The very day my shop is opened."

He straightened himself up and smiled reassuringly.

"Trust me," he said.

2

When, after imperceptible manœuvres by Mrs. Larkins, he found himself starting circuitously through the inevitable recreation-ground with Miriam to meet Annie, he found himself quite unable to avoid the topic of the shop that had now taken such a grip upon him. A sense of danger only increased the attraction. Minnie's persistent disposition to accompany them had been crushed by a novel and violent and pungently expressed desire on the part of Mrs. Larkins to see her do something in the house sometimes. . . .

"You really think you'll open a shop?" said Miriam.

"I hate cribs," said Mr. Polly, adopting a moderate tone. "In a shop there's this drawback and that, but one is one's own Master."

"That wasn't all talk?"

"Not a bit of it."

"After all," he went on, "a little shop needn't be so bad."

MIRIAM

"It's a 'ome," said Miriam.

"It's a home."

Pause.

"There's no need to keep accounts and that sort of thing if there's no assistant. I dare say I could run a shop all right if I wasn't interfered with."

"I should like to see you in your shop," said Miriam. "I expect you'd keep everything tremendously neat."

The conversation flagged.

"Let's sit down on one of those seats over there past that notice-board," said Miriam, "where we can see those blue flowers."

They did as she suggested, and sat down in a corner where a triangular bed of stock and delphinium brightened the asphalted trceries of the recreation-ground.

"I wonder what they call those flowers," she said. "I always like them. They're handsome."

"Delphicums and larkspurs," said Mr. Polly. "They used to be in the park at Port Burdock."

"Floriferous corner," he added approvingly.

He put an arm over the back of the seat, and assumed a more comfortable attitude. He glanced at Miriam, who was sitting in a lax, thoughtful pose, with her eyes on the flowers. She was wearing her old dress. She had not had time to change, and the blue tones of her old dress brought out a certain warmth in her skin, and her pose exaggerated whatever was feminine in her rather lean and insufficient body, and rounded her flat chest delusively. A little line of light lay across her profile. The afternoon was

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full of transfiguring sunshine, children were playing noisily in the adjacent sand-pit, some Judas-trees were abloom in the villa gardens that bordered the recreation-ground, and all the place was bright with touches of young summer colour. It all merged with the effect of Miriam in Mr. Polly's mind.

Her thought found speech. "One did ought to be happy in a shop," she said, with a note of unusual softness in her voice.

It seemed to him that she was right. One did ought to be happy in a shop. Folly not to banish dreams that made one ache of townless woods and bracken tangles and red-haired linen-clad figures sitting in dappled sunshine upon grey and crumbling walls and looking queenly down on one with clear blue eyes. Cruel and foolish dreams they were, that ended in one's being laughed at and made a mock of. There was no mockery here.

"A shop's such a respectable thing to be," said Miriam thoughtfully.

"*I* could be happy in a shop," he said.

His sense of effect had made him pause.

"If I had the right company," he added.

She became very still.

Mr. Polly swerved a little from the conversational ice-run upon which he had embarked.

"I'm not such a blooming Geezer," he said, "as not to be able to sell goods a bit. One has to be nosey over one's buying, of course. But I shall do all right."

He stopped, and felt falling, falling through the aching silence that followed.

MIRIAM

"If you get the right company," said Miriam.

"I shall get that all right."

"You don't mean you've got some one——?"

He found himself plunging.

"I've got some one in my eye this minute," he said.

"Elfrid!" she said, turning to him. "You don't mean——"

Well, *did* he mean? "I do!" he said.

"Not reely!" She clinched her hands to keep still.

He took the conclusive step.

"Well, you and me, Miriam, in a little shop, with a cat and a canary——" He tried too late to get back to a hypothetical note. "Just suppose it!"

"You mean," said Miriam, "you're in love with me, Elfrid?"

What possible answer can a man give to such a question but "Yes!"

Regardless of the public park, the children in the sand-pit, and every one, she bent forward and seized his shoulder and kissed him on the lips. Something lit up in Mr. Polly at the touch. He put an arm about her and kissed her back, and felt an irrevocable act was sealed. He had a curious feeling that it would be very satisfying to marry and have a wife—only somehow he wished it wasn't Miriam. Her lips were very pleasant to him, and the feel of her in his arm.

They recoiled a little from each other, and sat for a moment flushed and awkwardly silent. His mind was altogether incapable of controlling its confusions.

"I didn't dream," said Miriam, "you cared——"

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Sometimes I thought it was Annie, sometimes Minnie——”

“Always I liked you better than them,” said Mr. Polly.

“I loved you, Elfrid,” said Miriam, “since ever we met at your poor father’s funeral. Leastways I *would* have done if I had thought— You didn’t seem to mean anything you said.

“I can’t believe it!” she added.

“Nor I,” said Mr. Polly.

“You mean to marry me and start that little shop?”

“Soon as ever I find it,” said Mr. Polly.

“I had no more idea when I came out with you——”

“Nor me.”

“It’s like a dream.”

They said no more for a little while.

“I got to pinch myself to think it’s real,” said Miriam. “What they’ll do without me at ’ome I can’t imagine. When I tell them——”

For the life of him Mr. Polly could not tell whether he was fullest of tender anticipations or regretful panic.

“Mother’s no good at managing—not a bit. Annie don’t care for housework, and Minnie’s got no ’ead for it. What they’ll do without me I can’t imagine.”

“They’ll have to do without you,” said Mr. Polly, sticking to his guns.

A clock in the town began striking.

“Lor!” said Miriam, “we shall miss Annie, sitting ’ere and love-making.”

MIRIAM

She rose and made as if to take Mr. Polly's arm. But Mr. Polly felt that their condition must be nakedly exposed to the ridicule of the world by such a linking, and evaded her movement.

Annie was already in sight before a flood of hesitation and terrors assailed Mr. Polly.

"Don't tell any one yet a bit," he said.

"Only Mother," said Miriam firmly.

3

Figures are the most shocking things in the world. The pettiest little squiggles of black, looked at in the right light; and yet consider the blow they can give you upon the heart. You return from a careless holiday abroad, and turn over the page of a newspaper, and against the name of the distant, vague-conceived railway, in mortgages upon which you have embarked the bulk of your capital, you see, instead of the familiar, persistent 95-6 (varying at most to 93 *ex div.*), this slightly richer arrangement of marks, 76½-78½.

It is like the opening of a pit just under your feet.

So, too, Mr. Polly's happy sense of limitless resources was obliterated suddenly by a vision of this tracery:

"298"

instead of the

"350"

he had come to regard as the fixed symbol of his affluence.

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It gave him a disagreeable feeling about the diaphragm, akin in a remote degree to the sensation he had when the perfidy of the red-haired schoolgirl became plain to him. It made his brow moist.

"Going down a Vortorex," he whispered.

By a characteristic feat of subtraction he decided that he must have spent sixty-two pounds.

"Funererial baked meats," he said, recalling possible items.

The happy dream in which he had been living, of long, warm days, of open roads, of limitless, unchecked hours, of infinite time to look about him, vanished like a thing enchanted. He was suddenly back in the hard old economic world, that exacts work, that limits range, that discourages phrasing and dispels laughter. He saw Wood Street and its fearful suspenses yawning beneath his feet.

And also he had promised to marry Miriam, and on the whole rather wanted to.

He was distraught at supper. Afterwards, when Mrs. Johnson had gone to bed with a slight headache, he opened a conversation with Johnson.

"It's about time, O' Man, I saw about doing something," he said. "Riding about and looking at shops all very debonairious, O' Man, but it's time I took one for keeps."

"What did I tell you?" said Johnson.

"How do you think that corner shop of yours will figure out?" Mr. Polly asked.

"You're really meaning it?"

"If it's a practable proposition, O' Man. Assuming it's practable, what's your idea of the figures?"

MIRIAM

Johnson went to the chiffonier, got out a letter, and tore off the back sheet. "Let's figure it out," he said, with solemn satisfaction. "Let's see the lowest you could do it on."

He squared himself to the task, and Mr. Polly sat beside him like a pupil, watching the evolution of the grey, distasteful figures that were to dispose of his little hoard.

"What running expenses have we got to provide for?" said Johnson, wetting his pencil. "Let's have them first. Rent? . . ."

At the end of an hour of hideous speculations, Johnson decided, "It's close; but you'll have a chance."

"M'm," said Mr. Polly. "What more does a brave man want?"

"One thing you can do quite easily. I've asked about it."

"What's that, O' Man?" said Mr. Polly.

"Take the shop without the house above it."

"I suppose I might put my head in to mind it," said Mr. Polly, "and get a job with my body."

"Not exactly that. But I thought you'd save a lot if you stayed on here—being all alone, as you are."

"Never thought of that, O' Man," said Mr. Polly, and reflected silently upon the needlessness of Miriam.

"We were talking of eighty pounds for stock," said Johnson. "Of course seventy-five is five pounds less, isn't it? Not much else we can cut."

"No," said Mr. Polly.

"It's very interesting, all this," said Johnson, fold-

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ing up the half-sheet of paper and unfolding it. "I wish sometimes I had a business of my own instead of a fixed salary. You'll have to keep books, of course."

"One wants to know where one is."

"I should do it all by double entry," said Johnson. "A little troublesome at first, but far the best in the end."

"Lemme see that paper," said Mr. Polly, and took it with the feeling of a man who takes a nauseating medicine, and scrutinised his cousin's neat figures with listless eyes.

"Well," said Johnson, rising and stretching, "Bed! Better sleep on it, O' Man."

"Right-o!" said Mr. Polly, without moving; but indeed he could as well have slept upon a bed of thorns.

He had a dreadful night. It was like the end of the annual holiday, only infinitely worse. It was like a newly arrived prisoner's backward glance at the trees and heather through the prison gates. He had to go back to harness, and he was as fitted to go in harness as the ordinary domestic cat. All night Fate, with the quiet complacency, and indeed at times the very face and gestures, of Johnson, guided him towards that undesired establishment at the corner near the station. "O Lord!" he cried, "I'd rather go back to cribs. I *should* keep my money, anyhow." Fate never winced.

"Run away to sea," whispered Mr. Polly; but he knew he wasn't man enough. "Cut my blooming throat."

MIRIAM

Some braver strain urged him to think of Miriam, and for a little while he lay still. . . .

"Well, O' Man?" said Johnson, when Mr. Polly came down to breakfast, and Mrs. Johnson looked up brightly. Mr. Polly had never felt breakfast so unattractive before.

"Just a day or so more, O' Man, to turn it over in my mind," he said.

"You'll get the place snapped up," said Johnson.

There were times in those last few days of coyness with his destiny when his engagement seemed the most negligible of circumstances; and times—and these happened for the most part at nights, after Mrs. Johnson had indulged everybody in a Welsh rarebit—when it assumed so sinister and portentous an appearance as to make him think of suicide. And there were times too when he very distinctly desired to be married, now that the idea had got into his head, at any cost. Also he tried to recall all the circumstances of his proposal time after time, and never quite succeeded in recalling what had brought the thing off. He went over to Stamton with a becoming frequency, and kissed all his cousins, and Miriam especially, a great deal, and found it very stirring and refreshing. They all appeared to know; and Minnie was tearful but resigned. Mrs. Larkins met him, and indeed enveloped him, with unwonted warmth, and there was a big pot of household jam for tea. And he could not make up his mind to sign his name to anything about the shop, though it crawled nearer and nearer to him though the project had materialised now to the

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tent of a draft agreement, with the place for his signature indicated in pencil.

One morning, just after Mr. Johnson had gone to the station, Mr. Polly wheeled his bicycle out into the road, went up to his bedroom, packed his long white night-dress, a comb, and a tooth-brush in a manner that was as offhand as he could make it, informed Mrs. Johnson, who was manifestly curious, that he was "off for a day or two to clear his head," and fled forthright into the road, and mounting, turned his wheel towards the tropics and the equator and the south coast of England, and indeed more particularly to where the little village of Fishbourne slumbers and sleeps.

When he returned, four days later, he astonished Johnson beyond measure by remarking, so soon as the shop project was reopened, "I've took a little contraption at Fishbourne, O' Man, that I fancy suits me better."

He paused, and then added in a manner if possible even more offhand, "Oh, and I'm going to have a bit of a nuptial over at Stamton—with one of the Larkins cousins."

"Nuptial!" said Johnson.

"Wedding-bells, O' Man. Benedictine collapse."

On the whole Johnson showed great self-control. "It's your own affair, O' Man," he said, when things had been more clearly explained; "and I hope you won't feel sorry when it's too late."

But Mrs. Johnson was first of all angrily silent, and then reproachful. "I don't see what we've done to be made fools of like this," she said. "After all the

MIRIAM

trouble we've 'ad to make you comfortable and see after you—out late, and sitting up, and everything; and then you go off as sly as sly, without a word, an' get a shop behind our backs, as though you thought we meant to steal your money. I 'aven't patience with such deceitfulness, and I didn't think it of you, Elfrid. And now the letting season's 'arf gone by, and what I shall do with that room of yours I've no idea. Frank is frank, and fair play fair play; so *I* was told, any'ow, when I was a girl. Just as long as it suits you to stay 'ere you stay 'ere, and then it's off and no thank you whether we like it or not. Johnson's too easy with you. 'E sits there and doesn't say a word; and night after night 'e's been adding up and subtracting, and multiplying and dividing, and suggesting and thinkin' for you, instead of seeing to his own affairs."

She paused for breath.

"Unfortunate amoor," said Mr. Polly apologetically and indistinctly. "Didn't expect it myself."

4

Mr. Polly's marriage followed with a certain inevitableness.

He tried to assure himself that he was acting upon his own forceful initiative, but at the back of his mind was the completest realisation of his powerlessness to resist the gigantic social forces he had set in motion. He had got to marry under the will of society, even as in times past it had been appointed for other sunny souls under the will of society that they should be led

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out by serious and unavoidable fellow creatures and ceremoniously drowned or burned or hung. He would have preferred infinitely a more observant and less conspicuous rôle, but the choice was no longer open to him. He did his best to play his part, and he procured some particularly neat check trousers to do it in. The rest of his costume, except for some bright yellow gloves, a grey-and-blue mixture tie, and that the broad crape band was changed for a livelier piece of silk, were the things he had worn at the funeral of his father. So nearly akin are human joy and sorrow.

The Larkins sisters had done wonders with grey sateen. The idea of orange-blossom and white veils had been abandoned reluctantly on account of the expense of the cabs. A novelette in which the heroine had stood at the altar in "a modest going-away dress" had materially assisted this decision. Miriam was frankly tearful, and so, indeed, was Annie, but with laughter as well to carry it off. Mr. Polly heard Annie say something vague about never getting a chance because of Miriam always sticking about at home like a cat at a mouse-hole, that became, as people say, food for thought. Mrs. Larkins was from the first flushed, garrulous, and wet and smeared by copious weeping; an incredibly soaked and crumpled and used-up pocket-handkerchief never left the clutch of her plump red hand. "Goo' girls all of them," she kept on saying in a tremulous voice; "such Goo'-Goo'-Goo' girls!" She wetted Mr. Polly dreadfully when she kissed him. Her emotion affected the buttons down the back of her bodice, and almost the last

MIRIAM

filial duty Miriam did before entering on her new life was to close that gaping orifice for the eleventh time. Her bonnet was small and ill-balanced, black adorned with red roses, and first it got over her right eye until Annie told her of it, and then she pushed it over her left eye and looked ferocious for a space, and after that baptismal kissing of Mr. Polly the delicate millinery took fright and climbed right up to the back part of her head and hung on there by a pin, and flapped piteously at all the larger waves of emotion that filled the gathering. Mr. Polly became more and more aware of that bonnet as time went on, until he felt for it like a thing alive. Towards the end it had yawning fits.

The company did not include Mrs. Johnson, but Johnson came with a pervading surreptitiousness and backed against walls and watched Mr. Polly with doubt and speculation in his large grey eye, and whistled noiselessly and doubtfully on the edge of things. He was, so to speak, to be best man *sotto voce*. A sprinkling of girls in gay hats from Miriam's place of business appeared in church, great nudgers all of them, but only two came on afterwards to the house. Mrs. Punt brought her son with his ever-widening mind—it was his first wedding; and a Larkins uncle, a Mr. Voules, a licenced victualler, very kindly drove over in a high-hung dog-cart from Sommershill with a plump, well-dressed wife, to give the bride away. One or two total strangers drifted into the church and sat down observantly in distant seats.

This sprinkling of people seemed only to enhance the cool brown emptiness of the church, the rows and

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rows of empty pews, disengaged Prayer-Books, and abandoned hassocks. It had the effect of a preposterous misfit. Johnson consulted with a thin-legged, short-skirted verger about the disposition of the party. The officiating clergy appeared distantly in the doorway of the vestry putting on his surplice, and relapsed into a contemplative cheek-scratching that was manifestly habitual. Before the bride arrived, Mr. Polly's sense of the church found an outlet in whispered criticisms of ecclesiastical architecture with Johnson. "Early Norman arches, eh?" he said, "or Perpendicular."

"Can't say," said Johnson.

"Telessated pavements all right."

"It's well laid anyhow."

"Can't say I admire the altar. Scrappy rather with those flowers."

He coughed behind his hand and cleared his throat. At the back of his mind he was speculating whether flight at this eleventh hour would be criminal or merely reprehensible bad taste. A murmur from the nudgers announced the arrival of the bridal party.

The little procession from a remote door became one of the enduring memories of Mr. Polly's life. The verger had hustled to meet it and arrange it according to tradition and morality. In spite of Mrs. Larkins' impassioned "Don't take her from me yet!" he made Miriam go first with Mr. Voules, the bridesmaids followed, and then himself, hopelessly unable to disentangle himself from the whispering maternal anguish of Mrs. Larkins. Mrs. Voules, a compact, rounded woman with a square, expressionless face,

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imperturbable dignity, and a dress of considerable fashion, completed the procession.

Mr. Polly's eyes fell first upon the bride; the sight of her filled him with a curious stir of emotion. Alarm, desire, affection, respect—and a queer element of reluctant dislike, all played their part in that complex eddy. The grey dress made her a stranger to him, made her stiff and commonplace; she was not even the rather drooping form that had caught his facile sense of beauty when he had proposed to her in the recreation-ground. There was something, too, that did not please him in the angle of her hat; it was, indeed, an ill-conceived hat with large, aimless rosettes of pink and grey. Then his mind passed to Mrs. Larkins and the bonnet that was to gain such a hold upon him; it seemed to be flag-signalling as she advanced, and to the two eager, unrefined sisters he was acquiring.

A freak of fancy set him wondering where and when in the future a beautiful girl with red hair might march along some splendid aisle— Never mind! He became aware of Mr. Voules.

He became aware of Mr. Voules as a watchful, blue eye of intense forcefulness. It was the eye of a man who has got hold of a situation. He was a fat, short, red-faced man, clad in a tight-fitting tail-coat of black-and-white check, with a coquettish bow tie under the lowest of a number of crisp little red chins. He held the bride under his arm with an air of invincible championship, and his free arm flourished a grey top-hat of an equestrian type. Mr. Polly instantly learned from that eye that Mr. Voules knew all about his longing for flight. Its azure-rimmed

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pupil glowed with disciplined resolution. It said: "I've come to give this girl away, and give her away I will. I'm here now, and things have to go on all right. So don't think of it any more"—and Mr. Polly didn't. A faint phantom of a certain "lill dog" that had hovered just beneath the threshold of consciousness vanished into black impossibility. Until the conclusive moment of the service was attained the eye of Mr. Voules watched Mr. Polly relentlessly, and then instantly he relieved guard, and blew his nose into a voluminous and richly patterned handkerchief, and sighed and looked round for the approval and sympathy of Mrs. Voules, and nodded to her brightly, like one who has always foretold a successful issue to things. Mr. Polly felt at last like a marionette that has dropped off its wire. But it was long before that release arrived.

He became aware of Miriam breathing close to him.

"Hallo!" he said, and feeling that was clumsy and would meet the eye's disapproval: "Grey dress—suits you no end."

Miriam's eyes shone under her hat-brim.

"Not reely!" she whispered.

"You're all right," he said, with the feeling of the eye's observation and criticism stiffening his lips. He cleared his throat.

The verger's hand pushed at him from behind. Some one was driving Miriam towards the altar-rail and the clergyman. "We're in for it," said Mr. Polly to her sympathetically. "Where? Here? Right-o."

He was interested for a moment or so in something indescribably habitual in the clergyman's pose.

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What a lot of weddings he must have seen! Sick he must be of them!

"Don't let your attention wander," said the eye.

"Got the ring?" whispered Johnson.

"Pawnd it yesterday," answered Mr. Polly, with an attempt at lightness, and then had a dreadful moment under that pitiless scrutiny while he felt in the wrong waistcoat pocket. . . .

The officiating clergy sighed deeply, began, and married them wearily and without any hitch.

"D'bloved we gath'd gether sighto' Gard 'n face this con'gation join gather Man Wom Ho Mat'mony whichis on'bl state stooted by Gard in times mans in'cency. . . ."

Mr. Polly's thoughts wandered wide and far, and once again something like a cold hand touched his heart, and he saw a sweet face in sunshine under the shadow of trees.

Some one was nudging him. It was Johnson's finger diverting his eyes to the crucial place in the Prayer-Book to which they had come.

"Wiltou lover, cumfer, oner keeper sickness and health? . . ."

"Say, 'I will.'"

Mr. Polly moistened his lips. "I will," he said hoarsely.

Miriam, nearly inaudible, answered some similar demand.

Then the clergyman said: "Who gi's Wom mad't this man?"

"Well, *I'm* doing that," said Mr. Voules in a refreshingly full voice, and looking round the church.

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“Pete arf me,” said the clergyman to Mr. Polly.
“Take thee Mirum wed wife——”

“Take thee Mi’m wed’ wife,” said Mr. Polly.

“Have hold this day ford.”

“Have hold this day ford.”

“Betworse, richypoo’.”

“Bet worse, richypoo’”

Then came Miriam’s turn.

“Lego hands,” said the clergyman, “gothering?
No! On book. So! Here! Pete arf me ‘Wis ring
Ivy wed.’ ”

“Wis ring Ivy wed——”

So it went on, blurred and hurried, like the momentary vision of a very beautiful thing seen through the smoke of a passing train. . . .

“Now, my boy,” said Mr. Voules at last, gripping Mr. Polly’s elbow tightly, “you’ve got to sign the registry and there you are! Done!”

Before him stood Miriam, a little stiffly, the hat with a slight rake across her forehead, and a kind of questioning hesitation in her face. Mr. Voules urged him past her.

It was astounding. She was his wife!

And for some reason Miriam and Mrs. Larkins were sobbing, and Annie was looking grave. Hadn’t they, after all, wanted him to marry her? Because if that was the case——!

He became aware for the first time of the presence of Uncle Pentstemon in the background but approaching, wearing a tie of a light mineral-blue colour, and grinning and sucking enigmatically and judicially round his principal tooth.

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5

It was in the vestry that the force of Mr. Voules' personality began to show at its true value. He seemed to open out, like the fisherman's Ginn from the pot, and spread over everything directly the restraints of the ceremony were at an end.

"Ceremony," he said to the clergyman, "excellent, excellent." He also shook hands with Mrs. Larkins, who clung to him for a space, and kissed Miriam on the cheek. "First kiss for me," he said, "anyhow."

He led Mr. Polly to the register by the arm, and then got chairs for Mrs. Larkins and his wife. He then turned on Miriam. "Now, young people," he said. "One! or *I* shall again."

"That's right," said Mr. Voules. "Same again, Miss."

Mr. Polly was overcome with modest confusion, and turning, found a refuge from this publicity in the arms of Mrs. Larkins. Then in a state of profuse moisture he was assaulted and kissed by Annie and Minnie, who were immediately kissed upon some indistinctly stated grounds by Mr. Voules, who then kissed the entirely impassive Mrs. Voules, and smacked his lips and remarked, "Home again safe and sound." Then, with a strange harrowing cry, Mrs. Larkins seized upon and bedewed Miriam with kisses. Annie and Minnie kissed each other, and Johnson went abruptly to the door of the vestry and stared into the church, no doubt with ideas of sanctuary in his mind. "Like a bit of a kiss round sometimes," said Mr. Voules, and made a kind of hissing

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noise with his teeth, and suddenly smacked his hands together with great *éclat* several times. Meanwhile the clergyman scratched his cheek with one hand and fiddled the pen with the other, and the verger coughed protestingly.

"The dog-cart's just outside," said Mr. Voules. "No walking home to-day for the bride, M'am."

"Not going to drive us?" cried Annie.

"The happy pair, Miss. *Your* turn soon."

"Get out!" said Annie. "I shan't marry—ever."

"You won't be able to help it. You'll have to do it, just to disperse the crowd." Mr. Voules laid his hand on Mr. Polly's shoulder. "The bridegroom gives his arm to the bride. Hands across, and down the middle. Prump, Prump, Perump-pump-pump-pump-perump."

Mr. Polly found himself and the bride leading the way towards the western door.

Mrs. Larkins passed close to Uncle Pentstemon, sobbing too earnestly to be aware of him. "Such a goo'-goo'-goo' girl," she sobbed.

"Didn't think I'd come, did you?" said Uncle Pentstemon; but she swept past him, too busy with the expression of her feelings to observe him.

"She didn't think I'd come, I lay," said Uncle Pentstemon, a little foiled, but effecting an auditory lodgment upon Johnson.

"I don't know," said Johnson, uncomfortable. "I suppose you were asked. How are you getting on?"

"I was *arst*," said Uncle Pentstemon, and brooded for a moment.

"I goes about seeing wonders," he added, and then

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in a sort of enhanced undertone, "One of 'er girls gettin' married. That's what I means by wonders. Lord's goodness! Wow!"

"Nothing the matter?" asked Johnson.

"Got it in the back for a moment. Going to be a change of weather, I suppose," said Uncle Pentstemon. "I brought 'er a nice present, too, what I got in this passel. Vallyble old tea-caddy that uset' be my mother's. What I kep' my baccy in for years and years—till the hinge at the back got broke. It ain't been no use to me particular since, so thinks I, drat it! I may as well give it to 'er as not. . . ."

Mr. Polly found himself emerging from the western door.

Outside, a crowd of half a dozen adults and about fifty children had collected, and hailed the approach of the newly wedded couple with a faint, indeterminate cheer. All the children were holding something in little bags, and his attention was caught by the expression of vindictive concentration upon the face of a small, big-eared boy in the foreground. He didn't for the moment realise what these things might import. Then he received a stinging handful of rice in the ear, and a great light shone.

"Not yet, you young fool," he heard Mr. Voules saying behind him, and then a second handful spoke against his hat.

"Not yet," said Mr. Voules, with increasing emphasis, and Mr. Polly became aware that he and Miriam were the focus of two crescents of small boys, each with the light of massacre in his eyes and a grubby fist clutching into a paper bag for rice, and

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that Mr. Voules was warding off probable discharges with a large red hand.

The dog-cart was in charge of a loafer, and the horse and the whip were adorned with white favours, and the back seat was confused, but not untenable, with hampers. "Up we go," said Mr. Voules. "Old birds in front and young ones behind." An ominous group of ill-restrained rice-throwers followed them up as they mounted.

"Get your handkerchief for your face," said Mr. Polly to his bride, and took the place next the pavement with considerable heroism, held on, gripped his hat, shut his eyes, and prepared for the worst. "Off!" said Mr. Voules, and a concentrated fire came stinging Mr. Polly's face.

The horse shied, and when the bridegroom could look at the world again it was manifest the dog-cart had just missed an electric tram by a hair's breadth, and far away outside the church railings the verger and Johnson were battling with an active crowd of small boys for the life of the rest of the Larkins family. Mrs. Punt and her son had escaped across the road, the son trailing and stumbling at the end of a remorseless arm; but Uncle Pentstemon, encumbered by the tea-caddy, was the centre of a little circle of his own, and appeared to be dratting them all very heartily. Remoter, a policeman approached with an air of tranquil unconsciousness.

"Steady, you idiot, stead-y!" cried Mr. Voules; and then over his shoulder, "I brought that rice. I like old customs.—Whoa! stead-y."

The dog-cart swerved violently, and then, evoking

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a shout of groundless alarm from a cyclist, took a corner, and the rest of the wedding-party was hidden from Mr. Polly's eyes.

6

"We'll get the stuff into the house before the old gal comes along," said Mr. Voules, "if you'll hold the hoss."

"How about the key?" asked Mr. Polly.

"I got the key, coming."

And while Mr. Polly held the sweating horse and dodged the foam that dripped from its bit, the house absorbed Miriam and Mr. Voules altogether. Mr. Voules carried in the various hampers he had brought with him, and finally closed the door behind him.

For some time Mr. Polly remained alone with his charge in the little blind alley outside the Larkins' house, while the neighbours scrutinised him from behind their blinds. He reflected that he was a married man, that he must look very like a fool, that the head of a horse is a silly shape and its eye a bulger; he wondered what the horse thought of him, and whether it really liked being held and patted on the neck, or whether it only submitted out of contempt. Did it know he was married? Then he wondered if the clergyman had thought him much of an ass, and whether the individual lurking behind the lace curtains of the front room next door was a man or a woman. A door opened over the way, and an elderly gentleman in a kind of embroidered fez appeared smoking a pipe, with a quiet, satisfied expression. He

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regarded Mr. Polly for some time with mild but sustained curiosity. Finally he called: "Hi!"

"Hallo!" said Mr. Polly.

"You needn't 'old that 'orse," said the old gentleman.

"Spirited beast," said Mr. Polly. "And"—with some faint analogy to ginger beer in his mind—"he's up to-day."

"'E won't turn 'isself round," said the old gentleman, "any'ow. And there ain't no way through for 'im to go."

"*Verbum sap,*" said Mr. Polly, and abandoned the horse and turned to the door. It opened to him just as Mrs. Larkins, on the arm of Johnson, followed by Annie, Minnie, two friends, Mrs. Punt and her son, and at a slight distance Uncle Pentstemon, appeared round the corner.

"They're coming," he said to Miriam, and put an arm about her and gave her a kiss.

She was kissing him back, when they were startled violently by the shying of two empty hampers into the passage. Then Mr. Voules appeared holding a third.

"Here! you'll have plenty of time for that presently," he said; "get these hampers away before the old girl comes. I got a cold collation here to make her sit up. My eye!"

Miriam took the hampers, and Mr. Polly, under compulsion from Mr. Voules, went into the little front room. A profuse pie and a large ham had been added to the modest provision of Mrs. Larkins, and a number of select-looking bottles shouldered the bottle of

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sherry and the bottle of port she had got to grace the feast. They certainly went better with the iced wedding-cake in the middle. Mrs. Voules, still impassive, stood by the window regarding these things with faint approval.

"Makes it look a bit thicker, eh?" said Mr. Voules, and blew out both his cheeks, and smacked his hands together violently several times. "Surprise the old girl no end."

He stood back and smiled and bowed with arms extended as the others came clustering at the door.

"Why, Un-cle Voules!" cried Annie, with a rising note.

It was his reward.

And then came a great wedging and squeezing and crowding into the little room. Nearly every one was hungry, and eyes brightened at the sight of the pie and the ham and the convivial array of bottles. "Sit down, every one," cried Mr. Voules. "Leaning against anything counts as sitting, and makes it easier to shake down the grub!"

The two friends from Miriam's place of business came into the room among the first, and then wedged themselves so hopelessly against Johnson in an attempt to get out again to take off their things up-stairs, that they abandoned the attempt. Amid the struggle Mr. Polly saw Uncle Pentstemon relieve himself of his parcel by giving it to the bride. "Here!" he said, and handed it to her. "Weddin'-present," he explained, and added with a confidential chuckle, "I never thought I'd 'ave to give one—ever."

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“Who says steak-and-kidney pie?” bawled Mr. Voules. “Who says steak-and-kidney pie? You ’ave a drop of old Tommy, Martha. That’s what you want to steady you. . . .”

“Sit down, every one, and don’t all speak at once. Who says steak-and-kidney pie? . . .”

“Vociferatious,” whispered Mr. Polly. “Convivial vociferations.”

“Bit of ’am with it,” shouted Mr. Voules, poising a slice of ham on his knife. “Any one ’ave a bit of ’am with it? Won’t that little man of yours, Mrs. Punt—won’t ’e ’ave a bit of ’am? . . .”

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” said Mr. Voules, still standing and dominating the crammed roomful, “now you got your plates filled, and something I can warrant you good in your glasses, wot about drinking the ’ealth of the bride?”

“Eat a bit fust,” said Uncle Pentstemon, speaking with his mouth full, amidst murmurs of applause. “Eat a bit fust.”

So they did, and the plates clattered and the glasses clinked.

Mr. Polly stood shoulder to shoulder with Johnson for a moment. “In for it,” said Mr. Polly cheerfully. “Cheer up, O’ Man, and peck a bit. No reason why *you* shouldn’t eat, you know.”

The Punt boy stood on Mr. Polly’s boots for a minute, struggling violently against the compunction of Mrs. Punt’s grip.

“Pie,” said the Punt boy, “pie!”

“You sit ’ere and ’ave ’am, my lord!” said Mrs. Punt, prevailing. “Pie you can’t ’ave and you won’t.”

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"Lor' bless my heart, Mrs. Punt!" protested Mr. Voules, "let the boy 'ave a bit if he wants it—wedding and all!"

"You 'aven't 'ad 'im sick on your 'ands, Uncle Voules," said Mrs. Punt. "Else you wouldn't want to humour his fancies as you do. . . ."

"I can't help feeling it's a mistake, O' Man," said Johnson, in a confidential undertone. "I can't help feeling you've been Rash. Let's hope for the best."

"Always glad of good wishes, O' Man," said Mr. Polly. "You'd better have a drink or something. Anyhow, sit down to it."

Johnson subsided gloomily, and Mr. Polly secured some ham and carried it off, and sat himself down on the sewing-machine on the floor in the corner to devour it. He was hungry, and a little cut off from the rest of the company by Mrs. Voules' hat and back, and he occupied himself for a time with ham and his own thoughts. He became aware of a series of jangling concussions on the table. He craned his neck, and discovered that Mr. Voules was standing up and leaning forward over the table in the manner distinctive of after-dinner speeches, tapping upon the table with a black bottle. "Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Voules, raising his glass solemnly in the empty desert of sound he had made, and paused for a second or so. "Ladies and gentlemen—the Bride." He searched his mind for some suitable wreath of speech, and brightened at last with discovery. "Here's luck to her!" he said at last.

"Here's Luck!" said Johnson hopelessly but reso-

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lutely, and raised his glass. Everybody murmured, "Here's Luck."

"Luck!" said Mr. Polly, unseen in his corner, lifting a forkful of ham.

"That's all right," said Mr. Voules, with a sigh of relief at having brought off a difficult operation. "And now, who's for a bit more pie?"

For a time conversation was fragmentary again. But presently Mr. Voules rose from his chair again, and produced a silence by renewed hammering; he had subsided with a contented smile after his first oratorical effort. "Ladies and gents," he said, "fill up for a second toast: the happy Bridegroom!" He stood for half a minute searching his mind for the apt phrase that came at last in a rush. "Here's (hic) luck to *him*," said Mr. Voules.

"Luck to him!" said every one; and Mr. Polly, standing up behind Mrs. Voules, bowed amiably, amidst enthusiasm.

"He may say what he likes," said Mrs. Larkins, "he's *got* luck. That girl's a treasure of treasures, and always has been ever since she tried to nurse her own little sister being but three at the time and fell the full flight of stairs from top to bottom, no hurt that any outward eye 'as ever seen but always ready and helping, always tidying and busy. A treasure I must say, and a treasure I will say, giving no more than her due. . . ."

She was silenced altogether by a rapping sound that would not be denied. Mr. Voules had been struck by a fresh idea, and was standing up and hammering with the bottle again.

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"The third Toast, ladies and gentlemen," he said; "fill up, please. The Mother of the Bride. I—er . . . Uoo . . . 'Ere! . . . Ladies and gem, 'Ere's Luck to 'er! . . ."

7

The dingy little room was stuffy and crowded to its utmost limit, and Mr. Polly's skies were dark with the sense of irreparable acts. Everybody seemed noisy and greedy, and doing foolish things. Miriam, still in that unbecoming hat—for presently they had to start off to the station together—sat just beyond Mrs. Punt and her son, doing her share in the hospitalities, and ever and again glancing at him with a deliberately encouraging smile. Once she leaned over the back of the chair to him and whispered cheerfully, "Soon be together now." Next to her sat Johnson, profoundly silent, and then Annie, talking vigorously to a friend. Uncle Pentstemon was eating voraciously opposite, but with a kindling eye for Annie. Mrs. Larkins sat next Mr. Voules. She was unable to eat a mouthful, she declared, it would choke her; but ever and again Mr. Voules wooed her to swallow a little drop of liquid refreshment.

There seemed a lot of rice upon everybody, in their hats and hair and the folds of their garments.

Presently Mr. Voules was hammering the table for the fourth time in the interests of the Best Man. . . .

All feasts come to an end at last, and the break-up of things was precipitated by alarming symptoms on the part of Master Punt. He was taken out hastily after a whispered consultation; and since he had got

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into the corner between the fireplace and the cupboard, that meant every one moving to make way for him. Johnson took the opportunity to say, "Well, so long," to any one who might be listening, and disappeared. Mr. Polly found himself smoking a cigarette and walking up and down outside in the company of Uncle Pentstemon, while Mr. Voules replaced bottles in hampers, and prepared for departure, and the womenkind of the party crowded up-stairs with the bride. Mr. Polly felt taciturn, but the events of the day had stirred the mind of Uncle Pentstemon to speech. And so he spoke, discursively and disconnectedly, a little heedless of his listener, as wise old men will.

"They do say," said Uncle Pentstemon, "one funeral makes many. This time it's a wedding. But it's all very much of a muchness. . . .

"'Am *do* get in my teeth nowadays," said Uncle Pentstemon, "I can't understand it. 'Tisn't like there was nubblicks or strings or such in 'am. It's a plain food, sure-ly.

"You *got* to get married," said Uncle Pentstemon, resuming his discourse. "That's the way of it. Some has. Some hain't. I done it long before I was your age. It hain't for me to blame you. You can't 'elp being the marrying sort any more than me. It's nat'ral—like poaching, or drinking, or wind on the stummik. You can't 'elp it, and there you are! As for the good of it, there ain't no particular good in it as I can see. It's a toss-up. The hotter come, the sooner cold; but they all gets tired of it sooner or later. . . . I hain't no grounds to complain. Two

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I've 'ad and buried, and might 'ave 'ad a third, and never no worrit with kids—never. . . .

"You done well not to 'ave the big gal. I will say that for ye. She's a gad-about grinny, she is, if ever was. A gad-about grinny. Mucked up my mushroom-bed to rights, she did, and I 'aven't forgot it. Got the feet of a centipede, she 'as—all over everything, and neither with your leave nor by your leave. Like a stray 'en in a pea-patch. Cluck! cluck! Trying to laugh it off. *I* laughed 'er off, I did. Dratted lumpin' baggage! . . ."

For a while he mused malevolently upon Annie, and routed out a reluctant crumb from some coy sitting-out place in his tooth.

"Wimmin's a toss-up," said Uncle Pentstemon. "Prize packets they are, and you can't tell what's in 'em till you took 'em 'ome and undone 'em. Never was a bachelor married yet that didn't buy a pig in a poke. Never! Marriage seems to change the very natures in 'em through and through. You can't tell what they won't turn into—nohow.

"I seen the nicest girls go wrong," said Uncle Pentstemon, and added with unusual thoughtfulness, "Not that I mean *you* got one of that sort."

He sent another crumb on to its long home with a sucking, encouraging noise.

"The wust sort's the grizzler," Uncle Pentstemon resumed. "If ever I'd 'ad a grizzler, I'd up and 'it 'er on the 'ead with sumpthin' pretty quick. I don't think I *could* abide a grizzler," said Uncle Pentstemon. "I'd liefer 'ave a lump-about like that other gal. I would indeed. I lay I'd make 'er stop laughing

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after a bit for all 'er airs. And mind where her clumsy great feet went. . . .

"A man's got to tackle 'em, whatever they be," said Uncle Pentstemon, summing up the shrewd observation of an old-world lifetime. "Good or bad," said Uncle Pentstemon, raising his voice fearlessly, "a man's got to tackle 'em."

8

At last it was time for the two young people to catch the train for Waterloo *en route* for Fishbourne. They had to hurry, and as a concluding glory of matrimony they travelled second class, and were seen off by all the rest of the party except the Punts, Master Punt being now beyond any question unwell.

"Off!" The train moved out of the station.

Mr. Polly remained waving his hat and Mrs. Polly her handkerchief until they were hidden under the bridge. The dominating figure to the last was Mr. Voules. He had followed them along the platform, waving the equestrian grey hat and kissing his hand to the bride.

They subsided into their seats.

"Got a compartment to ourselves, anyhow," said Mrs. Polly, after a pause.

Silence for a moment.

"The rice 'e must 'ave bought. Pounds and pounds!"

Mr. Polly felt round his collar at the thought.

"Ain't you going to kiss me, Elfrid, now we're alone together?"

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He roused himself to sit forward, hands on knees, cocked his hat over one eye, and assumed an expression of avidity becoming to the occasion.

"Never!" he said. "Ever!" and feigned to be selecting a place to kiss with great discrimination.

"Come here," he said, and drew her to him.

"Be careful of my 'at," said Mrs. Polly, yielding awkwardly.

CHAPTER VII

THE LITTLE SHOP AT FISHBOURNE

1

For fifteen years Mr. Polly was a respectable shopkeeper in Fishbourne.

Years they were in which every day was tedious, and when they were gone it was as if they had gone in a flash. But now Mr. Polly had good looks no more. He was, as I have described him in the beginning of this story, thirty-seven, and fattish in a not very healthy way, dull and yellowish about the complexion, and with discontented wrinkles round his eyes. He sat on the stile above Fishbourne and cried to the heavens above him: "Oh, Roöötten Beëëastly Silly Hole!" And he wore a rather shabby black morning coat and vest, and his tie was richly splendid, being from stock, and his golf cap aslant over one eye.

Fifteen years ago, and it might have seemed to you that the queer little flower of Mr. Polly's imagination might be altogether withered and dead, and with no living seed left in any part of him. But, indeed, it still lived as an insatiable hunger for bright and delightful experiences, for the gracious aspect of things, for beauty. He still read books when he had a chance—books that told of glorious places abroad and glorious times, that wrung a rich humour from life, and

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contained the delight of words freshly and expressively grouped. But, alas! there are not many such books, and for the newspapers and the cheap fiction that abounded more and more in the world, Mr. Polly had little taste. There was no epithet in them. And there was no one to talk to, as he loved to talk. And he had to mind his shop.

It was a reluctant little shop from the beginning.

He had taken it to escape the doom of Johnson's choice, and because Fishbourne had a hold upon his imagination. He had disregarded the ill-built, cramped rooms behind it in which he would have to lurk and live, and the relentless limitations of its dimensions, the inconvenience of an underground kitchen that must necessarily be the living-room in winter—the narrow yard behind giving upon the yard of the Royal Fishbourne Hotel—the tiresome sitting and waiting for custom, the restricted prospects of trade. He had visualised himself and Miriam first as at breakfast on a clear, bright, winter morning, amidst a tremendous smell of bacon, and then as having muffins for tea. He had also thought of sitting on the beach on Sunday afternoons, and of going for a walk in the country behind the town and picking marguerites and poppies. But, in fact, Miriam and he were usually extremely cross at breakfast, and it did not run to muffins at tea. And she didn't think it looked well, she said, to go trapesing about the country on Sundays.

It was unfortunate that Miriam never took to the house from the first. She did not like it when she saw it, and liked it less as she explored it. "There's too

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many stairs," she said, "and the coal being indoors will make a lot of work."

"Didn't think of that," said Mr. Polly, following her round.

"It'll be a hard house to keep clean," said Miriam.

"White paint's all very well in its way," said Miriam, "but it shows the dirt something fearful. Better 'ave 'ad it nicely grained."

"There's a kind of place here," said Mr. Polly, "where we might have some flowers in pots."

"Not me," said Miriam. "I've 'ad trouble enough with Minnie and 'er musk. . . ."

They stayed for a week in a cheap boarding-house before they moved in. They had bought some furniture in Stamton, mostly second-hand, but with new cheap cutlery and china and linen, and they supplemented this from the Fishbourne shops. Miriam, relieved from the hilarious associations of home, developed a meagre and serious quality of her own, and went about with knitted brows pursuing some ideal of "'aving everything right." Mr. Polly gave himself to the arrangement of the shop with a certain zest, and whistled a great deal, until Miriam appeared and said that it went through her head. So soon as he had taken the shop he had filled the window with aggressive posters, announcing in no measured terms that he was going to open; and, now he was getting his stuff put out, he was resolved to show Fishbourne what window-dressing could do. He meant to give them boater straws, imitation Panamas, bathing-dresses with novelties in stripes, light flannel shirts, summer ties, and ready-made flannel trousers for

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men, youths, and boys. Incidentally he watched the small fishmonger over the way, and had a glimpse of the china-dealer next door, and wondered if a friendly nod would be out of place. And on the first Sunday in this new life he and Miriam arrayed themselves with great care, he in his wedding-funeral hat and coat and she in her going-away dress, and went processionally to church—a more respectable-looking couple you could hardly imagine—and looked about them.

Things began to settle down next week into their places. A few customers came, chiefly for bathing-suits and hat-guards, and on Saturday night the cheapest straw hats and ties, and Mr. Polly found himself more and more drawn towards the shop door and the social charm of the street. He found the china-dealer unpacking a crate at the edge of the pavement, and remarked that it was a fine day. The china-dealer gave a reluctant assent, and plunged into the crate in a manner that presented no encouragement to a loquacious neighbour.

“Zealacious commerciality,” whispered Mr. Polly to that unfriendly back view. . . .

2

Miriam combined earnestness of spirit with great practical incapacity. The house was never clean nor tidy, but always being frightfully disarranged for cleaning or tidying up, and she cooked because food had to be cooked, and with a sound moralist's entire disregard of the quality or the consequences. The

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food came from her hands done rather than improved, and looking as uncomfortable as savages clothed under duress by a missionary with a stock of out-sizes. Such food is too apt to behave resentfully, rebel, and work Obi. She ceased to listen to her husband's talk from the day she married him, and ceased to un-wrinkle the kink in her brow at his presence, giving herself up to mental states that had a quality of pre-occupation. And she developed an idea, for which, perhaps, there was legitimate excuse, that he was lazy. He seemed to stand about a great deal, to read—an indolent habit—and presently to seek company for talking. He began to attend the bar-parlour of the God's Providence Inn with some frequency, and would have done so regularly in the evening if cards, which bored him to death, had not arrested conversation. But the perpetual foolish variation of the permutations and combinations of two-and-fifty cards taken five at a time, and the meagre surprises and excitements that ensue, had no charm for Mr. Polly's mind, which was at once too vivid in its impressions and too easily fatigued.

It was soon manifest the shop paid only in the most exacting sense, and Miriam did not conceal her opinion that he ought to bestir himself and "do things," though what he was to do was hard to say. You see, when you have once sunken your capital in a shop you do not very easily get it out again. If customers will not come to you cheerfully and freely, the law sets limits upon the compulsion you may exercise. You cannot pursue people about the streets of a watering-place, compelling them either by threats

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or importunity to buy flannel trousers. Additional sources of income for a tradesman are not always easy to find. Wintershed, at the bicycle and gramophone shop to the right, played the organ in the church, and Clamp of the toy-shop was pew-opener and so forth; Gambell, the greengrocer, waited at table and his wife cooked, and Carter, the watchmaker, left things to his wife while he went about the world winding clocks; but Mr. Polly had none of these arts, and wouldn't, in spite of Miriam's quietly persistent protests, get any other. And on summer evenings he would ride his bicycle about the country, and if he discovered a sale where there were books, he would as often as not waste half the next day in going again to acquire a job lot of them haphazard, and bring them home tied about with string, and hide them from Miriam under the counter in the shop. That is a heart-breaking thing for any wife with a serious investigatory turn of mind to discover. She was always thinking of burning these finds, but her natural turn for economy prevailed with her.

The books he read during those fifteen years! He read everything he got except theology, and, as he read, his little unsuccessful circumstances vanished and the wonder of life returned to him; the routine of reluctant getting up, opening shop, pretending to dust it with zest, breakfasting with a shop egg underdone or overdone, or a herring raw or charred, and coffee made Miriam's way, and full of little particles, the return to the shop, the morning paper, the standing, standing at the door saying "How do!" to passers-by, or getting a bit of gossip, or watching

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unusual visitors, all these things vanished as the auditorium of a theatre vanishes when the stage is lit. He acquired hundreds of books at last—old, dusty books, books with torn covers and broken covers, fat books whose backs were naked string and glue—an inimical litter to Miriam.

There was, for example, the voyages of La Perouse, with many careful, explicit woodcuts and the frankest revelations of the ways of the eighteenth-century sailorman, homely, adventurous, drunken, incontinent, and delightful, until he floated, smooth and slow, with all sails set and mirrored in the glassy water, until his head was full of the thought of shining, kindly, brown-skinned women, who smiled at him and wreathed his head with unfamiliar flowers. He had, too, a piece of a book about the lost palaces of Yucatan, those vast terraces buried in primordial forest, of whose makers there is now no human memory. With La Perouse he linked "The Island Nights' Entertainments," and it never palled upon him that in the dusky stabbing of the "Island of Voices" something poured over the stabber's hands "like warm tea." Queer, incommunicable joy it is, the joy of the vivid phrase that turns the statement of the horriest fact to beauty.

And another book which had no beginning for him was the second volume of the travels of the Abbés Huc and Gabet. He followed those two sweet souls from their lessons in Thibetan under Sandura the Bearded (who called them donkeys, to their infinite benefit, and stole their store of butter) through a hundred misadventures to the very heart of Lhasa; and

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it was a thirst in him that was never quenched to find the other volume and whence they came, and who in fact they were. He read Fenimore Cooper and "Tom Cringle's Log" side by side with Joseph Conrad, and dreamt of the many-hued humanity of the East and West Indies until his heart ached to see those sun-soaked lands before he died. Conrad's prose had a pleasure for him that he was never able to define, a peculiar, deep-coloured effect. He found, too, one day, among a pile of soiled sixpenny books at Port Burdock, to which place he sometimes rode on his ageing bicycle, Bart Kennedy's "A Sailor Tramp," all written in vivid jerks, and had for ever after a kindlier and more understanding eye for every burly rough who slouched through Fishbourne High Street. Sterne he read with a wavering appreciation and some perplexity, but except for the "Pickwick Papers," for some reason that I do not understand, he never took at all kindly to Dickens. Yet he liked Lever, and Thackeray's "Catherine," and all Dumas until he got to the "Vicomte de Bragelonne." I am puzzled by his insensibility to Dickens, and I record it, as a good historian should, with an admission of my perplexity. It is much more understandable that he had no love for Scott. And I suppose it was because of his ignorance of the proper pronunciation of words that he infinitely preferred any prose to any metrical writing.

A book he browsed over with a recurrent pleasure was Waterton's "Wanderings in South America." He would even amuse himself by inventing descriptions of other birds in the Watertonian manner, new

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birds that he invented, birds with peculiarities that made him chuckle when they occurred to him. He tried to make Ruser, the ironmonger, share this joy with him. He read Bates, too, about the Amazon; but when he discovered that you could not see one bank from the other, he lost, through some mysterious action of the soul that again I cannot understand, at least a tithe of the pleasure he had taken in that river. But he read all sorts of things; a book of old Keltic stories collected by Joyce charmed him, and Mitford's "Tales of Old Japan," and a number of paper-covered volumes, "Tales from Blackwood," he had acquired at Easewood, remained a stand-by. He developed a quite considerable acquaintance with the plays of William Shakespear, and in his dreams he wore cinque cento or Elizabethan clothes, and walked about a stormy, ruffling, taverning, teeming world. Great land of sublimated things, thou World of Books, happy asylum, refreshment, and refuge from the world of every day! . . .

The essential thing of those fifteen long years of shopkeeping is Mr. Polly, well athwart the counter of his rather ill-lit shop, lost in a book, or rousing himself with a sigh to attend to business.

And meanwhile he got little exercise; indigestion grew with him until it ruled all his moods; he fattened and deteriorated physically, great moods of distress invaded and darkened his skies, little things irritated him more and more, and casual laughter ceased in him. His hair began to come off until he had a large bald space at the back of his head. Suddenly, one day it came to him—forgetful of those

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books and all he had lived and seen through them—that he had been in his shop for exactly fifteen years, that he would soon be forty, and that his life during that time had not been worth living, that it had been in apathetic and feebly hostile and critical company, ugly in detail and mean in scope, and that it had brought him at last to an outlook utterly hopeless and grey.

3

I have already had occasion to mention, indeed I have quoted, a certain high-browed gentleman living at Highbury, wearing a golden *pince-nez*, and writing for the most part in that very beautiful room, the library of the Climax Club. There he wrestles with what he calls “social problems” in a bloodless but at times, I think one must admit, an extremely illuminating manner. He has a fixed idea that something called a collective “intelligence” is wanted in the world, which means in practice that you and I and every one have to think about things frightfully hard and pool the results, and oblige ourselves to be shamelessly and persistently clear and truthful, and support and respect (I suppose) a perfect horde of professors and writers and artists and ill-groomed, difficult people, instead of using our brains in a moderate and sensible manner to play golf and bridge (pretending a sense of humour prevents our doing anything else with them), and generally taking life in a nice, easy, gentlemanly way, confound him! Well, this dome-headed monster of intellect alleges that Mr. Polly was unhappy entirely through that.

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“A rapidly complicating society,” he writes, “which, as a whole, declines to contemplate its future or face the intricate problems of its organisation, is in exactly the position of a man who takes no thought of dietary or regimen, who abstains from baths and exercise and gives his appetites free play. It accumulates useless and aimless lives, as a man accumulates fat and morbid products in his blood; it declines in its collective efficiency and vigour, and secretes discomfort and misery. Every phase of its evolution is accompanied by a maximum of avoidable distress and inconvenience and human waste. . . .

“Nothing can better demonstrate the collective dulness of our community, the crying need for a strenuous, intellectual renewal, than the consideration of that vast mass of useless, uncomfortable, under-educated, under-trained, and altogether pitiable people we contemplate when we use that inaccurate and misleading term, the Lower Middle Class. A great proportion of the lower middle class should properly be assigned to the unemployed and the unemployable. They are only not that, because the possession of some small hoard of money, savings during a period of wage-earning, an insurance policy or such like capital, prevents a direct appeal to the rates. But they are doing little or nothing for the community in return for what they consume; they have no understanding of any relation of service to the community, they have never been trained nor their imaginations touched to any social purpose. A great proportion of small shopkeepers, for example, are people who have, through the inefficiency

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that comes from inadequate training and sheer aimlessness, or through improvements in machinery or the drift of trade, been thrown out of employment, and who set up in needless shops as a method of eking out the savings upon which they count. They contrive to make sixty or seventy per cent. of their expenditure, the rest is drawn from the shrinking capital. Essentially their lives are failures, not the sharp and tragic failure of the labourer who gets out of work and starves, but a slow, chronic process of consecutive small losses which may end, if the individual is exceptionally fortunate, in an impoverished death-bed before actual bankruptcy or destitution supervenes. Their chances of ascendant means are less in their shops than in any lottery that was ever planned. The secular development of transit and communications has made the organisation of distributing businesses upon large and economical lines inevitable; except in the chaotic confusions of newly opened countries, the day when a man might earn an independent living by unskilled, or practically unskilled, retailing has gone for ever. Yet every year sees the melancholy procession towards petty bankruptcy and imprisonment for debt go on, and there is no statesmanship in us to avert it. Every issue of every trade journal has its four or five columns of abridged bankruptcy proceedings, nearly every item in which means the final collapse of another struggling family upon the resources of the community, and continually a fresh supply of superfluous artisans and shop-assistants, coming out of employment with savings or "help" from relations, of widows with a husband's

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insurance money, of the ill-trained sons of parsimonious fathers, replaces the fallen in the ill-equipped, jerry-built shops that everywhere abound. . . .”

I quote these fragments from a gifted if unpleasant contemporary for what they are worth. I feel this has to come in here as the broad aspect of this History. I come back to Mr. Polly, sitting upon his gate and swearing in the east wind, and so returning I have a sense of floating across unbridged abysses between the general and the particular. There, on the one hand, is the man of understanding seeing clearly—I suppose he sees clearly—the big process that dooms millions of lives to thwarting and discomfort and unhappy circumstances, and giving us no help, no hint, by which we may get that better “collective will and intelligence” which would dam that stream of human failure; and on the other hand, Mr. Polly, sitting on his gate, untrained, unwarned, confused, distressed, angry, seeing nothing except that he is, as it were, netted in greyness and discomfort—with life dancing all about him; Mr. Polly with a capacity for joy and beauty at least as keen and subtle as yours or mine.

4

I have hinted that our Mother England had equipped Mr. Polly for the management of his internal concerns no whit better than she had for the direction of his external affairs. With a careless generosity she affords her children a variety of foods unparalleled in the world's history, including many

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condiments and preserved preparations novel to the human economy. And Miriam did the cooking. Mr. Polly's system, like a confused and ill-governed democracy, had been brought to a state of perpetual clamour and disorder, demanding now evil and unsuitable internal satisfactions such as pickles and vinegar and the crackling on pork, and now vindictive external expressions, such as war and bloodshed throughout the world. So that Mr. Polly had been led into hatred and a series of disagreeable quarrels with his landlord, his wholesalers, and most of his neighbours.

Rumbold, the china-dealer next door, seemed hostile from the first for no apparent reason, and always unpacked his crates with a full back to his new neighbour, and from the first Mr. Polly resented and hated that uncivil breadth of expressionless humanity, wanted to prod it, kick it, satirise. But you cannot satirise a back, if you have no friend to nudge while you do it.

At last Mr. Polly could stand it no longer. He approached and prodded Rumbold.

"'Ello!" said Rumbold, suddenly erect and turned about.

"Can't we have some other point of view?" said Mr. Polly. "I'm tired of the end elevation."

"Eh?" said Mr. Rumbold, frankly puzzled.

"Of all the vertebracious animals man alone raises his face to the sky, O' Man. Well, why avert it?"

Rumbold shook his head with a helpless expression.

"Don't like so much Arreary Pency."

Rumbold, distressed, in utter obscurity.

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"In fact, I'm sick of your turning your back on me, see?"

A great light shone on Rumbold. "*That's* what you're talking about!" he said.

"That's it," said Polly.

Rumbold scratched his ear with the three strawy jampots he held in his hand. "Way the wind blows, I expect," he said. "But what's the fuss?"

"No fuss!" said Mr. Polly. "Passing remark. I don't like it, O' Man, that's all."

"Can't help it, if the wind blows my stror," said Mr. Rumbold, still far from clear about it.

"It isn't ordinary civility," said Mr. Polly.

"Got to unpack 'ow it suits me. Can't unpack with the stror blowing into one's eyes."

"Needn't unpack like a pig rooting for truffles, need you?"

"Truffles?"

"Needn't unpack like a pig."

Mr. Rumbold apprehended something.

"Pig!" he said, impressed. "You calling me a pig?"

"It's the side I seem to get of you."

"'Ere," said Mr. Rumbold, suddenly fierce, and shouting and making his points with gesticulated jampots, "you go indoors. I don't want no row with you, and I don't want you to row with me. I don't know what you're after, but I'm a peaceful man—teetotaller, too, and a good thing if *you* was. See? You go indoors!"

"You mean to say— I'm asking you civilly to stop unpacking—with your back to me."

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"Pig ain't civil and you ain't sober. You go indoors and lemme go on unpacking. You—you're excited."

"D'you mean—!" Mr. Polly was foiled.

He perceived an immense solidity about Rumbold.

"Get back to your shop and lemme get on with my business," said Mr. Rumbold. "Stop calling me pigs. See? Sweep your pavement."

"I came here to make a civil request."

"You came 'ere to make a row. I don't want no truck with you. See? I don't like the looks of you. See? And I can't stand 'ere all day arguing. See?"

Pause of mutual inspection.

It occurred to Mr. Polly that probably he was to some extent in the wrong.

Mr. Rumbold, blowing heavily, walked past him, deposited the jampots in his shop with an immense affectation that there was no Mr. Polly in the world, returned, turned a scornful back on Mr. Polly, and dived to the interior of the crate. Mr. Polly stood baffled. Should he kick this solid mass before him? Should he administer a resounding kick?

No!

He plunged his hands deeply into his trousers pockets, began to whistle, and returned to his own doorstep with an air of profound unconcern. There, for a time, to the tune of "Men of Harlech," he contemplated the receding possibility of kicking Mr. Rumbold hard. It would be splendid—and for the moment satisfying. But he decided not to do it. For indefinable reasons he could not do it. He went indoors and straightened up his dress ties very slowly

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and thoughtfully. Presently he went to the window and regarded Mr. Rumbold obliquely. Mr. Rumbold was still unpacking. . . .

Mr. Polly had no human intercourse thereafter with Rumbold for fifteen years. He kept up a Hate.

There was a time when it seemed as if Rumbold might go, but he had a meeting of his creditors and then went on unpacking as before, obtusely as ever.

5

Hinks, the saddler, two shops farther down the street, was a different case. Hinks was the aggressor—practically.

Hinks was a sporting man in his way, with that taste for checks in costume and tight trousers which is, under Providence, so mysteriously and invariably associated with equestrian proclivities. At first Mr. Polly took to him as a character, became frequent in the God's Providence Inn under his guidance, stood and was stood drinks, and concealed a great ignorance of horses until Hinks became urgent for him to play billiards or bet.

Then Mr. Polly took to evading him, and Hinks ceased to conceal his opinion that Mr. Polly was in reality a softish sort of flat.

He did not, however, discontinue conversation with Mr. Polly. He would come along to him whenever he appeared at his door and converse about sport and women and fisticuffs and the pride of life with an air of extreme initiation, until Mr. Polly felt himself the faintest underdeveloped simulacrum of

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man that had ever hovered on the verge of non-existence.

So he invented phrases for Hinks' clothes, and took Rusper, the ironmonger, into his confidence upon the weaknesses of Hinks. He called him the "chequered Careerist," and spoke of his patterned legs as "shivery shakys." Good things of this sort are apt to get round to people.

He was standing at his door one day, feeling bored, when Hinks appeared down the street, stood still, and regarded him with a strange, malignant expression for a space.

Mr. Polly waved a hand in a rather belated salutation.

Mr. Hinks spat on the pavement and appeared to reflect. Then he came towards Mr. Polly portentously and paused, and spoke between his teeth in an earnest, confidential tone.

"You been flapping your mouth about me, I'm told," he said.

Mr. Polly felt suddenly spiritless. "Not that I know of," he answered.

"Not that you know of, be blowed! You been flapping your mouth."

"Don't see it," said Mr. Polly.

"Don't see it, be blowed! You go flapping your silly mouth about me, and I'll give you a poke in the eye. See?"

Mr. Hinks regarded the effect of this coldly but firmly, and spat again.

"Understand me?" he inquired.

"Don't recollect," began Mr. Polly.

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“Don’t recollect, be blowed ! You flap your mouth a damn sight too much. This place gets more of your mouth than it wants. . . . Seen this?”

And Mr. Hinks, having displayed a freckled fist of extraordinary size and pugginess in an ostentatiously familiar manner to Mr. Polly’s close inspection by sight or smell, turned it about this way and that, shaking it gently for a moment or so, replaced it carefully in his pocket as if for future use, receded slowly and watchfully for a pace, and then turned away as if to other matters, and ceased to be, even in outward seeming, a friend. . . .

6

Mr. Polly’s intercourse with all his fellow-tradesmen was tarnished sooner or later by some such adverse incident, until not a friend remained to him, and loneliness made even the shop door terrible. Shops bankrupted all about him, and fresh people came, and new acquaintances sprang up, but sooner or later a discord was inevitable—the tension under which these badly fed, poorly housed, bored and bothered neighbours lived made it inevitable. The mere fact that Mr. Polly had to see them every day, that there was no getting away from them, was in itself sufficient to make them almost unendurable to his frettingly active mind.

Among other shopkeepers in the High Street there was Chuffles, the grocer, a small, hairy, silently intent polygamist, who was given rough music by the youth of the neighbourhood because of a scandal

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about his wife's sister, and who was nevertheless totally uninteresting, and Tonks, the second grocer, an old man with an older, very enfeebled wife, both submerged by piety. Tonks went bankrupt, and was succeeded by a branch of the National Provision Company, with a young manager exactly like a fox, except that he barked. The toy and sweetstuff shop was kept by an old woman of repellent manners, and so was the little fish shop at the end of the street. The Berlinwool shop, having gone bankrupt, became a newspaper shop, then fell to a haberdasher in consumption, and finally to a stationer; the three shops at the end of the street wallowed in and out of insolvency in the hands of a bicycle repairer and dealer, a gramophone dealer, a tobacconist, a six-penny-half-penny bazaar keeper, a shoemaker, a greengrocer, and the exploiter of a cinematograph peep-show—but none of them supplied friendship to Mr. Polly.

These adventurers in commerce were all more or less distraught souls, driving without intelligible comment before the gale of fate. The two milkmen of Fishbourne were brothers who had quarrelled about their father's will and started in opposition to each other. One was stone deaf and no use to Mr. Polly, and the other was a sporting man with a natural dread of epithet, who sided with Hinks. So it was all about him; on every hand, it seemed, were uncongenial people, uninteresting people, or people who conceived the deepest distrust and hostility towards him—a magic circle of suspicious, pre-occupied, and dehumanised humanity. So the poison in his system poisoned the world without.

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But Boomer, the wine merchant, and Tashingford, the chemist, be it noted, were fraught with pride, and held themselves to be a cut above Mr. Polly. They never quarrelled with him, preferring to bear themselves from the outset as though they had already done so.

As his internal malady grew upon Mr. Polly, and he became more and more a battle-ground of fermenting foods and warring juices, he came to hate the very sight, as people say, of every one of these neighbours. There they were, every day and all the days, just the same, echoing his own stagnation. They pained him all round the top and back of his head; they made his legs and arms weary and spiritless. The air was tasteless by reason of them. He lost his human kindness.

In the afternoons he would hover in the shop, bored to death with his business and his home and Miriam, and yet afraid to go out because of his inflamed and magnified dislike and dread of these neighbours. He could not bring himself to go out and run the gauntlet of the observant windows and the cold and estranged eyes.

One of his last friendships was with Rusper, the ironmonger. Rusper took over Worthington's shop about three years after Mr. Polly opened. He was a tall, lean, nervous, convulsive man, with an upturned, back-thrown, oval head, who read newspapers and *The Review of Reviews* assiduously, had belonged to a Literary Society somewhere once, and had some defect of the palate that at first gave his lightest word a charm and interest for Mr. Polly. It caused

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a peculiar clinking sound, as though he had something between a giggle and a gas-meter at work in his neck.

His literary admirations were not precisely Mr. Polly's literary admirations; he thought books were written to enshrine Great Thoughts, and that art was pedagogy in fancy dress; he had no sense of phrase or epithet or richness of texture, but still he knew there were books. He did know there were books, and he was full of large, windy ideas of the sort he called "Modern (kik) Thought," and seemed needlessly and helplessly concerned about "(kik) the Welfare of the Race."

Mr. Polly would dream about that (kik) at nights.

It seemed to that undesirable mind of his that Rusper's head was the most egg-shaped head he had ever seen; the similarity weighed upon him, and when he found an argument growing warm with Rusper he would say, "Boil it some more, O' Man; boil it harder!" or "Six minutes at least," allusions Rusper could never make head or tail of, and got at last to disregard as a part of Mr. Polly's general eccentricity. For a long time that little tendency threw no shadow over their intercourse, but it contained within it the seeds of an ultimate disruption.

Often during the days of this friendship Mr. Polly would leave his shop and walk over to Mr. Rusper's establishment and stand in his doorway and inquire, "Well, O' Man, how's the Mind of the Age working?" and get quite an hour of it; and sometimes Mr. Rusper would come into the outfitter's shop with "Heard the (kik) latest?" and spend the rest of the morning.

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Then Mr. Rusper married; and he married, very inconsiderately, a woman who was totally uninteresting to Mr. Polly. A coolness grew between them from the first intimation of her advent. Mr. Polly couldn't help thinking when he saw her that she drew her hair back from her forehead a great deal too tightly, and that her elbows were angular. His desire not to mention these things in the apt terms that welled up so richly in his mind made him awkward in her presence, and that gave her an impression that he was hiding some guilty secret from her. She decided he must have a bad influence upon her husband, and she made it a point to appear whenever she heard him talking to Rusper.

One day they became a little heated about the German peril.

"I lay (kik) they'll invade us," said Rusper.

"Not a bit of it. William's not the Xerxiacious sort."

"You'll see, O' Man."

"Just what I shan't do."

"Before (kik) five years are out."

"Not it."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"Oh, boil it hard!" said Mr. Polly.

Then he looked up and saw Mrs. Rusper standing behind the counter, half hidden by a trophy of spades and garden shears and a knife-cleaning machine, and by her expression he knew instantly that she understood.

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The conversation paled, and presently Mr. Polly withdrew.

After that estrangement increased steadily.

Mr. Rusper ceased altogether to come over to the outfitter's, and Mr. Polly called upon the ironmonger only with the completest air of casualty. And everything they said to each other led now to flat contradiction and raised voices. Rusper had been warned in vague and alarming terms that Mr. Polly insulted and made game of him, he couldn't discover exactly where; and so it appeared to him now that every word of Mr. Polly's might be an insult meriting his resentment, meriting it none the less because it was masked and cloaked.

Soon Mr. Polly's calls upon Mr. Rusper ceased also; and then Mr. Rusper, pursuing incomprehensible lines of thought, became afflicted with a specialised shortsightedness that applied only to Mr. Polly. He would look in other directions when Mr. Polly appeared, and his large, oval face assumed an expression of conscious serenity and deliberate happy unawareness that would have maddened a far less irritable person than Mr. Polly. It evoked a strong desire to mock and ape, and produced in his throat a cough of singular scornfulness, more particularly when Mr. Rusper also assisted with an assumed unconsciousness that was all his own.

Then one day Mr. Polly had a bicycle accident.

His bicycle was now very old, and it is one of the concomitants of a bicycle's senility that its free-wheel should one day obstinately cease to be free. It corresponds to that epoch in human decay when

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an old gentleman loses an incisor tooth. It happened just as Mr. Polly was approaching Mr. Rusper's shop, and the untoward chance of a motor-car trying to pass a wagon on the wrong side gave Mr. Polly no choice but to get on to the pavement and dismount. He was always accustomed to take his time and step off his left pedal at its lowest point, but the jamming of the free-wheel gear made that lowest moment a transitory one, and the pedal was lifting his foot for another revolution before he realised what had happened. Before he could dismount according to his habit the pedal had to make a revolution, and before it could make a revolution Mr. Polly found himself among the various sonorous things with which Mr. Rusper adorned the front of his shop—zinc dustbins, household pails, lawn mowers, rakes, spades, and all manner of clattering things. Before he got among them he had one of those agonising moments of helpless wrath and suspense that seem to last ages, in which one seems to perceive everything and think of nothing but words that are better forgotten. He sent a column of pails thundering across the doorway, and dismounted with one foot in a sanitary dustbin, amidst an enormous uproar of falling ironmongery.

“Put all over the place!” he cried, and found Mr. Rusper emerging from his shop with the large tranquillities of his countenance puckered to anger, like the frowns in the brow of a reefing sail. He gesticulated speechlessly for a moment.

“(kik) Jer doing?” he said at last.

“Tin mantraps!” said Mr. Polly.

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“Jer (kik) doing?”

“Dressing all over the pavement as though the blessed town belonged to you! Ugh!”

And Mr. Polly, in attempting a dignified movement, realised his entanglement with the dustbin for the first time. With a low, embittering expression, he kicked his foot about in it for a moment very noisily, and finally sent it thundering to the kerb. On its way it struck a pail or so. Then Mr. Polly picked up his bicycle and proposed to resume his homeward way. But the hand of Mr. Rusper arrested him.

“Put it (kik) all (kik) back (kik).”

“Put it (kik) back yourself.”

“You got (kik) put it back.”

“Get out of the (kik) way.”

Mr. Rusper laid one hand on the bicycle handle, and the other gripped Mr. Polly's collar urgently. Whereupon Mr. Polly said “Leggo!” and again, “D'you *hear*? Leggo!” and then drove his elbow with considerable force into the region of Mr. Rusper's midriff. Whereupon Mr. Rusper, with a loud, impassioned cry resembling “Woo kik” more than any other combination of letters, released the bicycle handle, seized Mr. Polly by the cap and hair, and bore his head and shoulders downwards. Thereat Mr. Polly, emitting such words as every one knows and nobody prints, butted his utmost into the concavity of Mr. Rusper, entwined a leg about him, and, after terrific moments of swaying instability, fell headlong beneath him amidst the bicycle and pails. There on the pavement these inexperienced children of a pacific age, untrained in arms and uninured to vio-

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lence, abandoned themselves to amateurish and absurd efforts to hurt and injure one another—of which the most palpable consequences were dusty backs, ruffled hair, and torn and twisted collars. Mr. Polly by accident got his finger into Mr. Rusper's mouth, and strove earnestly for some time to prolong that aperture in the direction of Mr. Rusper's ear before it occurred to Mr. Rusper to bite him (and even then he didn't bite very hard), while Mr. Rusper concentrated his mind almost entirely on an effort to rub Mr. Polly's face on the pavement. (And their positions bristled with chances of the deadliest sort!) They didn't, from first to last, draw blood.

Then it seemed to each of them that the other had become endowed with many hands and several voices and great accessions of strength. They submitted to fate and ceased to struggle. They found themselves torn apart and held up by outwardly scandalised and inwardly delighted neighbours, and invited to explain what it was all about.

"Got to (kik) puttem all back," panted Mr. Rusper, in the expert grasp of Hinks. "Merely asked him to (kik) puttem all back."

Mr. Polly was under restraint of little Clamp of the toyshop, who was holding his hands in a complex and uncomfortable manner that he afterwards explained to Wintershed was a combination of something romantic called "Jiu-jitsu" and something else still more romantic called the "Police Grip."

"Pails," explained Mr. Polly, in breathless fragments. "All over the road. Pails. Bungs up the street with his pails. Look at them!"

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“Deliber (kik) lib (kik) liberately rode into my goods (kik). Constantly (kik) annoying me (kik)!” said Mr. Rusper.

They were both tremendously earnest and reasonable in their manner. They wished every one to regard them as responsible and intellectual men acting for the love of right and the enduring good of the world. They felt they must treat this business as a profound and publicly significant affair. They wanted to explain and orate and show the entire necessity of everything they had done. Mr. Polly was convinced he had never been so absolutely correct in all his life as when he planted his foot in the sanitary dustbin, and Mr. Rusper considered his clutch at Mr. Polly's hair as the one faultless impulse in an otherwise undistinguished career. But it was clear in their minds they might easily become ridiculous if they were not careful, if for a second they stepped over the edge of the high spirit and pitiless dignity they had hitherto maintained. At any cost they perceived they must not become ridiculous.

Mr. Chuffles, the scandalous grocer, joined the throng about the principal combatants, mutely, as became an outcast, and with a sad, distressed, helpful expression picked up Mr. Polly's bicycle. Gambell's summer errand-boy, moved by example, restored the dustbin and pails to their self-respect.

“’E ought—’E ought (kik) pick them up,” protested Mr. Rusper.

“What's it all about?” said Mr. Hinks for the third time, shaking Mr. Rusper gently. “’As ’e been calling you names?”

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"Simply ran into his pails—as any one might," said Mr. Polly, "and out he comes and scraggs me."

"(kik) Assault!" said Mr. Rusper.

"He assaulted *me*," said Mr. Polly.

"Jumped (kik) into my dus'bin," said Mr. Rusper.

"That assault? Or isn't it?"

"You better drop it," said Mr. Hinks.

"Great pity they can't be've better, both of 'em," said Mr. Chuffles, glad for once to find himself morally unassailable.

"Any one see it begin?" said Mr. Wintershed.

"I was in the shop," said Mrs. Rusper suddenly, from the doorstep, piercing the little group of men and boys with the sharp horror of a woman's voice.

"If a witness is wanted, I suppose I've got a tongue. I suppose I got a voice in seeing my own husband injured. My husband went out and spoke to Mr. Polly, who was jumping off and on his bicycle all among our pails and things, and immediately 'e butted him in the stomach—immediately—most savagely—butted him. Just after his dinner, too, and him far from strong. I could have screamed. But Rusper caught hold of him right away, I will say that for Rusper——"

"I'm going," said Mr. Polly suddenly, releasing himself from the Anglo-Japanese grip and holding out his hands for his bicycle.

"Teach you (kik) to leave things alone," said Mr. Rusper, with an air of one who has given a lesson.

The testimony of Mrs. Rusper continued relentlessly in the background.

"You'll hear of me through a summons," said Mr. Polly, preparing to wheel his bicycle.

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“(kik) Me too,” said Mr. Rusper.

Some one handed Mr. Polly a collar. “This yours?”

Mr. Polly investigated his neck. “I suppose it is. Any one seen a tie?”

A small boy produced a grimy strip of spotted blue silk.

“Human life isn’t safe with you,” said Mr. Polly as a parting shot.

“(kik) Yours isn’t,” said Mr. Rusper.

And they got small satisfaction out of the Bench, which refused altogether to perceive the relentless correctitude of the behaviour of either party, and reproved the eagerness of Mrs. Rusper—speaking to her gently, firmly but exasperatingly as “My Good Woman,” and telling her to “Answer the Question! Answer the Question!”

“Seems a Pity,” said the chairman, when binding them over to keep the peace, “you can’t behave like Respectable Tradesmen. Seems a Great Pity. Bad Example to the Young and all that. Don’t do any Good to the town, don’t do any Good to yourselves, don’t do any manner of Good, to have all the Tradesmen in the Place scrapping about the Pavement of an Afternoon. Think we’re letting you off very easily this time, and hope it will be a Warning to you. Don’t expect men of your Position to come up before us. Very Regrettable Affair. Eh?”

He addressed the latter inquiry to his two colleagues.

“Exactly, exactly,” said the colleague to the right.

“Err (kik),” said Mr. Rusper.

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But the disgust that overshadowed Mr. Polly's being as he sat upon the stile had other and profounder justification than his quarrel with Ruser and the indignity of appearing before the county bench. He was, for the first time in his business career, short with his rent for the approaching quarter day; and, so far as he could trust his own handling of figures, he was sixty or seventy pounds on the wrong side of solvency. And that was the outcome of fifteen years of passive endurance of dulness throughout the best years of his life. What would Miriam say when she learned this, and was invited to face the prospect of exile—Heaven knows what sort of exile—from their present home? She would grumble and scold and become limply unhelpful, he knew, and none the less so because he could not help things. She would say he ought to have worked harder, and a hundred such exasperating, pointless things. Such thoughts as these require no aid from undigested cold pork and cold potatoes and pickles to darken the soul, and with these aids his soul was black indeed.

“May as well have a bit of a walk,” said Mr. Polly at last, after nearly intolerable meditations, and sat round and put a leg over the stile.

He remained still for some time before he brought over the other leg.

“Kill myself,” he murmured at last.

It was an idea that came back to his mind nowadays with a continually increasing attractiveness, more particularly after meals. Life, he felt, had no

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further happiness for him. He hated Miriam, and there was no getting away from her, whatever might betide. And for the rest, there was toil and struggle, toil and struggle with a failing heart and dwindling courage, to sustain that dreary duologue. "Life's insured," said Mr. Polly; "place is insured. I don't see it does any harm to her or any one."

He stuck his hands in his pockets. "Needn't hurt much," he said. He began to elaborate a plan.

He found it was quite interesting elaborating his plan. His countenance became less miserable and his pace quickened.

There is nothing so good in all the world for melancholia as walking, and the exercise of the imagination in planning something presently to be done, and soon the wrathful wretchedness had vanished from Mr. Polly's face. He would have to do the thing secretly and elaborately, because otherwise there might be difficulties about the life insurance. He began to scheme how he could circumvent that difficulty. . . .

He took a long walk, for, after all, what is the good of hurrying back to shop when you are not only insolvent but very soon to die? His dinner and the east wind lost their sinister hold upon his soul, and when at last he came back along the Fishbourne High Street his face was unusually bright and the craving hunger of the dyspeptic was returning. So he went into the grocer's and bought a ruddily decorated tin of a brightly pink fish-like substance known as "Deep Sea Salmon." This he was resolved to consume, regardless of cost, with vinegar and salt and pepper as a relish to his supper.

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He did, and since he and Miriam rarely talked, and Miriam thought honour and his recent behaviour demanded a hostile silence, he ate fast and copiously and soon gloomily. He ate alone, for she refrained, to mark her sense of his extravagance. Then he prowled into the High Street for a time, thought it an infernal place, tried his pipe and found it foul and bitter, and retired wearily to bed.

He slept for an hour or so, and then woke up to the contemplation of Miriam's hunched back and the riddle of life, and this bright and attractive idea of ending for ever and ever and ever all the things that were locking him in, this bright idea that shone like a baleful star above all the reek and darkness of his misery. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

MAKING AN END TO THINGS

1

MR. POLLY designed his suicide with considerable care and a quite remarkable altruism.

His passionate hatred for Miriam vanished directly the idea of getting away from her for ever became clear in his mind. He found himself full of solicitude then for her welfare. He did not want to buy his release at her expense. He had not the remotest intention of leaving her unprotected, with a painfully dead husband and a bankrupt shop on her hands. It seemed to him that he could contrive to secure for her the full benefit of both his life insurance and his fire insurance if he managed things in a tactful manner. He felt happier than he had done for years scheming out this undertaking, albeit it was, perhaps, a larger and somberer kind of happiness than had fallen to his lot before. It amazed him to think he had endured his monotony of misery and failure for so long.

But there were some queer doubts and questions in the dim, half-lit background of his mind that he had very resolutely to ignore.

"Sick of it," he had to repeat to himself aloud to keep his determination clear and firm. His life was a failure; there was nothing more to hope for but unhappiness. Why shouldn't he?

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His project was to begin the fire with the stairs that led from the ground floor to the underground kitchen and scullery. This he would soak with paraffin, and assist with firewood and paper and a brisk fire in the coal cellar underneath. He would smash a hole or so in the stairs to ventilate the blaze, and have a good pile of boxes and paper, and a convenient chair or so, in the shop above. He would have the paraffin can upset, and the shop lamp, as if awaiting refilling, at convenient distances in the scullery ready to catch. Then he would smash the house lamp on the staircase—a fall with that in his hand was to be the ostensible cause of the blaze—and he would cut his throat at the top of the kitchen stairs, which would then become his funeral pyre. He would do all this on Sunday evening while Miriam was at church, and it would appear that he had fallen downstairs with the lamp and been burned to death. There was really no flaw whatever that he could see in the scheme. He was quite sure he knew how to cut his throat, deep at the side and not to saw at the windpipe, and he was reasonably sure it wouldn't hurt him very much. And then everything would be at an end.

There was no particular hurry to get the thing done, of course, and meanwhile he occupied his mind with possible variations of the scheme. . . .

It needed a particularly dry and dusty east wind, a Sunday dinner of exceptional virulence, a conclusive letter from Konk, Maybrick, Ghool, and Gabbitas, his principal and most urgent creditors, and a conversation with Miriam, arising out of arrears of rent and leading on to mutual character sketching,

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before Mr. Polly could be brought to the necessary pitch of despair to carry out his plans. He went for an embittering walk, and came back to find Miriam in a bad temper over the tea things, with the brewings of three-quarters of an hour in the pot and hot buttered muffins gone leathery. He sat eating in silence with his resolution made.

"Coming to church?" said Miriam after she had cleared away.

"Rather. I got a lot to be grateful for," said Mr. Polly.

"You got what you deserve," said Miriam.

"Suppose I have," said Mr. Polly, and went and stared out of the back window at a despondent horse in the hotel yard.

He was still standing there when Miriam came downstairs dressed for church. Something in his immobility struck home to her. "You'd better come to church than mope," she said.

"I shan't mope," he answered.

She remained still. Her presence irritated him. He felt that in another moment he should say something absurd to her, make some last appeal for that understanding she had never been able to give. "Oh! go to church," he said.

In another moment the outer door slammed upon her. "Good riddance!" said Mr. Polly.

He turned about. "I've had my whack," he said.

He reflected. "I don't see she'll have any cause to holler," he said. "Beastly Home! Beastly Life!"

For a space he remained thoughtful. "Here goes!" he said at last.

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2

For twenty minutes Mr. Polly busied himself about the house, making his preparations very neatly and methodically.

He opened the attic windows, in order to make sure of a good draught through the house, and drew down the blinds at the back and shut the kitchen door to conceal his arrangements from casual observation. At the end he would open the door on the yard and so make a clean, clear draught right through the house. He hacked at, and wedged off, the tread of a stair. He cleared out the coals from under the staircase, and built a neat fire of firewood and paper there; he splashed about paraffin and arranged the lamps and can even as he had designed, and made a fine, inflammable pile of things in the little parlour behind the shop. "Looks pretty arsonical," he said, as he surveyed it all. "Wouldn't do to have a caller now. Now for the stairs!"

"Plenty of time," he assured himself, and took the lamp which was to explain the whole affair, and went to the head of the staircase between the scullery and the parlour. He sat down in the twilight, with the unlit lamp beside him, and surveyed things. He must light the fire in the coal cellar under the stairs, open the back door, then come up them very quickly and light the paraffin puddles on each step, then sit down here again and cut his throat. He drew his razor from his pocket and felt the edge. It wouldn't hurt much, and in ten minutes he would be indistinguishable ashes in the blaze.

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And this was the end of life for him !

The end ! And it seemed to him now that life had never begun for him, never ! It was as if his soul had been cramped and his eyes bandaged from the hour of his birth. Why had he lived such a life ? Why had he submitted to things, blundered into things ? Why had he never insisted on the things he thought beautiful and the things he desired, never sought them, fought for them, taken any risk for them, died rather than abandon them ? They were the things that mattered. Safety did not matter. A living did not matter unless there were things to live for. . . .

He had been a fool, a coward and a fool ; he had been fooled, too, for no one had ever warned him to take a firm hold upon life, no one had ever told him of the littleness of fear or pain or death. But what was the good of going through it now again. It was over and done with.

The clock in the back parlour pinged the half-hour.

"Time !" said Mr. Polly, and stood up.

For an instant he battled with an impulse to put it all back, hastily, guiltily, and abandon this desperate plan of suicide for ever.

But Miriam would smell the paraffin !

"No way out this time, O' Man," said Mr. Polly, and went slowly downstairs, matchbox in hand.

He paused for five seconds, perhaps, to listen to noises in the yard of the Royal Fishbourne Hotel before he struck his match. It trembled a little in his hand. The paper blackened, and an edge of blue flame ran outward and spread. The fire burned up

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readily, and in an instant the wood was crackling cheerfully.

Some one might hear. He must hurry.

He lit a pool of paraffin on the scullery floor, and instantly a nest of wavering blue flame became agog for prey. He went up the stairs three steps at a time, with one eager blue flicker in pursuit of him. He seized the lamp at the top. "Now!" he said, and flung it smashing. The chimney broke, but the glass receiver stood the shock and rolled to the bottom, a potential bomb. Old Rumbold would hear that and wonder what it was. . . . He'd know soon enough!

Then Mr. Polly stood hesitating, razor in hand, and then sat down. He was trembling violently, but quite unafraid.

He drew the blade lightly under one ear. "Lord!" but it stung like a nettle!

Then he perceived a little blue thread of flame running up his leg. It arrested his attention, and for a moment he sat, razor in hand, staring at it. It must be paraffin! On his trousers that had caught fire on the stairs. Of course his legs were wet with paraffin! He smacked the flicker with his hand to put it out, and felt his leg burn as he did so. But his trousers still charred and glowed. It seemed to him necessary that he must put this out before he cut his throat. He put down the razor beside him to smack with both hands very eagerly. And as he did so a thin, tall, red flame came up through the hole in the stairs he had made and stood still, quite still, as it seemed, and looked at him. It was a strange-looking flame, a flattish, salmon colour, redly streaked. It

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was so queer and quiet-mannered that the sight of it held Mr. Polly agape.

"Whuff!" went the can of paraffin below, and boiled over with stinking white fire. At the outbreak, the salmon-coloured flames shivered and ducked and then doubled and vanished, and instantly all the staircase was noisily ablaze.

Mr. Polly sprang up and backwards, as though the uprushing tongues of fire were a pack of eager wolves.

"Good Lord!" he cried, like a man who wakes up from a dream.

He swore sharply, and slapped again at a recalcitrant flame upon his leg.

"What the Deuce shall I do? I'm soaked with the confounded stuff!"

He had nerved himself for throat-cutting, but this was fire!

He wanted to delay things, to put the fire out for a moment while he did his business. The idea of arresting all this hurry with water occurred to him.

There was no water in the little parlour and none in the shop. He hesitated for a moment whether he should not run upstairs to the bedroom and get a ewer of water to throw on the flames. At this rate Rumbold's would be ablaze in five minutes. Things were going all too fast for Mr. Polly. He ran towards the staircase door, and its hot breath pulled him up sharply. Then he dashed out through the shop. The catch of the front door was sometimes obstinate; it was now, and instantly he became frantic. He rattled and stormed and felt the parlour already ablaze

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behind him. In another moment he was in the High Street with the door wide open.

The staircase behind him was crackling now like horsewhips and pistol-shots.

He had a vague sense that he wasn't doing as he had proposed, but the chief thing was his sense of that uncontrolled fire within. What was he going to do? There was the fire-brigade station next door but one.

The Fishbourne High Street had never seemed so empty.

Far off, at the corner by the God's Providence Inn, a group of three stiff hobbledehoyes in their black, neat clothes conversed intermittently with Taplow, the policeman.

"Hi!" bawled Mr. Polly to them. "Fire! Fire!" and, struck by a horrible thought, he thought of Rumbold's deaf mother-in-law upstairs, began to bang and kick and rattle with the utmost fury at Rumbold's shop door.

"Hi!" he repeated, "Fire!"

3

That was the beginning of the great Fishbourne fire, which burned its way sideways into Mr. Rusper's piles of crates and straw, and backwards to the petrol and stabling of the Royal Fishbourne Hotel, and spread from that basis until it seemed half Fishbourne would be ablaze. The east wind, which had been gathering in strength all that day, fanned the flames; everything was dry and ready, and the little shed

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beyond Rumbold's, in which the local fire brigade kept its manual, was alight before the Fishbourne fire-hose could be saved from disaster. In a marvelously short time a great column of black smoke, shot with red streamers, rose out of the middle of the High Street, and all Fishbourne was alive with excitement.

Much of the more respectable elements of Fishbourne society was in church or chapel; many, however, had been tempted by the blue sky and the hard freshness of spring to take walks inland, and there had been the usual disappearance of loungers and conversationalists from the beach and the back streets when, at the hour of six, the shooting of bolts and the turning of keys had ended the British Ramadan, that weekly interlude of drought our law imposes. The youth of the place were scattered on the beach or playing in backyards, under threat if their clothes were dirtied; and the adolescent were disposed in pairs among the more secluded corners to be found upon the outskirts of the place. Several godless youths, seasick, but fishing steadily, were tossing upon the sea in old Tarbold the infidel's boat, and the Clamps were entertaining cousins from Port Burdock. Such few visitors as Fishbourne could boast in the spring were at church or on the beach. To all these that column of smoke did in a manner address itself. "Look here!" it said, "this, within limits, is your affair; what are you going to do?"

The three hobbledehoy, had it been a week-day and they in working clothes, might have felt free to act, but the stiffness of black was upon them, and they simply moved to the corner by Rusper's to take

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a better view of Mr. Polly beating at his door. The policeman was a young, inexpert constable with far too lively a sense of the public-house. He put his head inside the Private Bar, to the horror of every one there. But there was no breach of the law, thank Heaven! "Polly's and Rumbold's on fire!" he said, and vanished again. A window opened in the top-story over Boomer's shop, and Boomer, captain of the fire brigade, appeared, staring out with a blank expression. Still staring, he began to fumble with his collar and tie; manifestly he had to put on his uniform. Hink's dog, which had been lying on the pavement outside Wintershed's, woke up, and having regarded Mr. Polly suspiciously for some time, growled nervously and went round the corner into Granville Alley. Mr. Polly continued to beat and kick at Rumbold's door.

Then the public-houses began to vomit forth the less desirable elements of Fishbourne society; boys and men were moved to run and shout, and more windows went up as the stir increased. Tashingford, the chemist, appeared at his door, in shirt sleeves and an apron, with his photographic plate-holders in his hand. And then, like a vision of purpose, came Mr. Gambell, the greengrocer, running out of Gayford's alley and buttoning on his jacket as he ran. His great brass fireman's helmet was on his head, hiding it all but the sharp nose, the firm mouth, the intrepid chin. He ran straight to the fire station and tried the door, and turned about and met the eye of Boomer still at his upper window. "The key!" cried Mr. Gambell, "the key!"

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Mr. Boomer made some inaudible explanation about his trousers and half a minute.

"Seen old Rumbold?" cried Mr. Polly, approaching Mr. Gambell.

"Gone over Downford for a walk," said Mr. Gambell. "He told me! But look 'ere! We 'aven't got the key!"

"Lord!" said Mr. Polly, and regarded the china shop with open eyes. He knew the old woman must be there alone. He went back to the shop front, and stood surveying it in infinite perplexity. The other activities in the street did not interest him. A deaf old lady somewhere upstairs there! Precious moments passing! Suddenly he was struck by an idea, and vanished from public vision into the open door of the Royal Fishbourne Tap.

And now the street was getting crowded, and people were laying their hands to this and that.

Mr. Rusper had been at home reading a number of tracts upon Tariff Reform, during the quiet of the wife's absence in church, and trying to work out the application of the whole question to ironmongery. He heard a clattering in the street, and for a time disregarded it, until a cry of "Fire!" drew him to the window. He pencil-marked the tract of Chiozza Money's that he was reading side by side with one by Mr. Holt Schooling, made a hasty note, "Bal of Trade say 12,000,000," and went to look out. Instantly he opened the window and ceased to believe the Fiscal Question the most urgent of human affairs.

"Good (kik) Gud!" said Mr. Rusper.

For now the rapidly spreading blaze had forced the

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partition into Mr. Rumbold's premises, swept across his cellar, clambered his garden wall by means of his well-tarred mushroom shed, and assailed the engine-house. It stayed not to consume, but ran as a thing that seeks a quarry. Polly's shop and upper parts were already a furnace, and black smoke was coming out of Rumbold's cellar gratings. The fire in the engine-house showed only as a sudden rush of smoke from the back, like something suddenly blown up. The fire brigade, still much under strength, were now hard at work in front of the latter building. They had got the door open all too late; they had rescued the fire-escape and some buckets, and were now lugging out their manual, with the hose already a dripping mass of molten, flaring, stinking rubber. Boomer was dancing about and swearing and shouting; this direct attack upon his apparatus outraged his sense of chivalry. His subordinates hovered in a disheartened state about the rescued fire-escape, and tried to piece Boomer's comments into some tangible instructions.

"Hi!" said Rusper from the window. "(kik) What's up?"

Gambell answered him out of his helmet. "Hose!" he cried. "Hose gone!"

"I (kik) got hose," cried Rusper.

He had. He had a stock of several thousand feet of garden hose of various qualities and calibres, and now, he felt, was the time to use it. In another moment his shop door was open, and he was hurling pails, garden syringes, and rolls of garden hose out upon the pavement. "(kik) Undo it!" he cried to the gathering crowd in the roadway.

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They did. Presently a hundred ready hands were unrolling and spreading and tangling up and twisting and hopelessly involving Mr. Rusper's stock of hose, sustained by an unquenchable assurance that presently it would in some manner contain and convey water; and Mr. Rusper on his knees, kiking violently, became incredibly busy with wire and brass junctions and all sorts of mysteries.

"Fix it to the (kik) bathroom tap!" said Mr. Rusper.

Next door to the fire station was Mantell and Throbsons', the little Fishbourne branch of that celebrated firm, and Mr. Boomer, seeking in a teeming mind for a plan of action, had determined to save this building. "Some one telephone to the Port Burdock and Hampstead-on-Sea fire brigades," he cried to the crowd, and then to his fellows: "Cut away the woodwork of the fire station!" and so led the way into the blaze with a whirling hatchet that effected wonders of ventilation in no time.

But it was not, after all, such a bad idea of his. Mantell and Throbsons' was separated from the fire station in front by a covered glass passage, and at the back the roof of a big outhouse sloped down to the fire station leads. The sturdy longshoremen, who made up the bulk of the fire brigade, assailed the glass roof of the passage with extraordinary gusto, and made a smashing of glass that drowned for a time the rising uproar of the flames.

A number of willing volunteers started off to the new telephone office in obedience to Mr. Boomer's request, only to be told, with cold official politeness

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by the young lady at the exchange, that all that had been done on her own initiative ten minutes ago. She parleyed with these heated enthusiasts for a space, and then returned to the window.

And, indeed, the spectacle was well worth looking at. The dusk was falling, and the flames were showing brilliantly at half a dozen points. The Royal Fishbourne Hotel Tap, which adjoined Mr. Polly to the west, was being kept wet by the enthusiastic efforts of a string of volunteers with buckets of water, and above, at a bathroom window, the little German waiter was busy with the garden hose. But Mr. Polly's establishment looked more like a house afire than most houses on fire contrive to look from start to finish. Every window showed eager, flickering flames, and flames like serpents' tongues were licking out of three large holes in the roof, which was already beginning to fall in. Behind, larger and abundantly spark-shot gusts of fire rose from the fodder that was now getting alight in the Royal Fishbourne Hotel stables. Next door to Mr. Polly, Mr. Rumbold's house was disgorging black smoke from the gratings that protected its underground windows, and smoke and occasional shivers of flame were also coming out of its first-floor windows. The fire station was better alight at the back than in front, and its woodwork burned pretty briskly with peculiar greenish flickerings, and a pungent flavour. In the street an inaggressively disorderly crowd clambered over the rescued fire-escape, and resisted the attempts of the three local constables to get it away from the danger of Mr. Polly's tottering façade; a cluster of busy

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forms danced and shouted and advised on the noisy and smashing attempt to cut off Mantell and Throbsons' from the fire station that was still in effectual progress. Further, a number of people appeared to be destroying interminable red and grey snakes under the heated direction of Mr. Ruser—it was as if the High Street had a plague of worms; and beyond again, the more timid and less active crowded in front of an accumulation of arrested traffic. Most of the men were in Sabbatical black, and this, and the white and starched quality of the women and children in their best clothes, gave a note of ceremony to the whole affair.

For a moment the attention of the telephone clerk was held by the activities of Mr. Tashingford, the chemist, who, regardless of every one else, was rushing across the road hurling fire grenades into the fire station and running back for more, and then her eyes lifted to the slanting outhouse roof that went up to a ridge behind the parapet of Mantell and Throbsons'. An expression of incredulity came into the telephone operator's eyes, and gave place to hard activity. She flung up the window and screamed out, "Two people on the roof up there! Two people on the roof!"

4

Her eyes had not deceived her. Two figures, which had emerged from the upper staircase window of Mr. Rumbold's and had got, after a perilous paddle in his cistern, on to the fire station, were now slowly but resolutely clambering up the outhouse roof towards

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the back of the main premises of Messrs. Mantell and Throbsons'. They clambered slowly, and one urged and helped the other, slipping and pausing ever and again amidst a constant trickle of fragments of broken tile.

One was Mr. Polly, with his hair wildly disordered, his face covered with black smudges and streaked with perspiration, and his trouser legs scorched and blackened; the other was an elderly lady, quietly but becomingly dressed in black with small white frills at her neck and wrists, and a Sunday cap of *écru* lace enlivened with a black velvet bow. Her hair was brushed back from her wrinkled brow and plastered down tightly, meeting in a small knob behind; her wrinkled mouth bore that expression of supreme resolution common with the toothless aged. She was shaky, not with fear, but with the vibrations natural to her years, and she spoke with a slow, quavering firmness.

"I don't mind scrambling," she said with piping inflexibility, "but I can't jump, and I won't jump."

"Scramble, old lady, then, scramble!" said Mr. Polly, pulling her arm. "It's one up and two down on these blessed tiles."

"It's not what I'm used to," she said.

"Stick to it," said Mr. Polly. "Live and learn," and got to the ridge and grasped at her arm to pull her after him.

"I can't jump, mind ye," she repeated, pressing her lips together. "And old ladies like me mustn't be hurried."

"Well, let's get as high as possible, anyhow," said

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Mr. Polly, urging her gently upwards. "Shinning up a waterspout in your line? Near as you'll get to Heaven."

"I *can't* jump," she said. "I can do anything but jump."

"Hold on," said Mr. Polly, "while I give you a boost. That's—wonderful."

"So long as it isn't jumping. . . ."

The old lady grasped the parapet above, and there was a moment of intense struggle.

"Urup!" said Mr. Polly. "Hold on! Gollys! where's she gone to? . . ."

Then an ill-mended, wavering, yet very reassuring spring-side boot appeared for an instant.

"Thought perhaps there wasn't any roof there!" he explained, scrambling up over the parapet beside her.

"I've never been out on a roof before," said the old lady. "I'm all disconnected. It's very bumpy. Especially that last bit. Can't we sit here for a bit and rest? I'm not the girl I used to be."

"You sit here ten minutes," shouted Mr. Polly, "and you'll pop like a roast chestnut. Don't understand me? *Roast Chestnut!* ROAST CHESTNUT! POP! There ought to be a limit to deafness. Come on round to the front and see if we can find an attic window. Look at this smoke!"

"Nasty!" said the old lady, her eyes following his gesture, puckering her face into an expression of great distaste.

"Come on!"

"Can't hear a word you say."

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He pulled her arm. "Come on!"

She paused for a moment to relieve herself of a series of entirely unexpected chuckles. "Sich goings on!" she said. "I never did! Where's he going now?" and came along behind the parapet to the front of the drapery establishment.

Below, the street was now fully alive to their presence, and encouraged the appearance of their heads by shouts and cheers. A sort of free fight was going on round the fire-escape, order represented by Mr. Boomer and the very young policeman, and disorder by some partially intoxicated volunteers with views of their own about the manipulation of the apparatus. Two or three lengths of Mr. Rusper's garden hose appeared to have twined themselves round the ladder. Mr. Polly watched the struggle with a certain impatience, and glanced ever and again over his shoulder at the increasing volume of smoke and steam that was pouring up from the burning fire station. He decided to break an attic window and get in, and so try and get down through the shop. He found himself in a little bedroom, and returned to fetch his charge. For some time he could not make her understand his purpose.

"Got to come at once!" he shouted.

"I hain't 'ad sich a time for years!" said the old lady.

"We'll have to get down through the house!"

"Can't do no jumping," said the old lady. "No!"

She yielded reluctantly to his grasp.

She stared over the parapet. "Runnin' and scurryin' about like black beetles in a kitchen," she said.

"We've got to hurry."

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"Mr. Rumbold 'e's a very Quiet man. 'E likes everything Quiet. He'll be surprised to see me 'ere! Why! there 'e is!" She fumbled in her garments mysteriously, and at last produced a wrinkled pocket-handkerchief and began to wave it.

"Oh, come *ON!*" cried Mr. Polly, and seized her.

He got her into the attic, but the staircase, he found, was full of suffocating smoke, and he dared not venture below the next floor. He took her into a long dormitory, shut the door on those pungent and pervasive fumes, and opened the window, to discover the fire-escape was now against the house, and all Fishbourne boiling with excitement as an immensely helmeted and active and resolute little figure ascended. In another moment the rescuer stared over the window-sill, heroic but just a trifle self-conscious and grotesque.

"Lawks-a-mussy!" said the old lady. "Wonders and Wonders! Why! it's Mr. Gambell! 'Iding 'is 'ead in that thing! I *never* did!"

"Can we get her out?" said Mr. Gambell. "There's not much time."

"He might git stuck in it."

"*You'll* get stuck in it," said Mr. Polly; "come along!"

"Not for jumpin' I don't," said the old lady, understanding his gestures rather than his words. "Not a bit of it. I bain't no good at jumping, and I *wun't*."

They urged her gently but firmly towards the window.

"You lemme do it my own way," said the old lady at the sill. . . .

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"I could do it better if 'e'd take it off."

"Oh! *carm* on!"

"It's wuss than Carter's stile," she said, "before they mended it—with a cow looking at you."

Mr. Gambell hovered protectingly below. Mr. Polly steered her aged limbs from above. An anxious crowd below babbled advice and did its best to upset the fire-escape. Within, streamers of black smoke were pouring up through the cracks in the floor. For some seconds the world waited while the old lady gave herself up to reckless mirth again. "Sich times!" she said. "Poor Rumbold!"

Slowly they descended; and Mr. Polly remained at the post of danger, steadying the long ladder, until the old lady was in safety below and sheltered by Mr. Rumbold (who was in tears) and the young policeman from the urgent congratulations of the crowd. The crowd was full of an impotent passion to participate. Those nearest wanted to shake her hand, those remoter cheered.

"The fust fire I was ever in, and likely to be my last. It's a scurryin', 'urryin' business, but I'm real glad I haven't missed it," said the old lady, as she was borne rather than led towards the refuge of the Temperance Hotel.

Also she was heard to remark: "'E was saying something about 'ot chestnuts. I haven't 'ad no 'ot chestnuts."

Then the crowd became aware of Mr. Polly awkwardly negotiating the top rungs of the fire-escape. "'Ere 'e comes!" proclaimed a voice; and Mr. Polly descended into the world again out of the conflagra-

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tion he had lit to be his funeral-pyre, moist, excited, and tremendously alive, amidst a tempest of applause. As he got lower and lower, the crowd howled like a pack of dogs at him. Impatient men, unable to wait for him, seized and shook his descending boots, and so brought him to earth with a run. He was rescued with difficulty from an enthusiast who wished to slake at his own expense and to his own accompaniment a thirst altogether heroic. He was hauled into the Temperance Hotel and flung like a sack, breathless and helpless, into the tear-wet embrace of Miriam.

5

With the dusk and the arrival of some county constabulary, and first one and presently two other fire-engines from Port Burdock and Hampstead-on-Sea, the local talent of Fishbourne found itself forced back into a secondary, less responsible, and more observant rôle. I will not pursue the story of the fire to its ashes, nor will I do more than glance at the unfortunate Mr. Rusper, a modern Laocoon, vainly trying to retrieve his scattered hose amidst the tramlings and rushings of the Port Burdock experts.

In a small sitting-room of the Fishbourne Temperance Hotel a little group of Fishbourne tradesmen sat and conversed in fragments, and anon went to the window and looked out upon the smoking desolation of their houses across the way, and anon sat down again. They and their families were the guests of old Lady Bargrave, who had displayed the utmost sym-

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pathy and interest in their misfortunes. She had taken several people into her own house at Everdean, had engaged the Temperance Hotel as a temporary refuge, and personally superintended the housing of Mantell and Throbsons' homeless assistants. The Temperance Hotel became and remained extremely noisy and congested with people sitting about anywhere, conversing in fragments, and totally unable to get themselves to bed. The manager was an old soldier, and, following the best traditions of the service, saw that every one had hot cocoa. Hot cocoa seemed to be about everywhere, and it was no doubt very heartening and sustaining to every one. When the manager detected any one disposed to be drooping or pensive, he exhorted that person at once to drink further hot cocoa and maintain a stout heart.

The hero of the occasion, the centre of interest, was Mr. Polly. For he had not only caused the fire by upsetting a lighted lamp, scorching his trousers and narrowly escaping death, as indeed he had now explained in detail about twenty times, but he had further thought at once of that amiable but helpless old lady next door, had shown the utmost decision in making his way to her over the yard wall of the Royal Fishbourne Hotel, and had rescued her with persistence and vigour, in spite of the levity natural to her years. Every one thought well of him and was anxious to show it, more especially by shaking his hand painfully and repeatedly. Mr. Rumbold, breaking a silence of nearly fifteen years, thanked him profusely, said that he had never understood him properly, and declared he ought to have a medal. There seemed to

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be a widely diffused idea that Mr. Polly ought to have a medal. Hinks thought so. He declared, moreover, and with the utmost emphasis, that Mr. Polly had a crowded and richly decorated interior—or words to that effect. There was something apologetic in this persistence; it was as if he regretted past intimations that Mr. Polly was internally defective and hollow. He also said that Mr. Polly was a “white man,” albeit, as he developed it, with a liver of the deepest chromatic satisfactions.

Mr. Polly wandered centrally through it all, with his face washed and his hair carefully brushed and parted, looking modest and more than a little absent-minded, and wearing a pair of black dress trousers belonging to the manager of the Temperance Hotel—a larger man than himself in every way.

He drifted upstairs to his fellow-tradesmen, and stood for a time staring into the littered street, with its pools of water and extinguished gas lamps. His companions in misfortune resumed a fragmentary, disconnected conversation. They touched now on one aspect of the disaster and now on another, and there were intervals of silence. More or less empty cocoa cups were distributed over the table, mantelshelf, and piano, and in the middle of the table was a tin of biscuits, into which Mr. Rumbold, sitting round-shouldered, dipped ever and again in an absentminded way, and munched like a distant shooting of coals. It added to the solemnity of the affair that nearly all of them were in their black Sunday clothes; little Clamp was particularly impressive and dignified in a wide open frock-coat, a Gladstone-shaped

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paper collar, and a large white-and-blue tie. They felt that they were in the presence of a great disaster, the sort of disaster that gets into the papers, and is even illustrated by blurred photographs of the crumbling ruins. In the presence of that sort of disaster all honourable men are lugubrious and sententious.

And yet it is impossible to deny a certain element of elation. Not one of those excellent men but was already realising that a great door had opened, as it were, in the opaque fabric of destiny, that they were to get their money again that had seemed sunken for ever beyond any hope in the deeps of retail trade. Life was already in their imagination rising like a Phoenix from the flames.

"I suppose there'll be a public subscription," said Mr. Clamp.

"Not for those who're insured," said Mr. Wintershed.

"I was thinking of them assistants from Mantell and Throbsons'. They must have lost nearly everything."

"They'll be looked after all right," said Mr. Rumbold. "Never fear."

Pause.

"*I'm* insured," said Mr. Clamp with unconcealed satisfaction. "Royal Salamander."

"Same here," said Mr. Wintershed.

"Mine's the Glasgow Sun," Mr. Hinks remarked. "Very good company."

"You insured, Mr. Polly?"

"He deserves to be," said Rumbold.

"Ra—ther," said Hinks. "Blowed if he don't."

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Hard lines it *would* be—if there wasn't something for him."

"Commercial and General," answered Mr. Polly over his shoulder, still staring out of the window. "Oh! I'm all right."

The topic dropped for a time, though manifestly it continued to exercise their minds.

"It's cleared me out of a lot of old stock," said Mr. Wintershed; "that's one good thing."

The remark was felt to be in rather questionable taste, and still more so was his next comment.

"Rusper's a bit sick it didn't reach *'im*."

Every one looked uncomfortable, and no one was willing to point the reason why Rusper should be a bit sick.

"Rusper's been playing a game of his own," said Hinks. "Wonder what he thought he was up to! Sittin' in the middle of the road with a pair of tweezers he was, and about a yard of wire—mending somethin'. Wonder he warn't run over by the Port Burdock engine."

Presently a little chat sprang up upon the causes of fires, and Mr. Polly was moved to tell for the one-and-twentieth time how it had happened. His story had now become as circumstantial and exact as the evidence of a police witness. "Upset the lamp," he said. "I'd just lighted it. I was going upstairs, and my foot slipped against where one of the treads was a bit rotten, and down I went. Thing was aflare in a moment! . . ."

He yawned at the end of the discussion, and moved doorward.

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"So long," said Mr. Polly.

"Good night," said Mr. Rumbold. "You played a brave man's part! If you don't get a medal——"

He left an eloquent pause.

"'Ear, 'ear!" said Mr. Wintershed and Mr. Clamp.

"Goo'-night, O' Man," said Mr. Hinks.

"Goo'-night, All," said Mr. Polly. . . .

He went slowly upstairs. The vague perplexity common to popular heroes pervaded his mind. He entered the bedroom and turned up the electric light. It was quite a pleasant room, one of the best in the Temperance Hotel, with a nice clean flowered wall-paper, and a very large looking-glass. Miriam appeared to be asleep, and her shoulders were humped up under the clothes in a shapeless, forbidding lump that Mr. Polly had found utterly loathsome for fifteen years. He went softly over to the dressing-table and surveyed himself thoughtfully. Presently he hitched up the trousers. "Miles too big for me," he remarked. "Funny not to have a pair of breeches of one's own. . . . Like being born again. Naked came I into the world."

Miriam stirred and rolled over, and stared at him.

"Hallo!" she said.

"Hallo."

"Come to bed?"

"It's three."

Pause while Mr. Polly disrobed slowly.

"I been thinking," said Miriam. "It isn't going to be so bad after all. We shall get your insurance. We can easy begin all over again."

"H'm," said Mr. Polly.

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She turned her face away from him and reflected.

"Get a better house," said Miriam, regarding the wallpaper pattern. "I've always 'ated them stairs."

Mr. Polly removed a boot.

"Choose a better position where there's more doing," murmured Miriam. . . .

"Not half so bad," she whispered. . . .

"You *wanted* stirring up," she said, half asleep. . . .

It dawned upon Mr. Polly for the first time that he had forgotten something.

He ought to have cut his throat!

The fact struck him as remarkable, but as now no longer of any particular urgency. It seemed a thing far off in the past, and he wondered why he had not thought of it before. Odd thing life is! If he had done it he would never have seen this clean and agreeable apartment with the electric light. . . . His thoughts wandered into a question of detail. Where could he have put down the razor? Somewhere in the little room behind the shop, he supposed, but he could not think where more precisely. Anyhow, it didn't matter now.

He undressed himself calmly, got into bed, and fell asleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER IX

THE POTWELL INN

1

BUT when a man has once broken through the paper walls of everyday circumstance, those unsubstantial walls that hold so many of us securely prisoned from the cradle to the grave, he has made a discovery. If the world does not please you, *you can change it*. Determine to alter it at any price, and you can change it altogether. You may change it to something sinister and angry, to something appalling, but it may be you will change it to something brighter, something more agreeable, and at the worst something much more interesting. There is only one sort of man who is absolutely to blame for his own misery, and that is the man who finds life dull and dreary. There are no circumstances in the world that determined action cannot alter, unless, perhaps, they are the walls of a prison cell, and even those will dissolve and change, I am told, into the infirmary compartment, at any rate, for the man who can fast with resolution. I give these things as facts and information, and with no moral intimations. And Mr. Polly, lying awake at nights, with a renewed indigestion, with Miriam sleeping sonorously beside him, and a general air of inevitableness about his situation, saw through it, understood there was no inevitable any more, and escaped his former despair.

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He could, for example, "clear out."

It became a wonderful and alluring phrase to him—
"Clear out!"

Why had he never thought of clearing out before?

He was amazed and a little shocked at the unimaginative and superfluous criminality in him that had turned old, cramped, and stagnant Fishbourne into a blaze and new beginnings. (I wish from the bottom of my heart I could add that he was properly sorry.) But something constricting and restrained seemed to have been destroyed by that flare. *Fishbourne wasn't the world.* That was the new, the essential fact of which he had lived so lamentably in ignorance. Fishbourne, as he had known it and hated it, so that he wanted to kill himself to get out of it, *wasn't the world.*

The insurance money he was to receive made everything humane and kindly and practicable. He would "clear out" with justice and humanity. He would take exactly twenty-one pounds, and all the rest he would leave to Miriam. That seemed to him absolutely fair. Without him, she could do all sorts of things—all the sorts of things she was constantly urging him to do. . . .

And he would go off along the white road that led to Garchester, and on to Crogate and so to Tunbridge Wells, where there was a Toad Rock he had heard of but never seen. (It seemed to him this must needs be a marvel.) And so to other towns and cities. He would walk and loiter by the way, and sleep in inns at night, and get an odd job here and there, and talk to strange people.

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Perhaps he would get quite a lot of work, and prosper; and if he did not do so he would lie down in front of a train, or wait for a warm night and then fall into some smooth, broad river. Not so bad as sitting down to a dentist—not nearly so bad. And he would never open a shop any more.

So the possibilities of the future presented themselves to Mr. Polly as he lay awake at night.

It was springtime, and in the woods, so soon as one got out of reach of the sea wind, there would be anemones and primroses.

2

A month later a leisurely and dusty tramp, plump equatorially and slightly bald, with his hands in his pockets and his lips puckered to a contemplative whistle, strolled along the river bank between Up-pingdon and Potwell. It was a profusely budding spring day, and greens such as God had never permitted in the world before in human memory (though, indeed, they come every year and we forget) were mirrored vividly in a mirror of equally unprecedented brown. For a time the wanderer stopped and stood still, and even the thin whistle died away from his lips as he watched a water-vole run to and fro upon a little headland across the stream. The vole plopped into the water, and swam and dived, and only when the last ring of its disturbance had vanished did Mr. Polly resume his thoughtful course to nowhere in particular.

For the first time in many years he had been lead-

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ing a healthy human life, living constantly in the open air, walking every day for eight or nine hours, eating sparingly, accepting every conversational opportunity, not even disdaining the discussion of possible work. And beyond mending a hole in his coat, that he had made while negotiating barbed wire, with a borrowed needle and thread in a lodging-house, he had done no real work at all. Neither had he worried about business nor about times and seasons. And for the first time in his life he had seen the Aurora Borealis.

So far, the holiday had cost him very little. He had arranged it on a plan that was entirely his own. He had started with four five-pound notes and a pound divided into silver, and he had gone by train from Fishbourne to Ashington. At Ashington he had gone to the post office, obtained a registered letter envelope, and sent his four five-pound notes with a short, brotherly note addressed to himself at Gilhampton Post-Office. He sent this letter to Gilhampton for no other reason in the world than that he liked the name of Gilhampton and the rural suggestion of its containing county, which was Sussex; and having so despatched it, he set himself to discover, mark down, and walk to Gilhampton, and so recover his resources. And having got to Gilhampton at last, he changed a five-pound note, bought four pound postal orders, and repeated his manœuvre with nineteen pounds.

After a lapse of fifteen years he rediscovered this interesting world, about which so many people go incredibly blind and bored. He went along country

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roads while all the birds were piping and chirruping and cheeping and singing, and looked at fresh new things, and felt as happy and irresponsible as a boy with an unexpected half-holiday. And if ever the thought of Miriam returned to him, he controlled his mind. He came to country inns and sat for unmeasured hours talking of this and that to those sage carters who rest for ever in the taps of country inns, while the big, sleek, brass-jingling horses wait patiently outside with their wagons. He got a job with some van people who were wandering about the country with swings and a steam roundabout, and remained with them three days, until one of their dogs took a violent dislike to him, and made his duties unpleasant. He talked to tramps and wayside labourers. He snoozed under hedges by day, and in outhouses and hayricks at night, and once, but only once, he slept in a casual ward. He felt as the etiolated grass and daisies must do when you move the garden roller away to a new place.

He gathered a quantity of strange and interesting memories.

He crossed some misty meadows by moonlight and the mist lay low on the grass, so low that it scarcely reached above his waist, and houses and clumps of trees stood out like islands in a milky sea, so sharply defined was the upper surface of the mist-bank. He came nearer and nearer to a strange thing that floated like a boat upon this magic lake, and behold, something moved at the stern, and a rope was whisked at the prow, and it had changed into a pensive cow, drowsy-eyed, regarding him. . . .

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He saw a remarkable sunset in a new valley near Maidstone, a very red and clear sunset, a wide redness under a pale, cloudless heaven, and with the hills all round the edge of the sky a deep purple blue and clear and flat, looking exactly as he had seen mountains painted in pictures. He seemed transported to some strange country, and would have felt no surprise if the old labourer he came upon leaning silently over a gate had addressed him in an unfamiliar tongue. . . .

Then one night, just towards dawn, his sleep upon a pile of brushwood was broken by the distant rattle of a racing motor-car breaking all the speed regulations, and as he could not sleep again, he got up and walked into Maidstone as the day came. He had never been abroad in a town at four o'clock in his life before, and the stillness of everything in the bright sunrise impressed him profoundly. At one corner was a startling policeman, standing up in a doorway quite motionless like a waxen image. Mr. Polly wished him "good-morning" unanswered, and went down to the bridge over the Medway, and sat on the parapet, very still and thoughtful, watching the town awaken, and wondering what he should do if it didn't, if the world of men never woke again. . . .

One day he found himself going along a road, with a wide space of sprouting bracken and occasional trees on either side, and suddenly this road became strangely and perplexingly familiar. "Lord!" he said, and turned about and stood. "It can't be."

He was incredulous, then left the road and walked along a scarcely perceptible track to the left, and

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came in half a minute to an old lichenous stone wall. It seemed exactly the bit of wall he had known so well. It might have been but yesterday he was in that place; there remained even a little pile of wood. It became absurdly the same wood. The bracken, perhaps, was not so high, and most of its fronds were still coiled up, that was all. Here he had stood, it seemed, and there she had sat and looked down upon him. Where was she now, and what had become of her? He counted the years back, and marvelled that beauty should have called to him with so imperious a voice—and signified nothing.

He hoisted himself with some little difficulty to the top of the wall, and saw far off under the beech trees two schoolgirls—small, insignificant, pigtailed creatures, with heads of blond and black, with their arms twined about each other's necks, no doubt telling each other the silliest secrets.

But that girl with the red hair—was she a countess? was she a queen? Children, perhaps? Had sorrow dared to touch her?

Had she forgotten altogether? . . .

A tramp sat by the roadside, thinking, and it seemed to the man in the passing motor-car he must needs be plotting for another pot of beer. But, as a matter of fact, what the tramp was saying to himself over and over again, was a variant upon a well-known Hebrew word.

“Itchabod,” the tramp was saying in the voice of one who reasons on the side of the inevitable. “It’s Fair Itchabod, O’ Man. There’s no going back to things like that.”

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3

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, one hot day in May, when Mr. Polly, unhurrying and serene, came upon that broad bend of the river to which the little lawn and garden of the Potwell Inn run down. He stopped at the sight of the place and surveyed its deep tiled roof, nestling under big trees—you never get a decently big, decently shaped tree by the sea-side—its sign towards the roadway, its sun-blistered green bench and tables, its shapely white windows and its row of upshooting hollyhock plants in the garden. A hedge separated the premises from a buttercup-yellow meadow, and beyond stood three poplars in a group against the sky, three exceptionally tall, graceful, and harmonious poplars. It is hard to say what there was about them that made them so beautiful to Mr. Polly, but they seemed to him to touch a pleasant scene with a distinction almost divine. He stood admiring them quietly for a long time.

At last the need for coarser æsthetic satisfactions arose in him.

“Provinder,” he whispered, drawing near to the inn. “Cold sirloin, for choice. And nutbrown brew and wheaten bread.”

The nearer he came to the place the more he liked it. The windows on the ground floor were long and low, and they had pleasing red blinds. The green tables outside were agreeably ringed with memories of former drinks, and an extensive grapevine spread level branches across the whole front of the place.

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Against the wall was a broken oar, two boat-hooks, and the stained and faded red cushions of a pleasure-boat. One went up three steps to the glass-panelled door and peeped into a broad, low room with a bar and a beer-engine, behind which were many bright and helpful-looking bottles against mirrors, and great and little pewter measures, and bottles fastened in brass wire upside down, with their corks replaced by taps, and a white china cask labelled "Shrub," and cigar boxes, and boxes of cigarettes, and a couple of Toby jugs and a beautifully coloured hunting scene framed and glazed, showing the most elegant people taking Piper's Cherry Brandy, and cards such as the law requires about the dilution of spirits and the illegality of bringing children into bars, and satirical verses about swearing and asking for credit, and three very bright, red-cheeked wax apples, and a round-shaped clock.

But these were the mere background to the really pleasant thing in the spectacle, which was quite the plumpest woman Mr. Polly had ever seen, seated in an arm-chair in the midst of all these bottles and glasses and glittering things, peacefully and tranquilly, and without the slightest loss of dignity, asleep. Many people would have called her a fat woman, but Mr. Polly's innate sense of epithet told him from the outset that plump was the word. She had shapely brows and a straight, well-shaped nose, kind lines and contentment about her mouth, and beneath it the jolly chins clustered like chubby little cherubim about the feet of an Assumptioning Madonna. Her plumpness was firm and pink and whole-

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some, and her hands, dimpled at every joint, were clasped in front of her; she seemed, as it were, to embrace herself with infinite confidence and kindness, as one who knew herself good in substance, good in essence, and would show her gratitude to God by that ready acceptance of all that He had given her. Her head was a little on one side, not much, but just enough to speak of trustfulness, and rob her of the stiff effect of self-reliance. And she slept.

"My sort," said Mr. Polly, and opened the door very softly, divided between the desire to enter and come nearer, and an instinctive indisposition to break slumbers so manifestly sweet and satisfying.

She awoke with a start, and it amazed Mr. Polly to see swift terror flash into her eyes. Instantly it had gone again.

"Law!" she said, her face softening with relief. "I thought you was Jim."

"I'm never Jim," said Mr. Polly.

"You've got his sort of hat."

"Ah!" said Mr. Polly, and leaned over the bar.

"It just came into my head you was Jim," said the plump lady, dismissed the topic and stood up. "I believe I was having forty winks," she said, "if all the truth was told. What can I do for you?"

"Cold meat?" said Mr. Polly.

"There *is* cold meat," the plump woman admitted.

"And room for it."

The plump woman came and leaned over the bar and regarded him judicially but kindly. "There's some cold boiled beef," she said, and added, "A bit of crisp lettuce?"

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"New mustard," said Mr. Polly.

"And a tankard!"

"A tankard."

They understood each other perfectly.

"Looking for work?" asked the plump woman.

"In a way," said Mr. Polly.

They smiled like old friends.

Whatever the truth may be about love, there is certainly such a thing as friendship at first sight. They liked each other's voices, they liked each other's way of smiling and speaking.

"It's such beautiful weather this spring," said Mr. Polly, explaining everything.

"What sort of work do you want?" she asked.

"I've never properly thought that out," said Mr. Polly. "I've been looking round—for ideas."

"Will you have your beef in the tap or outside? That's the tap."

Mr. Polly had a glimpse of an oaken settle. "In the tap will be handier for you," he said.

"Hear that?" said the plump lady.

"Hear what?"

"Listen."

Presently the silence was broken by a distant howl—
—"Oooooover!" "Eh?" she said.

He nodded.

"That's the ferry. And there isn't a ferryman."

"Could I?"

"Can you punt?"

"Never tried."

"Well—pull the pole out before you reach the end of the punt, that's all. Try."

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Mr. Polly went out again into the sunshine.

At times one can tell so much so briefly. Here are the facts then—bare. He found a punt and a pole, got across to the steps on the opposite side, picked up an elderly gentleman in an alpaca jacket and a pitch helmet, cruised with him vaguely for twenty minutes, conveyed him tortuously into the midst of a thicket of forget-me-not spangled sedges, splashed some waterweed over him, hit him twice with the punt pole, and finally landed him, alarmed but abusive, in treacherous soil at the edge of a hay meadow about forty yards down-stream, where he immediately got into difficulties with a noisy, aggressive little white dog that was guarding a jacket.

Mr. Polly returned in a complicated manner, but with perfect dignity, to his moorings.

He found the plump woman rather flushed and tearful, and seated at one of the green tables outside.

"I been laughing at you," she said.

"What for?" asked Mr. Polly.

"I ain't 'ad such a laugh since Jim come 'ome. When you 'it 'is 'ead, it 'urt my side."

"It didn't hurt his head—not particularly."

"Did you charge him anything?"

"Gratis," said Mr. Polly. "I never thought of it."

The plump woman pressed her hands to her sides and laughed silently for a space. "You ought to 'ave charged 'im Sumpthing," she said. "You better come and have your cold meat before you do any more puntin'. You and me'll get on together."

Presently she came and stood watching him eat.

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"You eat better than you punt," she said; and then, "I dessay you could learn to punt."

"Wax to receive and marble to retain," said Mr. Polly. "This beef is a Bit of All Right, M'am. I could have done differently if I hadn't been punting on an empty stomach. There's a leer feeling as the pole goes in——"

"I've never held with fasting," said the plump woman.

"You want a ferryman?"

"I want an odd man about the place."

"I'm odd all right. What's the wages?"

"Not much, but you get tips and pickings. I've a sort of feeling it would suit you."

"I've a sort of feeling it would. What's the duties? Fetch and carry? Ferry? Garden? Wash bottles? *Ceteris paribus?*"

"That's about it," said the fat woman.

"Give me a trial."

"I've more than half a mind. Or I wouldn't have said anything about it. I suppose you're all right. You've got a sort of half-respectable look about you. I suppose you 'aven't *done* anything?"

"Bit of Arson," said Mr. Polly, as if he jested.

"So long as you haven't the habit," said the plump woman.

"My first time, Ma'm," said Mr. Polly, munching his way through an excellent big leaf of lettuce. "And my last."

"It's all right if you haven't been to Prison," said the plump woman. "It isn't what a man's happened to do makes 'im bad. We all happen to do things at

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times. It's bringing it home to him and spoiling his self-respect does the mischief. You don't *look* a wrong 'un. 'Ave you been to prison?"

"Never."

"Nor a Reformatory? Nor any Institution?"

"Not me. Do I *look* reformed?"

"Can you paint and carpenter a bit?"

"Ripe for it."

"Have a bit of cheese?"

"If I might."

And the way she brought the cheese showed Mr. Polly that the business was settled in her mind.

He spent the afternoon exploring the premises of the Potwell Inn and learning the duties that might be expected of him, such as Stockholm tarring fences, digging potatoes, swabbing out boats, helping people land, embarking, landing, and time-keeping for the hirers of two rowing boats and one Canadian canoe, bailing out the said vessels and concealing their leaks and defects from prospective hirers, persuading inexperienced hirers to start down-stream rather than up, repairing rowlocks and taking inventories of returning boats with a view to supplementary charges, cleaning boots, sweeping chimneys, house painting, cleaning windows, sweeping out and sanding the Tap and Bar, cleaning pewter, washing glasses, turpentin- ing woodwork, whitewashing generally, plumbing and engineering, repairing locks and clocks, waiting and tapster's work generally, beating carpets and mats, cleaning bottles and saving corks, taking into the cellar, moving, tapping, and connecting beer-casks with their engines, blocking and destroying wasps'

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nests, doing forestry with several trees, drowning superfluous kittens, dog-fancying as required, assisting in the rearing of ducklings and the care of various poultry, bee-keeping, stabling, baiting and grooming horses and asses, cleaning and "garing" motor-cars and bicycles, inflating tires and repairing punctures, recovering the bodies of drowned persons from the river as required, and assisting people in trouble in the water, first-aid and sympathy, improvising and superintending a bathing station for visitors, attending inquests and funerals in the interests of the establishment, scrubbing floors and all the ordinary duties of a scullion, the Ferry, chasing hens and goats from the adjacent cottages out of the garden, making up paths and superintending drainage, gardening generally, delivering bottled beer and soda-water siphons in the neighbourhood, running miscellaneous errands, removing drunken and offensive persons from the premises by tact or muscle, as occasion required, keeping in with the local policeman, defending the premises in general and the orchard in particular from nocturnal depredators. . . .

"Can but try it," said Mr. Polly towards tea-time. "When there's nothing else on hand I suppose I might do a bit of fishing."

4

Mr. Polly was particularly charmed by the ducklings.

They were piping about among the vegetables in the company of their foster mother, and as he and

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the plump woman came down the garden path the little creatures mobbed them, and ran over their boots and in between Mr. Polly's legs, and did their best to be trodden upon and killed after the manner of ducklings all the world over. Mr. Polly had never been near young ducklings before, and their extreme blondness and the delicate completeness of their feet and beaks filled him with admiration. It is open to question whether there is anything more friendly in the world than a very young duckling. It was with the utmost difficulty that he tore himself away to practise punting, with the plump woman coaching from the bank. Punting, he found, was difficult but not impossible, and towards four o'clock he succeeded in conveying a second passenger across the sundering flood from the inn to the unknown.

As he returned, slowly indeed, but now one might almost say surely, to the peg to which the punt was moored, he became aware of a singularly delightful human being awaiting him on the bank. She stood with her legs very wide apart, her hands behind her back, and her head a little on one side, watching his gestures with an expression of disdainful interest. She had black hair and brown legs and a buff short frock and very intelligent eyes. And when he had reached a sufficient proximity she remarked, "Hallo!"

"Hallo," said Mr. Polly, and saved himself in the nick of time from disaster.

"Silly," said the young lady, and Mr. Polly lunged nearer.

"What are you called?"

"Polly."

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"Liar!"

"Why?"

"I'm Polly."

"Then I'm Alfred. But I meant to be Polly."

"I was first."

"All right. I'm going to be the ferryman."

"I see. You'll have to punt better."

"You should have seen me early in the afternoon."

"I can imagine it. . . . I've seen the others."

"What others?" Mr. Polly had landed now and was fastening up the punt.

"What Uncle Jim has scooted."

"Scooted?"

"He comes and scoots them. He'll scoot you, too, I expect."

A mysterious shadow seemed to fall athwart the sunshine and pleasantness of the Potwell Inn.

"I'm not a scooter," said Mr. Polly.

"Uncle Jim is."

She whistled a little flatly for a moment, and threw small stones at a clump of meadowsweet that sprang from the bank. Then she remarked—

"When Uncle Jim comes back he'll cut your insides out. . . . P'r'aps, very likely, he'll let me see."

There was a pause.

"*Who's Uncle Jim?*" Mr. Polly asked in a faded voice.

"Don't know who Uncle Jim is! He'll show you. He's a scorcher, is Uncle Jim. He only came back just a little time ago, and he's scooted three men. He don't like strangers about, don't Uncle Jim. He

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can swear. He's going to teach me, soon as I can whistle properly."

"Teach you to swear!" cried Mr. Polly, horrified.

"*And spit,*" said the little girl proudly. "He says I'm the gamest little beast he ever came across—ever."

For the first time in his life it seemed to Mr. Polly that he had come across something sheerly dreadful. He stared at the pretty thing of flesh and spirit in front of him, lightly balanced on its stout little legs and looking at him with eyes that had still to learn the expression of either disgust or fear.

"I say," said Mr. Polly, "how old are you?"

"Nine," said the little girl.

She turned away and reflected. Truth compelled her to add one other statement.

"He's not what I should call handsome, not Uncle Jim," she said. "But he's a Scorcher and no Mistake. . . . Gramma don't like him."

5

Mr. Polly found the plump woman in the big bricked kitchen lighting a fire for tea. He went to the root of the matter at once.

"I say," he asked, "who's Uncle Jim?"

The plump woman blanched and stood still for a moment. A stick fell out of the bundle in her hand unheeded. "That little granddaughter of mine been saying things?" she asked faintly.

"Bits of things," said Mr. Polly.

"Well, I suppose I must tell you sooner or later.

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He's—It's Jim. He's the Drorback to this place, that's what he is. The Drorback. I hoped you mightn't hear so soon. . . . Very likely he's gone."

"*She* don't seem to think so."

"'E 'asn't been near the place these two weeks and more," said the plump woman.

"But who is he?"

"I suppose I got to tell you," said the plump woman.

"She says he scoots people," Mr. Polly remarked after a pause.

"He's my own sister's son." The plump woman watched the crackling fire for a space. "I suppose I got to tell you," she repeated.

She softened towards tears. "I try not to think of it, and night and day he's haunting me. I try not to think of it. I've been for easy-going all my life. But I'm that worried and afraid, with death and ruin threatened and evil all about me! I don't know what to do! My own sister's son, and me a widow woman and 'elpless against his doin's!"

She put down the sticks she held upon the fender, and felt for her handkerchief. She began to sob and talk quickly.

"I wouldn't mind nothing else half so much if he'd leave that child alone. But he goes talking to her—if I leave her a moment he's talking to her, teaching her Words, and giving her ideas!"

"That's a Bit Thick," said Mr. Polly.

"Thick!" cried the plump woman; "it's 'orrible! And what am I to do? He's been here three times now, six days, and a week, and a part of a week, and

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I pray to God night and day he may never come again. Praying! Back he's come, sure as fate. He takes my money and he takes my things. He won't let no man stay here to protect me or do the boats or work the ferry. The ferry's getting a scandal. They stand and shout and scream and use language. . . . If I complain they'll say I'm helpless to manage here, they'll take away my licence, out I shall go—and it's all the living I can get—and he knows it, and he plays on it, and he don't care. And here I am. I'd send the child away, but I got nowhere to send the child. I buys him off when it comes to that, and back he comes, worse than ever, prowling round and doing evil. And not a soul to help me. Not a soul! I just hoped there might be a day or so. Before he comes back again. I was just hoping— I'm the sort that hopes."

Mr. Polly was reflecting on the flaws and drawbacks that seem to be inseparable from all the more agreeable things of life.

"Biggish sort of man, I expect?" asked Mr. Polly, trying to get the situation in all its bearings.

But the plump woman did not heed him. She was going on with her fire-making, and retailing in disconnected fragments the fearfulness of Uncle Jim.

"There was always something a bit wrong with him," she said; "but nothing you mightn't have hoped for, not till they took him, and carried him off, and reformed him. . . ."

"He was cruel to the hens and chickings, it's true, and stuck a knife into another boy; but then I've seen him that nice to a cat, nobody could have been

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kinder. I'm sure he didn't do no 'arm to that cat whatever any one tries to make out of it. I'd never listen to that. . . . It was that Reformatory ruined him. They put him along of a lot of London boys full of ideas of wickedness, and because he didn't mind pain—and he don't, I *will* admit, try as I would—they made him think himself a hero. Them boys laughed at the teachers they set over them, laughed and mocked at them—and I don't suppose they *was* the best teachers in the world; I don't suppose, and I don't suppose any one sensible does suppose that every one who goes to be a teacher or a chaplain or a warder in a Reformatory Home goes and changes right away into an Angel of Grace from Heaven—and, oh Lord! Where was I?"

"What did they send him to the Reformatory for?"

"Playing truant and stealing. He stole right enough—stole the money from an old woman, and what was I to do when it came to the trial but say what I knew. And him like a viper a looking at me—more like a viper than a human boy. He leans on the bar and looks at me. 'All right, Aunt Flo,' he says; just that, and nothing more. Time after time I've dreamt of it, and now he's come. 'They've Reformed me,' he says, 'and made me a devil, and devil I mean to be to you. So out with it,' he says."

"What did you give him last time?" asked Mr. Polly.

"Three golden pounds," said the plump woman. "That won't last very long," he says. "But there ain't no hurry. I'll be back in a week about." If I wasn't one of the hoping sort——"

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She left the sentence unfinished.

Mr. Polly reflected. "What sort of a size is he?" he asked. "I'm not one of your Herculeous sort, if you mean that. Nothing very wonderful bicepitally."

"You'll scoot," said the plump woman, with conviction rather than bitterness. "You'd better scoot now, and I'll try and find some money for him to go away again when he comes. It ain't reasonable to expect you to do anything but scoot. But I suppose it's the way of a woman in trouble to try and get help from a man, and hope and hope."

"How long's he been about?" asked Mr. Polly, ignoring his own outlook.

"Three months it is come the seventh since he come in by that very back door—and I hadn't set eyes on him for seven long years. He stood in the door watchin' me, and suddenly he let off a yelp—like a dog, and there he was grinning at the fright he'd given me. 'Good old Aunty Flo,' he says, 'ain't you dee-lighted to see me?' he says, 'now I'm Reformed.'"

The plump lady went to the sink and filled the kettle.

"I never did like 'im," she said, standing at the sink. "And seeing him there, with his teeth all black and broken— P'r'aps I didn't give him much of a welcome at first. Not what would have been kind to him. 'Lord!' I said, 'it's Jim.'"

"'It's Jim,' he said. 'Like a bad shillin'—like a damned bad shilling. Jim and trouble. You all of you wanted me Reformed, and now you got me Re-

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formed. I'm a Reformatory Reformed Character, warranted all right, and turned out as such. Ain't you going to ask me in, Aunty dear?"

"Come in," I said. "I won't have it said I wasn't ready to be kind to you!"

"He comes in and shuts the door. Down he sits in that chair. 'I come to torment you,' he says, 'you old Sumpthing!' and begins at me. . . . No 'uman being could ever have been called such things before. It made me cry out. 'And now,' he says, 'just to show I ain't afraid of 'urting you,' he says, and ups and twists my wrist."

Mr. Polly gasped.

"I could stand even his vi'lence," said the plump woman, "if it wasn't for the child."

Mr. Polly went to the kitchen window and surveyed his namesake, who was away up the garden path, with her hands behind her back, and wisps of black hair in disorder about her little face, thinking, thinking profoundly, about ducklings.

"You two oughtn't to be left," he said.

The plump woman stared at his back with hard hope in her eyes.

"I don't see that it's *my* affair," said Mr. Polly.

The plump woman resumed her business with the kettle.

"I'd like to have a look at him before I go," said Mr. Polly, thinking aloud, and added, "somehow. Not my business, of course."

"Lord!" he cried, with a start, at a noise in the bar, "who's that?"

"Only a customer," said the plump woman.

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6

Mr. Polly made no rash promises, and thought a great deal.

"It seems a sort of Crib," he said, and added, "for a chap who's looking for Trouble."

But he stayed on, and did various things out of the list I have already given, and worked the ferry, and it was four days before he saw anything of Uncle Jim. And so resistant is the human mind to things not yet experienced, that he could easily have believed in that time that there was no such person in the world as Uncle Jim. The plump woman, after her one outbreak of confidences, ignored the subject, and little Polly seemed to have exhausted her impressions in her first communication, and engaged her mind now, with a simple directness, in the study and subjugation of the new human being Heaven had sent into her world. The first unfavourable impression of his punting was soon effaced; he could nickname ducklings very amusingly, create boats out of wooden splinters, and stalk and fly from imaginary tigers in the orchard, with a convincing earnestness that was surely beyond the power of any other human being. She conceded at last that he should be called Mr. Polly, in honour of her, Miss Polly, even as he desired.

Uncle Jim turned up in the twilight.

Uncle Jim appeared with none of the disruptive violence Mr. Polly had dreaded. He came quite softly. Mr. Polly was going down the lane behind the church that led to the Potwell Inn, after posting

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a letter to the lime-juice people at the post office. He was walking slowly, after his habit, and thinking discursively. With a sudden tightening of the muscles he became aware of a figure walking noiselessly beside him.

His first impression was of a face singularly broad above, and with a wide, empty grin as its chief feature below, of a slouching body and dragging feet.

“ ‘Arf a mo’,” said the figure, as if in response to his start, and speaking in a hoarse whisper. “ ‘Arf a mo’, mister. You the noo bloke at the Potwell Inn?”

Mr. Polly felt evasive. “S’pose I am,” he replied hoarsely, and quickened his pace.

“ ‘Arf a mo’,” said Uncle Jim, taking his arm. “We ain’t doing a (sanguinary) Marathon. It ain’t a (decorated) cinder track. I want a word with you, mister. See?”

Mr. Polly wriggled his arm free and stopped. “Whad is it?” he asked, and faced the terror.

“I jest want a (decorated) word wiv you. See? —just a friendly word or two. Just to clear up any blooming errors. That’s all I want. No need to be so (richly decorated) proud, if you *are* the noo bloke at Potwell Inn. Not a bit of it. See?”

Uncle Jim was certainly not a handsome person. He was short, shorter than Mr. Polly, with long arms and lean, big hands; a thin and wiry neck stuck out of his grey flannel shirt, and supported a big head that had something of the snake in the convergent lines of its broad, knobby brow, meanly proportioned face, and pointed chin. His almost toothless mouth

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seemed a cavern in the twilight. Some accident had left him with one small and active, and one large and expressionless reddish eye, and wisps of straight hair strayed from under the blue cricket cap he had pulled down obliquely over the latter. He spat between his teeth, and wiped his mouth untidily with the soft side of his fist.

"You got to blurry well shift," he said. "See?"

"Shift!" said Mr. Polly. "How?"

"'Cos the Potwell Inn's *my* beat. See?"

Mr. Polly had never felt less witty. "How's it your beat?" he asked.

Uncle Jim thrust his face forward and shook his open hand, bent like a claw, under Mr. Polly's nose. "Not your blooming business," he said. "You got to shift."

"S'pose I don't," said Mr. Polly.

"You got to shift."

The tone of Uncle Jim's voice became urgent and confidential.

"You don't know who you're up against," he said. "It's a kindness I'm doing to warn you. See? I'm just one of those blokes who don't stick at things, see? I don't stick at nuffin."

Mr. Polly's manner became detached and confidential—as though the matter and the speaker interested him greatly, but didn't concern him over much.

"What do you think you'll do?" he asked.

"If you don't clear out?"

"Yes."

"*Gaw!*" said Uncle Jim. "You'd better! '*Ere!*'"

He gripped Mr. Polly's wrist with a grip of steel,

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and in an instant Mr. Polly understood the relative quality of their muscles. He breathed, an uninspiring breath, into Mr. Polly's face.

"What *won't* I do," he said, "once I start in on you?"

He paused, and the night about them seemed to be listening. "I'll make a mess of you," he said, in his hoarse whisper. "I'll do you—injuries. I'll 'urt you. I'll kick you ugly, see? I'll 'urt you in 'orrible ways—'orrible ugly ways. . . ."

He scrutinised Mr. Polly's face.

"You'll cry," he said, "to see yourself. See? Cry, you will."

"You got no right," began Mr. Polly.

"Right!" His note was fierce. "Ain't the old woman me aunt?"

He spoke still closelier. "I'll make a gory mess of you. I'll cut bits orf you——"

He receded a little. "I got no quarrel with *you*," he said.

"It's too late to go to-night," said Mr. Polly.

"I'll be round to-morrer—'bout eleven. See? And if I finds you——"

He produced a blood-curdling oath.

"H'm," said Mr. Polly, trying to keep things light.

"We'll consider your suggestions."

"You better," said Uncle Jim, and suddenly, noiselessly, was going.

His whispering voice sank until Mr. Polly could hear only the dim fragments of sentences. "'Orrible things to you—'Orrible things. . . . Kick yer Ugly. . . . Cut yer—liver out . . . spread it all about, I

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will. . . . See? I don't care a dead rat one way or the uvver."

And with a curious twisting gesture of the arm, Uncle Jim receded until his face was a still, dim thing that watched, and the black shadows of the hedge seemed to have swallowed up his body altogether.

7

Next morning about half-past ten Mr. Polly found himself seated under a clump of fir-trees by the roadside, and about three miles and a half from the Potwell Inn. He was by no means sure whether he was taking a walk to clear his mind, or leaving that threat-marred Paradise for good and all. His reason pointed a lean, unhesitating finger along the latter course.

For, after all, the thing was not *his* quarrel.

That agreeable, plump woman—agreeable, motherly, comfortable as she might be—wasn't his affair; that child with the mop of black hair, who combined so magically the charm of mouse and butterfly and flitting bird, who was daintier than a flower and softer than a peach, was no concern of his. Good Heavens! What were they to him? Nothing! . . .

Uncle Jim, of course, *had* a claim, a sort of claim.

If it came to duty and chucking up this attractive, indolent, observant, humorous, tramping life, there were those who had a right to him, a legitimate right, a prior claim on his protection and chivalry.

Why not listen to the call of duty and go back to Miriam now? . . .

He had had a very agreeable holiday. . . .

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And while Mr. Polly sat thinking these things as well as he could, he knew that if only he dared to look up, the Heavens had opened, and the clear judgment on his case was written across the sky.

He knew—he knew now as much as a man can know of life. He knew he had to fight or perish.

Life had never been so clear to him before. It had always been a confused, entertaining spectacle. He had responded to this impulse and that, seeking agreeable and entertaining things, evading difficult and painful things. Such is the way of those who grow up to a life that has neither danger nor honour in its texture. He had been muddled and wrapped about and entangled, like a creature born in the jungle who has never seen sea or sky. Now he had come out of it suddenly into a great exposed place. It was as if God and Heaven waited over him, and all the earth was expectation.

“Not my business,” said Mr. Polly, speaking aloud. “Where the devil do I come in?”

And again, with something between a whine and a snarl in his voice, “Not my blasted business!”

His mind seemed to have divided itself into several compartments, each with its own particular discussion busily in progress, and quite regardless of the others. One was busy with the detailed interpretation of the phrase, “Kick you ugly.” There’s a sort of French wrestling in which you use and guard against feet. Watch the man’s eye, and as his foot comes up, grip, and over he goes—at your mercy, if you use the advantage rightly. But how do you use the advantage rightly?

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When he thought of Uncle Jim the inside feeling of his body faded away rapidly to a blank discomfort. . . .

“Old cadger! She hadn’t no business to drag me into her quarrels. Ought to go to the police and ask for help! Dragging me into a quarrel that don’t concern me.

“Wish I’d never set eyes on the rotten inn!”

The reality of the case arched over him like the vault of the sky, as plain as the sweet blue heaven above and the wide spread of hill and valley about him. Man comes into life to seek and find his sufficient beauty, to serve it, to win and increase it, to fight for it, to face anything and dare anything for it, counting death as nothing so long as the dying eyes still turn to it. And fear and dullness and indolence and appetite, which, indeed, are no more than fear’s three crippled brothers, who make ambushes and creep by night, are against him, to delay him, to hold him off, to hamper and beguile and kill him in that quest. He had but to lift his eyes to see all that, as much a part of his world as the driving clouds and the bending grass; but he kept himself downcast, a grumbling, inglorious, dirty, fattish little tramp, full of dreams and quivering excuses.

“Why the hell was I ever born?” he said, with the truth almost winning him.

“What do you do when a dirty man, who smells, gets you down and under, in the dirt and dust, with a knee below your diaphragm, and a large hairy hand squeezing your windpipe tighter and tighter in a quarrel that isn’t, properly speaking, yours?”

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“If I had a chance against him—” protested Mr. Polly.

“It’s no Good, you see,” said Mr. Polly.

He stood up as though his decision was made, and was for an instant struck still by doubt.

There lay the road before him, going this way to the east, and that to the west.

Westward, one hour away now, was the Potwell Inn. Already things might be happening there. . . .

Eastward was the wise man’s course, a road dipping between hedges to a hop garden and a wood, and presently, no doubt, reaching an inn, a picturesque church, perhaps, a village, and fresh company. The wise man’s course. Mr. Polly saw himself going along it, and tried to see himself going along it with all the self-applause a wise man feels. But somehow it wouldn’t come like that. The wise man fell short of happiness for all his wisdom. The wise man had a paunch, and round shoulders, and red ears, and excuses. It was a pleasant road, and why the wise man should not go along it merry and singing, full of summer happiness, was a miracle to Mr. Polly’s mind. But, confound it! the fact remained: the figure went slinking—slinking was the only word for it—and would not go otherwise than slinking. He turned his eyes westward as if for an explanation, and if the figure was no longer ignoble, the prospect was appalling.

“One kick in the stummick would settle a chap like me,” said Mr. Polly.

“Oh, God!” cried Mr. Polly, and lifted his eyes to heaven, and said for the last time in that struggle, “It isn’t my affair!”

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And so saying, he turned his face towards the Potwell Inn.

He went back, neither halting nor hastening in his pace after this last decision, but with a mind feverishly busy.

"If I get killed I get killed, and if he gets killed I get hung. Don't seem just somehow.

"Don't suppose I shall *frighten* him off."

8

The private war between Mr. Polly and Uncle Jim for the possession of the Potwell Inn fell naturally into three chief campaigns. There was, first of all, the great campaign which ended in the triumphant eviction of Uncle Jim from the inn premises; there came next, after a brief interval, the futile invasions of the premises by Uncle Jim that culminated in the Battle of the Dead Eel; and, after some months of involuntary truce, there was the last supreme conflict of the Night Surprise. Each of these campaigns merits a section to itself.

Mr. Polly re-entered the inn discreetly.

He found the plump woman seated in her bar, her eyes astare, her face white and wet with tears. "O God!" she was saying over and over again—"O God!" The air was full of a spirituous reek, and on the sanded boards in front of the bar were the fragments of a broken bottle, and an overturned glass.

She turned her despair at the sound of his entry, and despair gave place to astonishment.

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"You come back!" she said.

"Ra-ther," said Mr. Polly.

"He's—he's mad drunk and looking for her."

"Where is she?"

"Locked upstairs."

"Haven't you sent to the police?"

"No one to send."

"I'll see to it," said Mr. Polly. "Out this way?"

She nodded.

He went to the crinkly paned window and peered out. Uncle Jim was coming down the garden path towards the house, his hands in his pockets, and singing hoarsely. Mr. Polly remembered afterwards, with pride and amazement, that he felt neither faint nor rigid. He glanced round him, seized a bottle of beer by the neck as an improvised club, and went out by the garden door. Uncle Jim stopped, amazed. His brain did not instantly rise to the new posture of things. "You!" he cried, and stopped for a moment. "You—scoot!"

"*Your* job," said Mr. Polly, and advanced some paces.

Uncle Jim stood swaying with wrathful astonishment, and then darted forward with clutching hands. Mr. Polly felt that if his antagonist closed, he was lost, and smote with all his force at the ugly head before him. Smash went the bottle, and Uncle Jim staggered, half stunned by the blow, and blinded with beer.

The lapses and leaps of the human mind are for ever mysterious. Mr. Polly had never expected that bottle to break. In an instant he felt disarmed and

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helpless. Before him was Uncle Jim, infuriated and evidently still coming on, and for defence was nothing but the neck of a bottle.

For a time our Mr. Polly has figured heroic. Now comes the fall again; he sounded abject terror; he dropped that ineffectual scrap of glass and turned and fled round the corner of the house.

"Bolls!" came the thick voice of the enemy behind him, as one who accepts a challenge, and bleeding but indomitable, Uncle Jim entered the house.

"Bolls!" he said, surveying the bar. "Fightin' with bolls! I'll showim fightin' with bolls!"

Uncle Jim had learned all about fighting with bottles in the Reformatory Home. Regardless of his terror-stricken aunt, he ranged among the bottled beer and succeeded, after one or two failures, in preparing two bottles to his satisfaction by knocking off the bottom, and gripping them dagger-wise by the necks. So prepared, he went forth again to destroy Mr. Polly.

Mr. Polly, freed from the sense of urgent pursuit, had halted beyond the raspberry canes, and rallied his courage. The sense of Uncle Jim victorious in the house restored his manhood. He went round by the outhouses to the riverside, seeking a weapon, and found an old paddle boat-hook. With this he smote Uncle Jim as he emerged by the door of the tap. Uncle Jim, blaspheming dreadfully, and with dire stabbing intimations in either hand, came through the splintering paddle like a circus rider through a paper hoop, and once more Mr. Polly dropped his weapon and fled.

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A careless observer, watching him sprint round and round the inn in front of the lumbering and reproachful pursuit of Uncle Jim, might have formed an altogether erroneous estimate of the issue of the campaign. Certain compensating qualities of the very greatest military value were appearing in Mr. Polly, even as he ran; if Uncle Jim had strength and brute courage, and the rich toughening experience a Reformatory Home affords, Mr. Polly was nevertheless sober, more mobile, and with a mind now stimulated to an almost incredible nimbleness. So that he not only gained on Uncle Jim, but thought what use he might make of this advantage. The word "strategious" flamed red across the tumult of his mind. As he came round the house for the third time, he darted suddenly into the yard, swung the door to behind himself, and bolted it, seized the zinc pig's pail that stood by the entrance to the kitchen, and had it neatly and resonantly over Uncle Jim's head, as he came belatedly in round the outhouse on the other side. One of the splintered bottles jabbed Mr. Polly's ear—at the time it seemed of no importance—and then Uncle Jim was down and writhing dangerously and noisily upon the yard tiles, with his head still in the pig pail, and his bottle gone to splinters, and Mr. Polly was fastening the kitchen door against him.

"Can't go on like this for ever," said Mr. Polly, whooping for breath, and selecting a weapon from among the brooms that stood behind the kitchen door.

Uncle Jim was losing his head. He was up and kicking the door, and bellowing unamiable proposals and invitations, so that a strategist emerging silently

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by the tap door could locate him without difficulty, steal upon him unawares, and——!

But before that felling blow could be delivered, Uncle Jim's ear had caught a footfall, and he turned. Mr. Polly quailed, and lowered his broom—a fatal hesitation.

“*Now* I got you!” cried Uncle Jim, dancing forward in a disconcerting zigzag.

He rushed to close, and Mr. Polly stopped him neatly, as it were a miracle, with the head of the broom across his chest. Uncle Jim seized the broom with both hands. “*Lea go*,” he said, and tugged. Mr. Polly shook his head, tugged, and showed pale, compressed lips. Both tugged. Then Uncle Jim tried to get round the end of the broom; Mr. Polly circled away. They began to circle about one another, both lugging hard, both intensely watchful of the slightest initiative on the part of the other. Mr. Polly wished brooms were longer—twelve or thirteen feet, for example; Uncle Jim was clearly for shortness in brooms. He wasted breath in saying what was to happen shortly—sanguinary, oriental, soul-blanching things—when the broom no longer separated them. Mr. Polly thought he had never seen an uglier person. Suddenly Uncle Jim flashed into violent activity, but alcohol slows movement, and Mr. Polly was equal to him. Then Uncle Jim tried jerks, and, for a terrible instant, seemed to have the broom out of Mr. Polly's hands. But Mr. Polly recovered it with the clutch of a drowning man. Then Uncle Jim drove suddenly at Mr. Polly's midriff; but again Mr. Polly was ready, and swept him round in a circle. Then suddenly a

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wild hope filled Mr. Polly. He saw the river was very near, the post to which the punt was tied not three yards away. With a wild yell he sent the broom home under his antagonist's ribs. "Woosh!" he cried, as the resistance gave.

"Oh! *Gaw!*" said Uncle Jim, going backward helplessly, and Mr. Polly thrust hard, and abandoned the broom to the enemy's despairing clutch.

Splash! Uncle Jim was in the water, and Mr. Polly had leaped like a cat aboard the ferry punt, and grasped the pole.

Up came Uncle Jim spluttering and dripping. "You (unprofitable matter, and printing it might lead to a Censorship of Novels)—You know I got a weak chess!"

The pole took him in the throat and drove him backwards and downwards.

"Lea go!" cried Uncle Jim, staggering, and with real terror in his once awful eyes.

Splash! Down he fell backwards into a frothing mass of water, with Mr. Polly jabbing at him. Under water he turned round, and came up again, as if in flight towards the middle of the river. Directly his head reappeared, Mr. Polly had him between his shoulders and under again, bubbling thickly. A hand clutched and disappeared.

It was stupendous! Mr. Polly had discovered the heel of Achilles. Uncle Jim had no stomach for cold water. The broom floated away, pitching gently on the swell. Mr. Polly, infuriated by victory, thrust Uncle Jim under again, and drove the punt round on its chain, in such a manner that when Uncle Jim

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came up for the fourth time—and now he was nearly out of his depth, too buoyed up to walk, and apparently nearly helpless—Mr. Polly, fortunately for them both, could not reach him.

Uncle Jim made the clumsy gestures of those who struggle insecurely in the water. "Keep out," said Mr. Polly. Uncle Jim, with a great effort, got a footing, emerged until his arm-pits were out of water, until his waistcoat buttons showed, one by one, till scarcely two remained, and made for the camp-sheeting.

"Keep out!" cried Mr. Polly, and leaped off the punt and followed the movements of his victim along the shore.

"I tell you I got a weak chess," said Uncle Jim moistly. "I ate worter. This ain't fair fightin'."

"Keep out!" said Mr. Polly.

"This ain't fair fightin'," said Uncle Jim, almost weeping, and all his terrors had gone.

"Keep out!" said Mr. Polly, with an accurately poised pole.

"I tell you I got to land, you Fool," said Uncle Jim, with a sort of despairing wrathfulness, and began moving down-stream.

"You keep out," said Mr. Polly in parallel movement. "Don't you ever land on this place again! . . ."

Slowly, argumentatively, and reluctantly, Uncle Jim waded down-stream. He tried threats, he tried persuasion, he even tried a belated note of pathos; Mr. Polly remained inexorable, if in secret a little perplexed as to the outcome of the situation. "This cold's getting to my marrer!" said Uncle Jim.

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"You want cooling. You keep out in it," said Mr. Polly.

They came round the bend into sight of Nicholson's ait, where the backwater runs down to the Potwell Mill. And there, after much parley and several feints, Uncle Jim made a desperate effort, and struggled into clutch of the overhanging osiers on the island, and so got out of the water, with the mill-stream between them. He emerged dripping and muddy and vindictive. "By *Gaw!*" he said. "I'll skin you for this!"

"You keep off, or I'll do worse to you," said Mr. Polly.

The spirit was out of Uncle Jim for the time, and he turned away to struggle through the osiers towards the mill, leaving a shining trail of water among the green-grey stems.

Mr. Polly returned slowly and thoughtfully to the inn, and suddenly his mind began to bubble with phrases. The plump woman stood at the top of the steps that led up to the inn door, to greet him.

"Law!" she cried, as he drew near, "'asn't 'e killed you?"

"Do I look it?" said Mr. Polly.

"But where's Jim?"

"Gone off."

"'E was mad drunk and dangerous!"

"I put him in the river," said Mr. Polly. "That toned down his alcolaceous frenzy! I gave him a bit of a doing altogether."

"Hain't he 'urt you?"

"Not a bit of it!"

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"Then what's all that blood beside your ear?"

Mr. Polly felt. "Quite a cut! Funny how one overlooks things! Heated moments! He must have done that when he jabbed about with those bottles. Hallo, Kiddy! You venturing downstairs again?"

"Ain't he killed you?" asked the little girl.

"Well!"

"I wish I'd seen more of the fighting."

"Didn't you?"

"All I saw was you running round the house, and Uncle Jim after you."

There was a little pause. "I was leading him on," said Mr. Polly.

"Some one's shouting at the ferry," she said.

"Right-o. But you won't see any more of Uncle Jim for a bit. We've been having a conversazione about that."

"I believe it *is* Uncle Jim," said the little girl.

"Then he can wait," said Mr. Polly shortly.

He turned round and listened for the words that drifted across from the little figure on the opposite bank. So far as he could judge, Uncle Jim was making an appointment for the morrow. Mr. Polly replied with a defiant movement of the punt pole. The little figure was convulsed for a moment, and then went on its way upstream—fiercely.

So it was the first campaign ended in an insecure victory.

9

The next day was Wednesday, and a slack day for the Potwell Inn. It was a hot, close day, full of the

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murmuring of bees. One or two people crossed by the ferry; an elaborately equipped fisherman stopped for cold meat and dry ginger ale in the bar parlour; some haymakers came and drank beer for an hour, and afterwards sent jars and jugs by a boy to be replenished; that was all. Mr. Polly had risen early, and was busy about the place meditating upon the probable tactics of Uncle Jim. He was no longer strung up to the desperate pitch of the first encounter. He was grave and anxious. Uncle Jim had shrunken, as all antagonists that are boldly faced shrink, after the first battle, to the negotiable, the vulnerable. Formidable he was, no doubt, but not invincible. He had, under Providence, been defeated once, and he might be defeated altogether.

Mr. Polly went about the place considering the militant possibilities of pacific things—pokers, copper-sticks, garden implements, kitchen knives, garden nets, barbed wire, oars, clothes-lines, blankets, pewter pots, stockings, and broken bottles. He prepared a club with a stocking and a bottle inside, upon the best East End model. He swung it round his head once, broke an outhouse window with a flying fragment of glass, and ruined the stocking beyond all darning. He developed a subtle scheme, with the cellar flap as a sort of pitfall; but he rejected it finally because (a) it might entrap the plump woman, and (b) he had no use whatever for Uncle Jim in the cellar. He determined to wire the garden that evening, burglar fashion, against the possibilities of a night attack.

Towards two o'clock in the afternoon three young

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men arrived in a capacious boat from the direction of Lammam, and asked permission to camp in the paddock. It was given all the more readily by Mr. Polly because he perceived in their proximity a possible check upon the self-expression of Uncle Jim. But he did not foresee, and no one could have foreseen, that Uncle Jim, stealing craftily upon the Potwell Inn in the late afternoon, armed with a large rough-hewn stake, would have mistaken the bending form of one of those campers—who was pulling a few onions by permission in the garden—for Mr. Polly's, and crept upon it swiftly and silently, and smitten its wide invitation unforgettably and unforgivably. It was an error impossible to explain; the resounding whack went up to Heaven, the cry of amazement, and Mr. Polly emerged from the inn, armed with the frying-pan he was cleaning, to take this reckless assailant in the rear. Uncle Jim, realising his error, fled blaspheming into the arms of the other two campers, who were returning from the village with butcher's meat and groceries. They caught him, they smacked his face with steak and punched him with a bursting parcel of lump sugar, they held him though he bit them, and their idea of punishment was to duck him. They were hilarious, strong young stockbrokers' clerks, Territorials, and seasoned boating men; they ducked him as though it was romping and all that Mr. Polly had to do was to pick up lumps of sugar for them and wipe them on his sleeve and put them on a plate, and explain that Uncle Jim was a notorious bad character, and not quite right in his head.

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“Got a regular Obsession the Missis is his Aunt,” said Mr. Polly, expanding it. “Perfect noosance he is.”

But he caught a glance of Uncle Jim’s eye as he receded before the campers’ urgency that boded ill for him, and in the night he had a disagreeable idea that perhaps his luck might not hold for the third occasion.

That came soon enough. So soon, indeed, as the campers had gone.

Thursday was the early closing day at Lammam, and, next to Sunday, the busiest part of the week at the Potwell Inn. Sometimes as many as six boats all at once would be moored against the ferry punt and hiring row-boats. People could either have a complete tea, a complete tea with jam, cake, and eggs, a kettle of boiling water and find the rest, or Refreshments *à la carte* as they chose. They sat about, but usually the boiling water-ers had a delicacy about using the tables, and grouped themselves humbly on the ground. The complete tea-ers with jam and eggs got the best tablecloth, on the table nearest the steps that led up to the glass-panelled door.

The groups about the lawn were very satisfying to Mr. Polly’s sense of amenity. To the right were the complete tea-ers, with everything heart could desire; then a small group of three young men in remarkable green and violet and pale blue shirts, and two girls in mauve and yellow blouses, with common teas and gooseberry jam, at the green clothless table; then, on the grass down by the pollard willow, a small family of hot-water-ers with a hamper, a little trou-

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bled by wasps in their jam from the nest in the tree, and all in mourning, but happy otherwise; and on the lawn to the right a ginger beer lot of 'prentices without their collars, and very jocular and happy. The young people in the rainbow shirts and blouses formed the centre of interest; they were under the leadership of a gold-spectacled senior with a fluting voice and an air of mystery; he ordered everything, and showed a peculiar knowledge of the qualities of the Potwell jams, preferring gooseberry with much insistence. Mr. Polly watched him, christened him the "benifluous influence," glanced at the 'prentices, and went inside and down into the cellar in order to replenish the stock of stone ginger beer, which the plump woman had allowed to run low during the preoccupations of the campaign. It was in the cellar that he first became aware of the return of Uncle Jim. He became aware of him as a voice, a voice not only hoarse but thick, as voices thicken under the influence of alcohol.

"Where's that muddy-faced mongrel?" cried Uncle Jim. "Let 'im come out to me! Where's that blighted whisp with the punt pole—I got a word to say to 'im. Come out of it, you pot-bellied chunk of dirtiness, you! Come out and 'ave your ugly face wiped. I got a Thing for you. . . . 'Ear me?"

"'E's 'iding, that's what 'e's doing," said the voice of Uncle Jim, dropping for a moment to sorrow, and then with a great increment of wrathfulness: "Come out of my nest, you blinking cuckoo, you, or I'll cut your silly insides out! Come out of it, you pock-marked Rat! Stealing another man's 'ome away

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from 'im! Come out and look me in the face, you squinting son of a Skunk! . . ."

Mr. Polly took the ginger beer and went thoughtfully upstairs to the bar.

"'E's back," said the plump woman as he appeared. "I knew 'e'd come back."

"I heard him," said Mr. Polly, and looked about. "Just gimme the old poker handle that's under the beer-engine."

The door opened softly, and Mr. Polly turned quickly. But it was only the pointed nose and intelligent face of the young man with the gilt spectacles and the discreet manner. He coughed, and the spectacles fixed Mr. Polly.

"I say," he said with quiet earnestness, "there's a chap out here seems to *want* some one."

"Why don't he come in?" said Mr. Polly.

"He seems to want you out there."

"What's he want?"

"I *think*," said the spectacled young man, after a thoughtful moment, "he appears to have brought you a present of fish."

"Isn't he shouting?"

"He *is* a little boisterous."

"He'd better come in."

The manner of the spectacled young man intensified. "I wish you'd come out and persuade him to go away," he said. "His language—*isn't* quite the thing—*ladies*."

"It never was," said the plump woman, her voice charged with sorrow.

Mr. Polly moved towards the door and stood with

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his hand on the handle. The gold-spectacled face disappeared.

"Now, my man," came his voice from outside, "be careful what you're saying——"

"OO in all the World and Hereafter are you to call me me man?" cried Uncle Jim, in the voice of one astonished and pained beyond endurance, and added scornfully, "You gold-eyed Geezer, you!"

"Tut, tut!" said the gentleman in gilt glasses. "Restrain yourself!"

Mr. Polly emerged, poker in hand, just in time to see what followed. Uncle Jim in his shirt-sleeves, and a state of ferocious decolletage, was holding something—yes!—a dead eel by means of a piece of newspaper about its tail, holding it down and back and a little sideways in such a way as to smite with it upward and hard. It struck the spectacled gentleman under the jaw with a peculiar dead thud, and a cry of horror came from the two seated parties at the sight. One of the girls shrieked piercingly, "Horace!" and every one sprang up. The sense of helping numbers came to Mr. Polly's aid.

"Drop it!" he cried, and came down the steps waving his poker and thrusting the spectacled gentleman before him, as heretofore great heroes were wont to wield the ox-hide shield.

Uncle Jim gave ground suddenly, and trod upon the foot of a young man in a blue shirt, who immediately thrust at him violently with both hands.

"Lea go!" howled Uncle Jim. "That's the Chap I'm looking for!" and pressing the head of the spectacled gentleman aside, smote hard at Mr. Polly.

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But at the sight of this indignity inflicted upon the spectacled gentleman a woman's heart was stirred, a pink parasol drove hard and true at Uncle Jim's wiry neck, and at the same moment the young man in the blue shirt sought to collar him, and lost his grip again.

"Suffragettes!" gasped Uncle Jim, with the ferrule at his throat. "Everywhere!" and aimed a second more successful blow at Mr. Polly.

"Wup!" said Mr. Polly.

But now the jam and egg party was joining in the fray. A stout, yet still fairly able-bodied gentleman in white and black checks inquired: "What's the fellow up to? Ain't there no police here?" And it was evident that once more public opinion was rallying to the support of Mr. Polly.

"Oh, come on then, all the LOT of you!" cried Uncle Jim, and backing dexterously, whirled the eel round in a destructive circle. The pink sunshade was torn from the hand that gripped it, and whirled athwart the complete but unadorned tea-things on the green table.

"Collar him! Some one get hold of his collar!" cried the gold-spectacled gentleman, retreating up the steps to the inn door as if to rally his forces.

"Stand clear, you blessed mantel ornaments!" cried Uncle Jim. "Stand clear!" and retired backing, staving off attack by means of the whirling eel.

Mr. Polly, undeterred by a sense of grave damage done to his nose, pressed the attack in front, the two young men in violet and blue skirmished on Uncle Jim's flanks, the man in white and black checks sought still further outflanking possibilities, and two

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of the apprentice boys ran for oars. The gold-spectacled gentleman, as if inspired, came down the wooden steps again, seized the tablecloth of the jam and egg party, lugged it from under the crockery with inadequate precautions against breakage, and advanced with compressed lips, curious lateral crouching movements, swift flashings of his glasses, and a general suggestion of bull-fighting in his pose and gestures. Uncle Jim was kept busy, and unable to plan his retreat with any strategic soundness. He was, moreover, manifestly a little nervous about the river in his rear. He gave ground in a curve, and so came right across the rapidly abandoned camp of the family in mourning, crunching teacups under his heel, oversetting the teapot, and finally tripping backwards over the hamper. The eel flew out at a tangent from his hand, and became a mere looping relic on the sward.

“Hold him!” cried the gentleman in spectacles. “Collar him!” and, moving forward with extraordinary promptitude, wrapped the best tablecloth about Uncle Jim’s arms and head. Mr. Polly grasped his purpose instantly, the man in checks was scarcely slower, and in another moment Uncle Jim was no more than a bundle of smothered blasphemy, and a pair of wildly active legs.

“Duck him!” panted Mr. Polly, holding on to the earthquake. “Bes’ thing—duck him.”

The bundle was convulsed by paroxysms of anger and protest. One boot got the hamper and sent it ten yards.

“Go in the house for a clothes-line, some one,”

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said the gentleman in gold spectacles. "He'll get out of this in a moment."

One of the apprentices ran.

"Bird-nets in the garden," shouted Mr. Polly. "In the garden."

The apprentice was divided in his purpose.

And then suddenly Uncle Jim collapsed, and became a limp, dead-seeming thing under their hands. His arms were drawn inward, his legs bent up under his person, and so he lay.

"Fainted!" said the man in checks, relaxing his grip.

"A fit, perhaps," said the man in spectacles.

"Keep hold!" said Mr. Polly, too late.

For suddenly Uncle Jim's arms and legs flew out like springs released. Mr. Polly was tumbled backwards, and fell over the broken teapot, and into the arms of the father in mourning. Something struck his head—dazingly. In another second Uncle Jim was on his feet, and the tablecloth enshrouded the head of the man in checks. Uncle Jim manifestly considered he had done all that honour required of him; and against overwhelming numbers, and the possibility of reiterated duckings, flight is no disgrace.

Uncle Jim fled.

Mr. Polly sat up, after an interval of indeterminate length, among the ruins of an idyllic afternoon. Quite a lot of things seemed scattered and broken, but it was difficult to grasp it all at once. He stared between the legs of people. He became aware of a voice speaking slowly and complainingly.

"Some one ought to pay for those tea-things,"

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said the father in mourning. "We didn't bring them 'ere to be danced on, not by no manner of means."

10

There followed an anxious peace for three days, and then a rough man in a blue jersey, in the intervals of trying to choke himself with bread and cheese and pickled onions, broke abruptly into information.

"Jim's lagged again, Missus," he said.

"What!" said the landlady. "Our Jim?"

"Your Jim," said the man; and after an absolutely necessary pause for swallowing, added, "Stealing a 'atchet."

He did not speak for some moments, and then he replied to Mr. Polly's inquiries: "Yes, a 'atchet. Down Lammam way—night before last."

"What'd 'e steal a 'atchet for?" asked the plump woman.

"'E said 'e wanted a 'atchet."

"I wonder what he wanted a hatchet for," said Mr. Polly thoughtfully.

"I dessay 'e 'ad a use for it," said the gentleman in the blue jersey, and he took a mouthful that amounted to conversational suicide. There was a prolonged pause in the little bar, and Mr. Polly did some rapid thinking.

He went to the window and whistled. "I shall stick it," he whispered at last. "'Atchets or no 'atchets."

He turned to the man with the blue jersey, when he thought him clear for speech again. "How much did you say they'd given him?" he asked.

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“Three munce,” said the man in the blue jersey, and refilled anxiously, as if alarmed at the momentary clearness of his voice.

11

Those three months passed all too quickly—months of sunshine and warmth, of varied novel exertion in the open air, of congenial experiences, of interest and wholesome food and successful digestion; months that browned Mr. Polly and hardened him, and saw the beginnings of his beard; months marred only by one anxiety, an anxiety Mr. Polly did his utmost to suppress. The day of reckoning was never mentioned, it is true, by either the plump woman or himself, but the name of Uncle Jim was written in letters of glaring silence across their intercourse. As the term of that respite drew to an end, his anxiety increased, until at last it trenched upon his well-earned sleep. He had some idea of buying a revolver. He compromised upon a small and very foul and dirty rook rifle, which he purchased in Lammam under a pretext of bird scaring, and loaded carefully and concealed under his bed from the plump woman's eye.

September passed away, October came.

And at last came that night in October whose happenings it is so difficult for a sympathetic historian to drag out of their proper nocturnal indistinctness into the clear, hard light of positive statement. A novelist should present characters, not vivisect them publicly. . . .

The best, the kindest, if not the justest course, is

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surely to leave untold such things as Mr. Polly would manifestly have preferred untold.

Mr. Polly has declared that when the cyclist discovered him he was seeking a weapon that should make a conclusive end to Uncle Jim. That declaration is placed before the reader without comment.

The gun was certainly in the possession of Uncle Jim at that time, and no human being but Mr. Polly knows how he got hold of it.

The cyclist was a literary man named Warspite, who suffered from insomnia; he had risen and come out of his house near Lammam just before the dawn, and he discovered Mr. Polly partially concealed in the ditch by the Potwell churchyard wall. It is an ordinary dry ditch full of nettles, and overgrown with elder and dog-rose, and in no way suggestive of an arsenal. It is the last place in which a sensible man would look for a gun. And he says that when he dismounted to see why Mr. Polly was allowing only the latter part of his person to show (and that, it would seem, by inadvertency), Mr. Polly merely raised his head and advised him to "Look out!" and added, "He's let fly at me twice already."

He came out under persuasion, and with gestures of extreme caution. He was wearing a white cotton nightgown of the type that has now been so extensively superseded by pyjama sleeping suits, and his legs and feet were bare, and much scratched and torn, and very muddy.

Mr. Warspite takes that exceptionally lively interest in his fellow-creatures which constitutes so much of the distinctive and complex charm of your novel-

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ist all the world over, and he at once involved himself generously in the case. The two men returned at Mr. Polly's initiative across the churchyard to the Potwell Inn, and came upon the burst and damaged rook rifle near the new monument to Sir Samuel Harpon at the corner by the yew.

"That must have been his third go," said Mr. Polly. "It sounded a bit funny."

The sight inspirited him greatly, and he explained further that he had fled to the churchyard on account of the cover afforded by tombstones from the flight of small shot. He expressed anxiety for the fate of the landlady of the Potwell Inn and her grandchild, and led the way with enhanced alacrity along the lane to that establishment.

They found the doors of the house standing open, the bar in some disorder—several bottles of whisky were afterwards found to be missing—and Blake, the village policeman, rapping patiently at the open door. He entered with them. The glass in the bar had suffered severely, and one of the mirrors was starred from a blow from a pewter pot. The till had been forced and ransacked, and so had the bureau in the minute room behind the bar.

An upper window was opened, and the voice of the landlady became audible making inquiries. They went out and parleyed with her. She had locked herself upstairs with the little girl, she said, and refused to descend until she was assured that neither Uncle Jim nor Mr. Polly's gun was anywhere on the premises. Mr. Blake and Mr. Warspite proceeded to satisfy themselves with regard to the former condi-

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tion, and Mr. Polly went to his room in search of garments more suited to the brightening dawn. He returned immediately with a request that Blake and Mr. Warspite would "just come and look." They found the apartment in a state of extraordinary confusion, the bed-clothes in a ball in the corner, the drawers all open and ransacked, the chair broken, the lock of the door forced and broken, one door panel slightly scorched and perforated by shot, and the window wide open. None of Mr. Polly's clothes were to be seen, but some garments which had apparently once formed part of a stoker's workaday outfit, two brownish-yellow halves of a shirt, and an unsound pair of boots, were scattered on the floor. A faint smell of gunpowder still hung in the air, and two or three books Mr. Polly had recently acquired had been shied with some violence under the bed. Mr. Warspite looked at Mr. Blake, and then both men looked at Mr. Polly. "That's *his* boots," said Mr. Polly.

Blake turned his eyes to the window. "Some of these tiles 'ave just got broken," he observed.

"I got out of the window and slid down the scullery tiles," Mr. Polly answered, omitting much, they both felt, from his explanation. . . .

"Well, we better find 'im and 'ave a word with 'im," said Blake. "That's about my business now."

12

But Uncle Jim had gone altogether. . . .

He did not return for some days. That, perhaps,

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was not very wonderful. But the days lengthened to weeks, and the weeks to months, and still Uncle Jim did not recur. A year passed, and the anxiety of him became less acute; a second healing year followed the first. One afternoon about thirty months after the Night Surprise the plump woman spoke of him.

"I wonder what's become of Jim," she said.

"*I* wonder sometimes," said Mr. Polly.

CHAPTER X

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. 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

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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 burned, 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 had the courage

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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 spoiled 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 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, re-baiting 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

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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 boat-load 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.)

MIRIAM REVISITED

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.”

2

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 the name of Ruser had vanished. A row of new shops replaced the destruction of the great fire. Mantell and Throbsons’ had risen again upon a more flamboyant pattern, and the new fire station was in the Swiss Teutonic style, 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 inquiries about his lost wife, wavering a little between it and the God’s Providence Inn down the street. Then his eye caught the 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

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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 dare say 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 dare say 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 and Larkins. Real, I suppose?"

"Polly's my sister's name. She married a Mr. Polly."

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"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 it was. 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?"

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"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 unpleasant 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? Hang it! He'd known feebler people by far.

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."

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"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 clo'es '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 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!"

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"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.

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3

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, and the three poplars rose clear and harmonious against the sky of green and yellow. It was as if everything lay securely within a great, warm, friendly globe of crystal sky. It was as safe and inclosed and fearless as a child that has still to be born. It was an evening full of 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 had ever done more than seemed to jar, that there could be any shadow in life save such velvet softness 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

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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

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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 men know good from evil. It's just what I've *never* done. No Adam's apple stuck in *my* throat, M'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 every one. 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'am. . . . 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

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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 licence 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 a nigger or 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 help you," said the fat woman thoughtfully.

"Who cares?" said Mr. Polly.

A deeper strain had come to the fat woman. "You got to die some day," she said.

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"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

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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.”

BEALBY

A HOLIDAY

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BEALBY
A HOLIDAY

CHAPTER THE FIRST

YOUNG BEALBY GOES TO SHONTS

§ 1

THE cat is the offspring of a cat and the dog of a dog, but butlers and lady's maids do not reproduce their kind. They have other duties.

So their successors have to be sought among the prolific, and particularly among the prolific on great estates. Such are gardeners, but not undergardeners; gamekeepers and coachmen, but not lodge people, because their years are too great and their lodges too small. And among those to whom this opportunity of entering service came was young Bealby, who was the stepson of Mr. Darling, the gardener of Shonts.

Every one knows the glories of Shonts. Its façade. Its two towers. The great marble pond. The terraces where the peacocks walk and the lower lake with the black-and-white swans. The great park and the avenue. The view of the river winding away across the blue country. And of the Shonts Velasquez—but that is now in America. And the Shonts Rubens, which is in the National Gallery. And the Shonts porcelain. And the Shonts past history; it was a refuge for the old faith; it had priests' holes and secret passages. And how at last the Marquis had to let Shonts to the Laxtons—the Peptonised Milk and Baby Soother people—for a long term of years. It was a splendid chance for any boy to begin his

BEALBY

knowledge of service in so great an establishment, and only the natural perversity of human nature can explain the violent objection young Bealby took to anything of the sort. He did. He said he did not want to be a servant, and that he would not go and be a good boy and try his very best in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him at Shonts. On the contrary.

He communicated these views suddenly to his mother as she was preparing a steak and kidney pie in the bright little kitchen of the gardener's cottage. He came in with his hair all ruffled and his face hot and distinctly dirty, and his hands in his trousers pockets in the way he had been repeatedly told not to.

"Mother," he said, "I'm not going to be a steward's boy at the house anyhow, not if you tell me to, not till you're blue in the face. So that's all about it."

This delivered, he remained panting, having no further breath left in him.

His mother was a thin, firm woman. She paused in her rolling of the dough until he had finished, and then she made a strong, broadening sweep of the rolling-pin, and remained facing him, leaning forward on that implement with her head a little on one side.

"You will do," she said, "whatsoever your father has said you will do."

"'E isn't my father," said young Bealby.

His mother gave a snapping nod of the head expressive of extreme determination.

"Anyhow I ain't going to do it," said young Bealby, and feeling the conversation was difficult to

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sustain he moved towards the staircase door with a view to slamming it.

"You'll do it," said his mother, "right enough."

"You see whether I do," said young Bealby, and then got in his door-slam rather hurriedly because of steps outside.

Mr. Darling came in out of the sunshine a few moments later. He was a large, many-pocketed, earthy-whiskered man with a clean-shaven determined mouth, and he carried a large pale cucumber in his hand.

"I tole him," he said.

"What did he say?" asked his wife.

"Nuthin," said Mr. Darling.

"'E says 'e won't," said Mrs. Darling.

Mr. Darling regarded her thoughtfully for a moment.

"I never see such a boy," said Mr. Darling. "Why —'e's got to."

§ 2

But young Bealby maintained an obstinate fight against the inevitable.

He had no gift of lucid exposition. "I ain't going to be a servant," he said. "I don't see what right people have making a servant of me."

"You got to be something," said Mr. Darling.

"Everybody's got to be something," said Mrs. Darling.

"Then let me be something else," said young Bealby.

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"*I dessay you'd like to be a gentleman,*" said Mr. Darling.

"I wouldn't mind," said young Bealby.

"You got to be what your opportunities give you," said Mr. Darling.

Young Bealby became breathless. "Why shouldn't I be an engine-driver?" he asked.

"All oily," said his mother. "And getting yourself killed in an accident. And got to pay fines. You'd *like* to be an engine-driver."

"Or a soldier."

"Oo!—a Swaddy!" said Mr. Darling derisively.

"Or the sea."

"With that weak stummik of yours," said Mrs. Darling.

"Besides which," said Mr. Darling, "it's been arranged for you to go up to the 'ouse the very first of next month. And your box and everything ready."

Young Bealby became very red in the face. "I won't go," he said very faintly.

"You will," said Mr. Darling, "if I 'ave to take you by the collar and the slack of your breeches to get you there."

§ 3

The heart of young Bealby was a coal of fire within his breast as—unassisted—he went across the dewy park up to the great house whither his box was to follow him.

He thought the world a "rotten show."

He also said, apparently to two does and a fawn,

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"If you think I'm going to stand it, you know, you're JOLLY-well mistaken."

I do not attempt to justify his prejudice against honourable usefulness in a domestic capacity. He had it. Perhaps there is something in the air of Highbury, where he had spent the past eight years of his life, that leads to democratic ideals. It is one of those new places where estates seem almost forgotten. Perhaps too there was something in the Bealby strain. . . .

I think he would have objected to any employment at all. Hitherto he had been a remarkably free boy with a considerable gusto about his freedom. Why should that end? The little village mixed school had been a soft job for his Cockney wits, and for a year and a half he had been top boy. Why not go on being top boy?

Instead of which, under threats, he had to go across the sunlit corner of the park, through that slanting morning sunlight which had been so often the prelude to golden days of leafy wanderings! He had to go past the corner of the laundry where he had so often played cricket with the coachman's boys, (already swallowed up into the working world), he had to follow the laundry wall to the end of the kitchen and there, where the steps go down and underground, he had to say farewell to the sunlight, farewell to childhood, boyhood, freedom. He had to go down and along the stone corridor to the pantry, and there he had to ask for Mr. Mergleson. He paused on the top step, and looked up at the blue sky across which a hawk was slowly drifting. His

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eyes followed the hawk out of sight beyond a cypress bough, but indeed he was not thinking about the hawk, he was not seeing the hawk; he was struggling with a last wild impulse of his ferial nature. "Why not sling it?" his ferial nature was asking. "Why not even now—*do a bunk?*"

It would have been better for him perhaps and better for Mr. Mergleson and better for Shonts if he had yielded to the whisper of the Tempter. But his heart was heavy within him, and he had no provisions. And never a penny. One can do but a very little bunk on an empty belly! "Must" was written all over him. He went down the steps.

The passage was long and cool and at the end of it was a swing door. Through that and then to the left, he knew one had to go, past the still-room and so to the pantry. The maids were at breakfast in the still-room with the door open. The grimace he made in passing was intended rather to entertain than to insult, and anyhow a chap must do something with his face. And then he came to the pantry and into the presence of Mr. Mergleson.

Mr. Mergleson was in his shirt-sleeves and generally dishevelled, having an early cup of tea in an atmosphere full of the bleak memories of overnight. He was an ample man with a large nose, a vast under lip and mutton-chop side-whiskers. His voice would have suited a succulent parrot. He took out a gold watch from his waistcoat pocket and regarded it. "Ten minutes past seven, young man," he said, "isn't seven o'clock."

Young Bealby made no articulate answer.

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"Just stand there for a minute," said Mr. Mergleson, "and when I'm at libbuty I'll run through your duties." And almost ostentatiously he gave himself up to the enjoyment of his cup of tea.

Three other gentlemen in deshabelle sat at table with Mr. Mergleson. They regarded young Bealby with attention, and the youngest, a red-haired bare-faced youth in shirt-sleeves and a green apron, was moved to a grimace that was clearly designed to echo the scowl on young Bealby's features.

The fury that had been subdued by a momentary awe of Mr. Mergleson revived and gathered force. Young Bealby's face became scarlet, his eyes filled with tears and his mind with the need for movement. After all—he wouldn't stand it. He turned round abruptly and made for the door.

"Where'n earth you going to?" cried Mr. Mergleson.

"He's shy!" cried the second footman.

"Steady on!" cried the first footman and had him by the shoulder in the doorway.

"Lemme go!" howled the new recruit, struggling.

"I won't be a blooming servant. I won't."

"Here!" cried Mr. Mergleson, gesticulating with his teaspoon, "Bring 'im to the end of the table there. What's this about a blooming servant?"

Bealby suddenly blubbering was replaced at the end of the table.

"May I ask what's this about a blooming servant?" asked Mr. Mergleson.

Sniff and silence.

"Did I understand you to say that you ain't going to be a blooming servant, young Bealby?"

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"Yes," said young Bealby.

"Thomas," said Mr. Mergleson, "just smack 'is 'ed. Smack it rather 'ard. . . ."

Things too rapid to relate occurred. "So you'd *bite*, would you?" said Thomas. . . .

"Ah!" said Mr. Mergleson. "Got 'im! That one! . . ."

"Just smack 'is 'ed once more," said Mr. Mergleson. . . .

"And now you just stand there, young man, until I'm at libbuty to attend to you further," said Mr. Mergleson, and finished his tea slowly and eloquently. . . .

The second footman rubbed his shin thoughtfully.

"If I got to smack 'is 'ed much," he said, "'e'd better change into his slippers."

"Take him to 'is room," said Mr. Mergleson, getting up. "See 'e washes the grief and grubbiness off 'is face in the handwash at the end of the passage and make him put on his slippers. Then show 'im 'ow to lay the table in the steward's room."

§ 4

The duties to which Bealby was introduced struck him as perplexingly various, undesirably numerous, uninteresting and difficult to remember, and also he did not try to remember them very well because he wanted to do them as badly as possible, and he thought that forgetting would be a good way of starting at that. He was beginning at the bottom of the ladder; to him it fell to wait on the upper ser-

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vants, and the green baize door at the top of the service staircase was the limit of his range. His room was a small wedge-shaped apartment under some steps leading to the servants' hall, lit by a window that did not open and that gave upon the underground passage. He received his instructions in a state of crumpled mutinousness, but for a day his desire to be remarkably impossible was more than counterbalanced by his respect for the large able hands of the four men servants, his seniors, and by a disinclination to be returned too promptly to the gardens. Then in a tentative manner he broke two plates, and got his head smacked by Mr. Mergleson himself. Mr. Mergleson gave a staccato slap quite as powerful as Thomas's but otherwise different. The hand of Mr. Mergleson was large and fat and he got his effects by dash, Thomas's was horny and lingered. After that young Bealby put salt in the teapot in which the housekeeper made tea. But that, he observed, she washed out with hot water before she put in the tea. It was clear that he had wasted his salt, which ought to have gone into the kettle.

Next time—the kettle.

Beyond telling him his duties almost excessively nobody conversed with young Bealby during the long hours of his first day in service. At midday dinner in the servants' hall he made one of the kitchen-maids giggle by pulling faces intended to be delicately suggestive of Mr. Mergleson, but that was his nearest approach to disinterested human intercourse.

When the hour for retirement came—"Get out of it. Go to bed, you dirty little Kicker," said Thomas.

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“We’ve had about enough of you for one day”—young Bealby sat for a long time on the edge of his bed weighing the possibilities of arson and poison. He wished he had some poison. Some sort of poison with a mediæval manner, poison that hurts before it kills. Also he produced a small penny pocketbook with a glazed black cover and blue edges. He headed one page of this “Mergleson” and entered beneath it three black crosses. Then he opened an account to Thomas, who was manifestly destined to be his principal creditor. Bealby was not a forgiving boy. At the village school they had been too busy making him a good Churchman to attend to things like that. There were a lot of crosses for Thomas.

And while Bealby made these sinister memoranda down-stairs Lady Laxton—for Laxton had bought a baronetcy for twenty thousand down to the party funds and a tip to the whip over the Peptonised Milk flotation—Lady Laxton, a couple of floors above Bealby’s ruffled head, mused over her approaching week-end party. It was an important week-end party. The Lord Chancellor of England was coming. Never before had she had so much as a member of the Cabinet at Shonts. He was coming, and do what she would she could not help but connect it with her very strong desire to see the master of Shonts in the clear scarlet of a Deputy Lieutenant. Peter would look so well in that. The Lord Chancellor was coming and to meet him and to circle about him there were Lord John Woodenhouse and Slinker Bond, there were the Countess of Barracks and Mrs. Rampound Pilby, the novelist, with her husband Ram-

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pound Pilby, there was Professor Timbre, the philosopher, and there were four smaller (though quite good) people who would run about very satisfactorily among the others. (At least she thought they would run about very satisfactorily among the others, not imagining any evil of her cousin Captain Douglas.)

All this good company in Shonts filled Lady Laxton with a pleasant realisation of progressive successes, but at the same time one must confess that she felt a certain diffidence. In her heart of hearts she knew she had not made this party. It had happened to her. How it might go on happening to her she did not know, it was beyond her control. She hoped very earnestly that everything would pass off well.

The Lord Chancellor was as big a guest as any she had had. One must grow as one grows, but still—being easy and friendly with him would be, she knew, a tremendous effort. Rather like being easy and friendly with an elephant. She was not good at conversation. The task of interesting people taxed her and puzzled her. . . .

It was Slinker Bond, the whip, who had arranged the whole business—after, it must be confessed, a hint from Sir Peter. Laxton had complained that the government were neglecting this part of the country. "They ought to show up more than they do in the county," said Sir Peter and added almost carelessly, "I could easily put anybody up at Shonts." There were to be two select dinner parties and a large but still select Sunday lunch to let in the countryside to the spectacle of the Laxtons taking their (new) proper place at Shonts. . . .

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It was not only the sense of her own deficiencies that troubled Lady Laxton; there were also her husband's excesses. He had—it was no use disguising it—rather too much the manner of an employer. He had a way of getting, how could one put it?—*confident* at dinner, and Mergleson seemed to *delight* in filling up his glass. Then he would contradict a good deal. . . . She felt that Lord Chancellors, however, are the sort of men one doesn't contradict. . . .

Then the Lord Chancellor was said to be interested in philosophy—a difficult subject. She had got Timbre to talk to him upon that. Timbre was a professor of philosophy at Oxford, so that was sure to be all right. But she wished she knew one or two good safe things to say in philosophy herself. She had long felt the need of a secretary and now she felt it more than ever. If she had a secretary she could just tell him what it was she wanted to talk about, and he could get her one or two of the right books and mark the best passages and she could learn it all up.

She feared—it was a worrying fear—that Laxton would say right out and very early in the week-end that he didn't believe in philosophy. He had a way of saying he "didn't believe in" large things like that, art, philanthropy, novels, and so on. Sometimes he said, "I don't believe in all this"—art or whatever it was. She had watched people's faces when he had said it and she had come to the conclusion that saying you don't believe in things isn't the sort of thing people say nowadays. It was wrong somehow. But she did not want to tell Laxton directly that it was wrong. He would remember if she did, but he had a

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way of taking such things rather badly at the time.

. . . She hated him to take things badly.

"If one could invent some little hint," she whispered to herself.

She had often wished she was better at hints.

She was, you see, a gentlewoman, modest, kindly. Her people were quite good people. Poor of course. But she was not clever, she was anything but clever. And the wives of these captains of industry need to be very clever indeed if they are to escape a magnificent social isolation. They get the titles and the big places and all that sort of thing; people don't at all intend to isolate them, but there is nevertheless an inadvertent avoidance. . . .

Even as she uttered these words, "If one could invent some little hint," Bealby down there less than forty feet away through the solid floor below her feet and a little to the right was wetting his stump of pencil as wet as he could in order to insure a sufficiently emphatic fourteenth cross on the score-sheet of the doomed Thomas. Most of the other thirteen marks were done with such hard breathing emphasis that the print of them went more than half-way through that little blue-edged book.

§ 5

The arrival of the week-end guests impressed Bealby at first merely as a blessed influence that withdrew the four men servants into that unknown world on the other side of the green-baize door, but then he learned that it also involved the appearance of five

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new persons, two valets and three maids, for whom places had to be laid in the steward's room. Otherwise Lady Laxton's social arrangements had no more influence upon the mind of Bealby than the private affairs of the Emperor of China. There was something going on up there, beyond even his curiosity. All he heard of it was a distant coming and going of vehicles and some slight talk to which he was inattentive while the coachman and grooms were having a drink in the pantry—until these maids and valets appeared. They seemed to him to appear suddenly out of nothing, like slugs after rain, black and rather shiny, sitting about inactively and quietly consuming small matters. He disliked them and they regarded him without affection or respect.

Who cared? He indicated his feeling towards them as soon as he was out of the steward's room by a gesture of the hand and nose venerable only by reason of its antiquity.

He had things more urgent to think about than strange valets and maids. Thomas had laid hands on him, jeered at him, inflicted shameful indignities on him, and he wanted to kill Thomas in some frightful manner. (But if possible unobtrusively.)

If he had been a little Japanese boy this would have been an entirely honourable desire. It would have been Bushido and all that sort of thing. In the gardener's stepson however it is—undesirable. . . .

Thomas, on the other hand, having remarked the red light of revenge in Bealby's eye and being secretly afraid, felt that his honour was concerned in not relaxing his persecutions. He called him "Kicker" and

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when he did not answer to that name, he called him "Snorter," "Bleater," "Snooks," and finally tweaked his ear. Then he saw fit to assume that Bealby was deaf and that ear-tweaking was the only available method of address. This led on to the convention of a sign language whereby ideas were communicated to Bealby by means of painful but frequently quite ingeniously symbolical freedoms with various parts of his person. Also Thomas affected to discover uncleanliness in Bealby's head, and succeeded after many difficulties in putting it into a sinkful of lukewarm water.

Meanwhile young Bealby devoted such scanty time as he could give to reflection to debating whether it was better to attack Thomas suddenly with a carving-knife or throw a lighted lamp. The large pantry inkpot of pewter might be effective in its way, he thought, but he doubted whether in the event of a charge it had sufficient stopping power. He was also curiously attracted by a long two-pronged toasting-fork that hung at the side of the pantry fireplace. It had *reach*. . . .

Over all these dark thoughts and ill-concealed emotions Mr. Mergleson prevailed, large yet speedy, speedy yet exact, parroting orders and making plump gestures, performing duties and seeing that duties were performed.

Matters came to a climax late on Saturday night at the end of a trying day, just before Mr. Mergleson went round to lock up and turn out the lights.

Thomas came into the pantry close behind Bealby, who, greatly belated through his own inefficiency,

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was carrying a tray of glasses from the steward's room, applied an ungentle hand to his neck, and ruffled up his back hair in a smart and painful manner. At the same time Thomas remarked, "Burrh!"

Bealby stood still for a moment and then put down his tray on the table and, making peculiar sounds as he did so, resorted very rapidly to the toasting-fork. . . . He got a prong into Thomas's chin at the first prod.

How swift are the changes of the human soul! At the moment of his thrust young Bealby was a primordial savage; so soon as he saw this incredible piercing of Thomas's chin—for all the care that Bealby had taken it might just as well have been Thomas's eye—he moved swiftly through the ages and became a simple Christian child. He abandoned violence and fled.

The fork hung for a moment from the visage of Thomas like a twisted beard of brass, and then rattled on the ground.

Thomas clapped his hand to his chin and discovered blood.

"You little —!" He never found the right word (which perhaps is just as well), instead he started in pursuit of Bealby.

Bealby in his sudden horror of his own act—and Thomas—fled headlong into the passage and made straight for the service stairs that went up into a higher world. He had little time to think. Thomas with a red-smearred chin appeared in pursuit. Thomas the avenger. Thomas really roused. Bealby shot through the green-baize door and the pursuing footman pulled up only just in time not to follow him.

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Only just in time. He had an instinctive instant anxious fear of great dangers. He heard something, a sound as though the young of some very large animal had squeaked feebly. He had a glimpse of something black and white—and large. . . .

Then something, some glass thing, smashed.

He steadied the green-baize door which was wobbling on its brass hinges, controlled his panting breath, and listened.

A low rich voice was—ejaculating. It was not Bealby's voice, it was the voice of some substantial person being quietly but deeply angry. They were the ejaculations restrained in tone but not in quality of a ripe and well-stored mind — no boy's thin stuff.

Then very softly Thomas pushed open the door just widely enough to see, and as instantly let it fall back into place.

Very gently and yet with an alert rapidity he turned about and stole down the service stairs.

His superior officer appeared in the passage below.

"Mr. Mergleson," he cried, "I say—Mr. Mergleson."

"What's up?" said Mr. Mergleson.

"He's gone!"

"Who?"

"Bealby."

"Home?" This almost hopefully.

"No."

"Where?"

"Up there! I think he ran against somebody."

Mr. Mergleson scrutinised his subordinate's face

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for a second. Then he listened intently; both men listened intently.

"Have to fetch him out of that," said Mr. Mergleson, suddenly preparing for brisk activity.

Thomas bent lower over the banisters.

"*The Lord Chancellor!*" he whispered with white lips and a sideways gesture of his head.

"What about 'im?" said Mergleson arrested by something in the manner of Thomas.

Thomas's whisper became so fine that Mr. Mergleson drew nearer to catch it. Thomas repeated the last remark. "He's just through there—on the landing—cursing and swearing—'orrible things—more like a mad turkey than a human being."

"Where's Bealby?"

"He must almost 'ave run into 'im," said Thomas after consideration.

"But now—where is he?"

Thomas pantomimed infinite perplexity.

Mr. Mergleson reflected and decided upon his line. He came up the service staircase, lifted his chin and with an air of meek officiousness went through the green door. There was no one now on the landing, there was nothing remarkable on the landing except a broken tumbler, but half-way up the grand staircase stood the Lord Chancellor. Under one arm the great jurist carried a soda-water siphon and he grasped a decanter of whisky in his hand. He turned sharply at the sound of the green-baize door and bent upon Mr. Mergleson the most terrible eyebrows that ever surely adorned a legal visage. He was very red in the face and savage-looking.

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"Was it *you*," he said with a threatening gesture of the decanter, and his voice betrayed a noble indignation, "was it *you* who slapped me behind?"

"Slapped you behind, me lord?"

"Slapped me *behind*. Don't I speak—plainly?"

"I—such a libbuty, me lord!"

"Idiot! I ask you a plain question——"

With almost inconceivable alacrity Mr. Mergleson rushed up three steps, leaped forward and caught the siphon as it slipped from his lordship's arm.

He caught it, but at a price. He overset and, clasping it in his hands, struck his lordship first with the siphon on the left shin and then butted him with a face that was still earnestly respectful in the knees. His lordship's legs were driven sideways, so that they were no longer beneath his centre of gravity. With a monosyllabic remark of a topographical nature his lordship collapsed upon Mr. Mergleson. The decanter flew out of his grasp and smashed presently with emphasis upon the landing below. The siphon escaping from the wreckage of Mr. Mergleson and drawn no doubt by a natural affinity, rolled noisily from step to step in pursuit of the decanter. . . .

It was a curious little procession that hurried down the great staircase of Shonts that night. First the whisky like a winged harbinger with the pedestrian siphon in pursuit. Then the great lawyer gripping the great butler by the tails of his coat and punching furiously. Then Mr. Mergleson trying wildly to be respectful—even in disaster. First the Lord Chancellor dived over Mr. Mergleson grappling as he passed, then Mr. Mergleson, attempting explana-

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tions, was pulled backwards over the Lord Chancellor; then again the Lord Chancellor was for a giddy but vindictive moment uppermost; a second rotation and they reached the landing.

Bang! There was a deafening report—

CHAPTER THE SECOND

A WEEK-END AT SHONTS

§ 1

THE week-end visit is a form of entertainment peculiar to Great Britain. It is a thing that could have been possible only in a land essentially aristocratic and mellow, in which even the observance of the Sabbath has become mellow. At every London terminus on a Saturday afternoon the outgoing trains have an unusually large proportion of first-class carriages, and a peculiar abundance of rich-looking dressing-bags provoke the covetous eye. A discreet activity of valets and maids mingles with the stimulated alertness of the porters. One marks celebrities in gay raiment. There is an indefinable air of distinction upon platform and bookstall. Sometimes there are carriages reserved for especially privileged parties. There are greetings.

“And so *you* are coming too!”

“No, this time it is Shonts.”

“The place where they found the Rubens. Who has it now?” . . .

Through this cheerfully prosperous throng went the Lord Chancellor with his high nose, those eyebrows of his which he seemed to be able to furl or unfurl at will, and his expression of tranquil self-sufficiency. He was going to Shonts for his party and not for his pleasure, but there was no reason why

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that should appear upon his face. He went along preoccupied, pretending to see nobody, leaving to others the disadvantage of the greeting. In his right hand he carried a small important bag of leather. Under his left arm he bore a philosophical work by Doctor MacTaggart, three illustrated papers, *The Fortnightly Review*, the day's *Times*, *The Hibbert Journal*, *Punch* and two blue books. His lordship never quite knew the limits set to what he could carry under his arm. His man, Candler, followed therefore at a suitable distance with several papers that had already been dropped, alert to retrieve any further losses.

At the large bookstall they passed close by Mrs. Rampound Pilby, who according to her custom was feigning to be a member of the general public and was asking the clerk about her last book. The Lord Chancellor saw Rampound Pilby hovering at hand and deftly failed to catch his eye. He loathed the Rampound Pilbys. He speculated for a moment what sort of people could possibly stand Mrs. Pilby's vast pretensions—even from Saturday to Monday. One dinner-party on her right hand had glutted him for life. He chose a corner seat, took possession of both it and the seat opposite it in order to have somewhere to put his feet, left Candler to watch over and pack in his hand luggage, and went high up the platform, remaining there with his back to the world—rather like a bigger more aquiline Napoleon—in order to evade the great novelist.

In this he was completely successful.

He returned however to find Candler on the verge of a personal conflict with a very fair young man in

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grey. He was so fair as to be almost an albino, except that his eyes were quick and brown; he was blushing the brightest pink and speaking very rapidly.

"These two places," said Candler, breathless with the badness of his case, "are engaged."

"Oh *ve-very* well," said the very fair young man, with his eyebrows and moustache looking very pale by contrast, "have it so. But do permit me to occupy the middle seat of the carriage. With a residuary interest in the semi-gentleman's place."

"You little know, young man, *whom* you are calling a semi-gentleman," said Candler, whose specialty was grammar.

"Here he is!" said the young gentleman.

"Which place will you have, my lord?" asked Candler, abandoning his case altogether.

"Facing," said the Lord Chancellor slowly unfurling the eyebrows and scowling at the young man in grey.

"Then I'll have the other," said the very fair young man talking very glibly. He spoke with a quick low voice, like one who forces himself to keep going. "You see," he said, addressing the great jurist with the extreme familiarity of the courageously nervous, "I've gone into this sort of thing before. First, mind you, I have a fair look for a vacant corner. I'm not the sort to spoil sport. But if there isn't a vacant corner I look for traces of a semi-gentleman. A semi-gentleman is one who has a soft cap and not an umbrella—his friend in the opposite seat has the umbrella—or he has an umbrella and not a soft cap, or a waterproof and not a bag, or a bag and

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not a waterproof. And a half-interest in a rug. That's what I call a semi-gentleman. You see the idea. Sort of divided beggar. Nothing in any way offensive."

"Sir," said the Lord Chancellor, interrupting in a voice of concentrated passion, "I don't care a rap what you call a semi-gentleman. *Will* you get out of my way?"

"Just as you please," said the very fair young man, and going a few paces from the carriage door he whistled for the boy with the papers. He was bearing up bravely.

"*Pink 'un?*" said the very fair young gentleman almost breathlessly. "*Black and White?* What's all these others? *Aihenæum?* *Sporting and Dramatic?* Right O. And—eh! What? Do I *look* the sort that buys a *Spectator?* You don't know! Do I wear galoshes? My dear boy, where's your *savoir faire?*"

§ 2

The Lord Chancellor was a philosopher and not easily perturbed. His severe manner was consciously assumed and never much more than skin-deep. He had already furled his eyebrows and dismissed his vis-à-vis from his mind before the train started. He turned over *The Hibbert Journal*, and read in it with a large tolerance.

Dimly on the outskirts of his consciousness the very fair young man hovered, as a trifling annoyance, as something pink and hot rustling a sheet of a discordant shade of pink, as something that got in the way

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of his legs and whistled softly some trivial cheerful air, just to show how little it cared. Presently, very soon, this vague trouble would pass out of his consciousness altogether. . . .

The Lord Chancellor was no mere amateur of philosophy. His activities in that direction were a part of his public reputation. He lectured on religion and æsthetics. He was a fluent Hegelian. He spent his holidays, it was understood, in the Absolute—at any rate in Germany. He would sometimes break into philosophy at dinner-tables and particularly over the dessert, and be more luminously incomprehensible while still apparently sober than almost any one. An article in the *Hibbert* caught and held his attention. It attempted to define a new and doubtful variety of Infinity. You know of course that there are many sorts and species of Infinity, and that the Absolute is just the king among Infinities as the lion is king among the beasts. . . .

“I say,” said a voice coming out of the world of Relativity and coughing the cough of those who break a silence, “*You aren’t going to Shonts, are you?*”

The Lord Chancellor returned slowly to earth.

“Just seen your label,” said the very fair young man. “You see,—*I’m going to Shonts.*”

The Lord Chancellor remained outwardly serene. He reflected for a moment. And then he fell into that snare which is more fatal to great lawyers and judges perhaps than to any other class of men, the snare of the crushing repartee. One had come into his head now—a beauty.

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"Then we shall meet there," he said in his suavest manner.

"Well—rather."

"It would be a great pity," said the Lord Chancellor with an effective blandness, using a kind of wry smile that he employed to make things humorous, "it would be a great pity, don't you think, to anticipate that pleasure."

And having smiled the retort well home with his head a little on one side, he resumed with large leisurely movements the reading of his *Hibbert Journal*.

"Got me there," said the very fair young man belatedly, looking boiled to a turn, and after a period of restlessness settled down to an impatient perusal of *Black and White*.

"There's a whole blessed week-end of course," the young man remarked presently without looking up from his paper and apparently pursuing some obscure meditations. . . .

A vague uneasiness crept into the Lord Chancellor's mind as he continued to appear to peruse. Out of what train of thought could such a remark arise? His weakness for crushing retort had a little betrayed him. . . .

It was however only when he found himself upon the platform of Chelsome, which as every one knows is the station for Shonts, and discovered Mr. and Mrs. Rampound Pilby upon the platform, looking extraordinarily like a national monument and its custodian, that the Lord Chancellor began to realise that he was in the grip of fate, and that the service he was doing his party by week-ending with the

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Laxtons was likely to be not simply joyless but disagreeable.

Well anyhow he had MacTaggart, and he could always work in his own room. . . .

§ 3

By the end of dinner the Lord Chancellor was almost at the end of his large but clumsy endurance; he kept his eyebrows furled only by the most strenuous relaxation of his muscles, and within he was a sea of silent blasphemies. All sorts of little things had accumulated. . . .

He exercised an unusual temperance with the port and old brandy his host pressed upon him, feeling that he dared not relax lest his rage had its way with him. The cigars were quite intelligent at any rate, and he smoked and listened with a faintly perceptible disdain to the conversation of the other men. At any rate Mrs. Rampound Pilby was out of the room. The talk had arisen out of a duologue that had preceded the departure of the ladies, a duologue of Timbre's, about apparitions and the reality of the future life. Sir Peter Laxton, released from the eyes of his wife, was at liberty to say he did not believe in all this stuff; it was just thought transference and fancy and all that sort of thing. His declaration did not arrest the flow of feeble instances and experiences into which such talk invariably degenerates. His lordship remained carelessly attentive, his eyebrows unfurled but drooping, his cigar upward at an acute angle; he contributed no anecdotes, content now

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and then to express himself compactly by some brief sentence of pure Hegelian—much as a Mahometan might spit.

“Why! come to that, they say Shonts is haunted,” said Sir Peter. “I suppose we could have a ghost here in no time if I chose to take it on. Rare place for a ghost too.”

The very fair young man of the train had got a name now and was Captain Douglas. When he was not blushing too brightly he was rather good-looking. He was a distant cousin of Lady Laxton. He impressed the Lord Chancellor as unabashed. He engaged people in conversation with a cheerful familiarity that excluded only the Lord Chancellor, and even at the Lord Chancellor he looked ever and again. He pricked up his ears at the mention of ghosts, and afterwards when the Lord Chancellor came to think things over, it seemed to him that he had caught a curious glance of the Captain's bright little brown eye.

“What sort of ghost, Sir Peter? Chains? Eh? No?”

“Nothing of that sort, it seems. I don't know much about it, I wasn't sufficiently interested. No, sort of spook that bangs about and does you a mischief. What's its name? Plundergeist?”

“Poltergeist,” the Lord Chancellor supplied carelessly in the pause.

“Runs its hand over your hair in the dark. Taps your shoulder. All nonsense. But we don't tell the servants. Sort of thing I don't believe in. Easily explained,—what with panelling and secret passages and priests' holes and all that.”

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"Priests' holes!" Douglas was excited.

"Where they hid. Perfect rabbit-warren. There's one going out from the drawing-room alcove. Quite a good room in its way. But you know,"—a note of wrath crept into Sir Peter's voice,—"they didn't treat me fairly about these priests' holes. I ought to have had a sketch and a plan of these priests' holes. When a chap is given possession of a place, he ought to be given possession. Well! I don't know where half of them are myself. That's not possession. Else we might refurnish them and do them up a bit. I guess they're pretty musty."

Captain Douglas spoke with his eye on the Lord Chancellor. "Sure there isn't a murdered priest in the place, Sir Peter?" he asked.

"Nothing of the sort," said Sir Peter. "I don't believe in these priests' holes. Half of 'em never had priests in 'em. It's all pretty tidy rot I expect—come to the bottom of it. . . ."

The conversation did not get away from ghosts and secret passages until the men went to the drawing-room. If it seemed likely to do so Captain Douglas pulled it back. He seemed to delight in these silly particulars; the sillier they were the more he was delighted.

The Lord Chancellor was a little preoccupied by one of those irrational suspicions that will sometimes afflict the most intelligent of men. Why did Douglas want to know all the particulars about the Shonts ghosts? Why every now and then did he glance with that odd expression at one's face—a glance half appealing and half amused? Amused! It was a strange

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fancy, but the Lord Chancellor could almost have sworn that the young man was laughing at him. At dinner he had had that feeling one has at times of being talked about; he had glanced along the table to discover the Captain and a rather plain woman, that idiot Timbre's wife she probably was, with their heads together looking up at him quite definitely and both manifestly pleased by something Douglas was telling her. . . .

What was it Douglas had said in the train? Something like a threat. But the exact words had slipped the Lord Chancellor's memory. . . .

The Lord Chancellor's preoccupation was just sufficient to make him a little unwary. He drifted into grappling distance of Mrs. Rampound Pilby. Her voice caught him like a lasso and drew him in.

"Well, and *how* is Lord Moggeridge now?" she asked.

What on earth is one to say to such an impertinence?

She was always like that. She spoke to a man of the calibre of Lord Bacon as though she was speaking to a schoolboy home for the holidays. She had an invincible air of knowing all through everybody. It gave confidence to her work rather than charm to her manner.

"Do you still go on with your philosophy?" she said.

"No," shouted the Lord Chancellor, losing all self-control for the moment and waving his eyebrows about madly, "No, I go *off* with it."

"For your vacations? Ah, Lord Moggeridge, how

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I envy you great lawyers your long vacations. I—never get a vacation. Always we poor authors are pursued by our creations, sometimes it's typescript, sometimes it's proofs. Not that I really complain of proofs. I confess to a weakness for proofs. Sometimes alas! it's criticism. Such *undiscerning* criticism! . . .”

The Lord Chancellor began to think very swiftly of some tremendous lie that would enable him to escape at once without incivility from Lady Laxton's drawing-room. Then he perceived that Mrs. Rampound Pilby was asking him: “Is that *the* Captain Douglas, or his brother who's in love with the actress woman?”

The Lord Chancellor made no answer. What he thought was: “Great Silly Idiot! How should I know?”

“I think it must be *the* one—the one who had to leave Portsmouth in disgrace because of the ragging scandal. He did nothing there, they say, but organise practical jokes. Some of them were quite subtle practical jokes. He's a cousin of our hostess; that perhaps accounts for his presence. . . .”

The Lord Chancellor's comment betrayed the drift of his thoughts. “He'd better not try that sort of thing on here,” he said. “I abominate—clowning.”

Drawing-room did not last very long. Even Lady Laxton could not miss the manifest gloom of her principal guest, and after the good-nights and barley-water and lemonade on the great landing Sir Peter led Lord Moggeridge by the arm—he hated being led by the arm—into the small but still spacious apart-

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ment that was called the study. The Lord Chancellor was now very thirsty; he was not used to abstinence of any sort; but Sir Peter's way of suggesting a drink roused such a fury of resentment in him that he refused tersely and conclusively. There was nobody else in the study but Captain Douglas, who seemed to hesitate upon the verge of some familiar address, and Lord Woodenhouse, who was thirsty too, and held a vast tumbler of whisky and soda, with a tinkle of ice in it, on his knee in a way annoying to a parched man. The Lord Chancellor helped himself to a cigar and assumed the middle of the fireplace with an air of contentment, but he could feel the self-control running out of the heels of his boots.

Sir Peter after a quite unsuccessful invasion of his own hearth-rug—the Lord Chancellor stood like a rock—secured the big arm-chair, stuck his feet out towards his distinguished guest and resumed a talk that he had been holding with Lord Woodenhouse about firearms. Mergleson had as usual been too attentive to his master's glass, and the fine edge was off Sir Peter's deference. "I always have carried firearms," he said, "and I always shall. Used properly they are a great protection. Even in the country how are you to know who you're going to run up against—anywhen?"

"But you might shoot and hit something," said Douglas.

"Properly used, I said—properly used. Whipping out a revolver and shooting *at* a man, that's not properly used. Almost as bad as pointing it at him—which is pretty certain to make him fly straight at

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you. If he's got an ounce of pluck. But *I* said properly used and I *mean* properly used."

The Lord Chancellor tried to think about that article on Infinities, while appearing to listen to this fool's talk. He despised revolvers. Armed with such eyebrows as his it was natural for him to despise revolvers.

"Now, I've got some nice little barkers up-stairs," said Sir Peter. "I'd almost welcome a burglar, just to try them."

"If you shoot a burglar," said Lord Woodenhouse abruptly, with a gust of that ill-temper that was frequent at Shonts towards bedtime, "when he's not attacking you, it's murder."

Sir Peter held up an offensively pacifying hand. "I know *that*," he said, "you needn't tell me *that*."

He raised his voice a little to increase his already excessive accentuations. "*I* said properly used."

A yawn took the Lord Chancellor unawares and he caught it dexterously with his hand. Then he saw Douglas hastily pull at his blonde moustache to conceal a smile—grinning ape! What was there to smile at? The man had been smiling all the evening.

Up to something?

"Now let me *tell* you," said Sir Peter, "let me *tell* you the proper way to use a revolver. You whip it out and *instantly* let fly at the ground. You should never let any one see a revolver ever before they hear it—see? You let fly at the ground first off, and the concussion stuns them. It doesn't stun you. *You* expect it, *they* don't. See? There you are—five shots left, master of the situation."

BEALBY

"I think, Sir Peter, I'll bid you good-night," said the Lord Chancellor, allowing his eye to rest for one covetous moment on the decanter and struggling with the devil of pride.

Sir Peter made a gesture of extreme friendliness from his chair, expressive of the Lord Chancellor's freedom to do whatever he pleased at Shonts. "I may perhaps tell you a little story that happened once in Morocco."

"My eyes won't keep open any longer," said Captain Douglas suddenly, with a whirl of his knuckles into his sockets, and stood up.

Lord Woodenhouse stood up too.

"You see," said Sir Peter, standing also but sticking to his subject and his hearer. "This was when I was younger than I am now, you must understand, and I wasn't married. Just mooching about a bit, between business and pleasure. Under such circumstances one goes into parts of a foreign town where one wouldn't go if one was older and wiser. . . ."

Captain Douglas left Sir Peter and Woodenhouse to it.

He emerged on the landing and selected one of the lighted candlesticks upon the table. "Lord!" he whispered. He grimaced in soliloquy and then perceived the Lord Chancellor regarding him with suspicion and disfavour from the ascending staircase. He attempted ease. For the first time since the train incident he addressed Lord Moggeridge.

"I gather, my lord, you don't believe in ghosts?" he said.

"No, sir," said the Lord Chancellor, "I don't."

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"They won't trouble me to-night."

"They won't trouble any of us."

"Fine old house anyhow," said Captain Douglas. The Lord Chancellor disdained to reply. He went on his way up-stairs.

§ 4

When the Lord Chancellor sat down before the thoughtful fire in the fine old panelled room assigned to him he perceived that he was too disturbed to sleep. This was going to be an infernal week-end. The worst week-end he had ever had. Mrs. Rampound Pilby maddened him; Timbre, who was a Pragmatist—which stands in the same relation to a Hegelian that a small dog does to a large cat—exasperated him; he loathed Laxton, detested Rampound Pilby and feared—as far as he was capable of fearing anything—Captain Douglas. There was no refuge, no soul in the house to whom he could turn for consolation and protection from these others. Slinker Bond could talk only of the affairs of the party, and the Lord Chancellor, being Lord Chancellor, had lost any interest in the affairs of the party; Woodenhouse could talk of nothing. The women were astonishingly negligible. There were practically no pretty women. There ought always to be pretty *young* women for a Lord Chancellor, pretty young women who can at least seem to listen. . . .

And he was atrociously thirsty.

His room was supplied only with water—stuff you use to clean your teeth—and nothing else. . . .

BEALBY

No good thinking about it. . . .

He decided that the best thing he could do to compose himself before turning in would be to sit down at the writing-table and write a few sheets of Hegelian—about that Infinity article in the *Hibbert*. There is indeed no better consolation for a troubled mind than the Hegelian exercises; they lift it above—everything. He took off his coat and sat down to this beautiful amusement, but he had scarcely written a page before his thirst became a torment. He kept thinking of that great tumbler Woodenhouse had held—sparkling, golden, cool—and stimulating.

What he wanted was a good stiff whisky and a cigar, one of Laxton's cigars, the only good thing in his entertainment so far.

And then Philosophy.

Even as a student he had been a worker of the Teutonic type—never abstemious.

He thought of ringing and demanding these comforts, and then it occurred to him that it was a little late to ring for things. Why not fetch them from the study himself? . . .

He opened his door and looked out upon the great staircase. It was a fine piece of work, that staircase. Low, broad, dignified. . . .

There seemed to be nobody about. The lights were still on. He listened for a little while, and then put on his coat and went with a soft swiftness that was still quite dignified down-stairs to the study, the study redolent of Sir Peter.

He made his modest collection.

Lord Moggeridge came nearer to satisfaction as he

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emerged from the study that night at Shonts than at any other moment during this ill-advised week-end. In his pocket were four thoroughly good cigars. In one hand he held a cut-glass decanter of whisky. In the other a capacious tumbler. Under his arm, with that confidence in the unlimited portative power of his arm that nothing could shake, he had tucked the siphon. His soul rested upon the edge of tranquillity like a bird that has escaped the fowler. He was already composing his next sentence about that new variety of Infinity. . . .

Then something struck him from behind and impelled him forward a couple of paces. It was something hairy, something in the nature, he thought afterwards, of a worn broom. And also there were two other things softer and a little higher on each side. . . .

Then it was he made that noise like the young of some large animal.

He dropped the glass in a hasty attempt to save the siphon. . . .

"What in the name of Heavens—?" he cried, and found himself alone.

"Captain Douglas!"

The thought leaped to his mind.

But indeed it was not Captain Douglas. It was Bealby. Bealby in panic flight from Thomas. And how was Bealby to know that this large, richly laden man was the Lord Chancellor of England? Never before had Bealby seen any one in evening dress except a butler, and so he supposed this was just some larger, finer kind of butler that they kept up-stairs.

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Some larger, finer kind of butler blocking the path of escape. Bealby had taken in the situation with the rapidity of a hunted animal. The massive form blocked the door to the left. . . .

In the playground of the village school Bealby had been pre-eminent for his dodging; he moved as quickly as a lizard. His little hands, his head, poised with the skill of a practised butter, came against that mighty back, and then Bealby had dodged into the study. . . .

But it seemed to Lord Moggeridge, staggering over his broken glass and circling about defensively, that this fearful indignity could come only from Captain Douglas. Foolery. . . . Blup, blup. . . . Sham Poltergeist. Imbeciles. . . .

He said as much, believing that this young man and possibly confederates were within hearing; he said as much—hotly. He went on to remarks of an unphilosophical tendency about Captain Douglas generally, and about army officers, practical joking, Laxton's hospitalities, Shonts. . . . Thomas, you will remember, heard him. . . .

Nothing came of it. No answer, not a word of apology.

At last in a great dudgeon and with a kind of wariness about his back, the Lord Chancellor, with things more spoiled for him than ever, went on his way up-stairs.

When the green-baize door opened behind him, he turned like a shot, and a large foolish-faced butler appeared. Lord Moggeridge with a sceptre-like motion of the decanter very quietly and firmly asked him a simple question and then, then the lunatic

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must needs leap up three stairs and dive suddenly and upsettingly at his legs.

Lord Moggeridge was paralysed with amazement. His legs were struck from under him. He uttered one brief topographical cry.

(To Sir Peter unfortunately it sounded like "Help!")

For a few seconds the impressions that rushed upon Lord Moggeridge were too rapid for adequate examination. He had a compelling fancy to kill butlers. Things culminated in a pistol-shot. And then he found himself sitting on the landing beside a disgracefully dishevelled man servant, and his host was running down-stairs to them with a revolver in his hand.

On occasion Lord Moggeridge could produce a tremendous voice. He did so now. For a moment he stared panting at Sir Peter, and then emphasised by a pointing finger came the voice. Never had it been so charged with emotion.

"What does this *mean*, you, sir?" he shouted. "What does this mean?"

It was exactly what Sir Peter had intended to say.

§ 5

Explanations are detestable things.

And anyhow it isn't right to address your host as "You, sir."

§ 6

Throughout the evening the persuasion had grown in Lady Laxton's mind that all was not going well

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with the Lord Chancellor. It was impossible to believe he was enjoying himself. But she did not know how to give things a turn for the better. Clever women would have known, but she was so convinced she was not clever that she did not even try.

Thing after thing had gone wrong.

How was she to know that there were two sorts of philosophy—quite different? She had thought philosophy was philosophy. But it seemed that there were these two sorts, if not more; a round large sort that talked about the Absolute and was scornfully superior and rather irascible, and a jabby-pointed sort that called people “Tender” or “Tough,” and was generally much too familiar. To bring them together was just mixing trouble. There ought to be little books for hostesses explaining these things. . . .

Then it was extraordinary that the Lord Chancellor, who was so tremendously large and clever, wouldn't go and talk to Mrs. Rampound Pilby, who was also so tremendously large and clever. Repeatedly Lady Laxton had tried to get them into touch with one another. Until at last the Lord Chancellor had said distinctly and deliberately, when she had suggested his going across to the eminent writer, “God forbid!” Her dream of a large clever duologue that she could afterwards recall with pleasure was altogether shattered. She thought the Lord Chancellor uncommonly hard to please. These weren't the only people for him. Why couldn't he “chat party secrets” with Slinker Bond or say things to Lord Woodenhouse? You could say anything you liked to Lord Woodenhouse. Or talk with Mr. Tim-

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bre. Mrs. Timbre had given him an excellent opening; she had asked, wasn't it a dreadful anxiety always to have the Great Seal to mind? He had simply *grunted*. . . . And then why did he keep on looking so *dangerously* at Captain Douglas? . . .

Perhaps to-morrow things would take a turn for the better. . . .

One can at least be hopeful. Even if one is not *clever* one can be that. . . .

From such thoughts as these it was that this unhappy hostess was roused by a sound of smashing glass, a rumpus, and a pistol-shot.

She stood up, she laid her hand on her heart, she said "*Oh!*" and gripped her dressing-table for support. . . .

After a long time and when it seemed that it was now nothing more than a hubbub of voices, in which her husband's could be distinguished clearly, she crept out very softly upon the upper landing.

She perceived her cousin, Captain Douglas, looking extremely fair and frail and untrustworthy in a much too gorgeous kimono dressing-gown of embroidered Japanese silk. "I can assure you, my lord," he was saying in a strange high-pitched deliberate voice, "on my word of honour as a soldier, on my word of honour as a soldier, that I know absolutely nothing about it."

"Sure it wasn't all imagination, my lord?" Sir Peter asked with his inevitable infelicity. . . .

She decided to lean over the balustrading and ask very quietly and clearly:

"Lord Moggeridge, please! is anything the matter?"

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§ 7

All human beings are egotists, but there is no egotism to compare with the egotism of the very young.

Bealby was so much the centre of his world that he was incapable of any interpretation of this shouting and uproar, this smashing of decanters and firing of pistol-shots, except in reference to himself. He supposed it to be a Hue and Cry. He supposed that he was being hunted—hunted by a pack of great butlers hounded on by the irreparably injured Thomas. The thought of up-stairs gentlefolks passed quite out of his mind. He snatched up a faked Syrian dagger that lay, in the capacity of a paper-knife, on the study-table, concealed himself under the chints valance of a sofa, adjusted its rumpled skirts neatly, and awaited the issue of events.

For a time events did not issue. They remained talking noisily upon the great staircase. Bealby could not hear what was said, but most of what was said appeared to be flat contradiction.

“Perchance,” whispered Bealby to himself, gathering courage, “perchance we have eluded them. . . . A breathing space. . . .”

At last a woman’s voice mingled with the others and seemed a little to assuage them. . . .

Then it seemed to Bealby that they were dispersing to beat the house for him. “Good night *again* then,” said some one.

That puzzled him, but he decided it was a “blind.” He remained very, very still.

He heard a clicking in the apartment—the blue

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parlour it was called—between the study and the dining-room. Electric light?

Then some one came into the study. Bealby's eye was as close to the ground as he could get it. He was breathless, he moved his head with an immense circumspection. The valance was translucent but not transparent, below it there was a crack of vision, a strip of carpet, the casters of chairs. Among these things he perceived feet—not ankles, it did not go up to that, but just feet. Large flattish feet. A pair. They stood still, and Bealby's hand lighted on the hilt of his dagger.

The person above the feet seemed to be surveying the room—or reflecting.

"Drunk! . . . Old fool's either drunk or mad! That's about the truth of it," said a voice.

Mergleson! Angry, but parrotty and unmistakable.

The feet went across to the table and there were faint sounds of refreshment, discreetly administered. Then a moment of profound stillness. . . .

"Ah!" said the voice at last, a voice renewed.

Then the feet went to the passage door, halted in the doorway. There was a double click. The lights went out. Bealby was in absolute darkness.

Then a distant door closed and silence followed upon the dark. . . .

Mr. Mergleson descended to a pantry ablaze with curiosity.

"The Lord Chancellor's going dotty," said Mr. Mergleson replying to the inevitable question.

"That's what's up." . . .

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"I tried to save the blessed siphon," said Mr. Mergleson pursuing his narrative, "and 'e sprang on me like a leppard. I suppose 'e thought I wanted to take it away from 'im. 'E'd broke a glass already. 'Ow,—I *don't* know. There it was, lying on the landing. . . ."

"'Ere's where 'e bit my 'and," said Mr. Mergleson. . . .

A curious little side-issue occurred to Thomas. "Where's young Kicker all this time?" he asked.

"Lord!" said Mr. Mergleson, "all them other things, they clean drove 'im out of my 'ed. I suppose 'e's up there, hiding somewhere. . . ."

He paused. His eye consulted the eye of Thomas.

"'E's got be'ind a curtain or something," said Mr. Mergleson. . . .

"Queer where 'e can 'ave got to," said Mr. Mergleson. . . .

"Can't be bothered about 'im," said Mr. Mergleson.

"I expect he'll sneak down to 'is room when things are quiet," said Thomas, after reflection.

"No good going and looking for 'im now," said Mr. Mergleson. "Things up-stairs,—they *got* to settle down. . . ."

But in the small hours Mr. Mergleson awakened and thought of Bealby and wondered whether he was in bed. This became so great an uneasiness that about the hour of dawn he got up and went along the passage to Bealby's compartment. Bealby was not there and his bed had not been slept in.

That sinister sense of gathering misfortunes which

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comes to all of us at times in the small hours was so strong in the mind of Mr. Mergleson that he went on and told Thomas of this disconcerting fact. Thomas woke with difficulty and rather crossly, but sat up at last, alive to the gravity of Mr. Mergleson's mood.

"If 'e's found hiding about up-stairs after all this upset," said Mr. Mergleson, and left the rest of the sentence to a sympathetic imagination.

"Now it's light," said Mr. Mergleson after a slight pause, "I think we better just go round and 'ave a look for 'im. Both of us."

So Thomas clad himself provisionally, and the two men servants went up-stairs very softly and began a series of furtive sweeping movements—very much in the spirit of Lord Kitchener's historical sweeping movements in the Transvaal—through the stately old rooms in which Bealby must be lurking. . . .

§ 8

Man is the most restless of animals. There is an incessant urgency in his nature. He never knows when he is well off. And so it was that Bealby's comparative security under the sofa became presently too irksome to be endured. He seemed to himself to stay there for ages, but, as a matter of fact, he stayed there only twenty minutes. Then with eyes tempered to the darkness he first stuck out an alert attentive head, then crept out and remained for the space of half a minute on all fours surveying the indistinct blacknesses about him.

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Then he knelt up. Then he stood up. Then with arms extended and cautious steps he began an exploration of the apartment.

The passion for exploration grows with what it feeds upon. Presently Bealby was feeling his way into the blue parlour and then round by its shuttered and curtained windows to the dining-room. His head was now full of the idea of some shelter, more permanent, less pervious to housemaids than that sofa. He knew enough now of domestic routines to know that up-stairs in the early morning was much routed about by housemaids. He found many perplexing turns and corners, and finally got into the dining-room fireplace where it was very dark, and kicked against some fire-irons. That made his heart beat fast for a time. Then, groping on past it, he found in the darkness what few people could have found in the day, the stud that released the panel that hid the opening of the way that led to the priest hole. He felt the thing open, and halted perplexed. In that corner there wasn't a ray of light. For a long time he was trying to think what this opening could be, and then he concluded it was some sort of back way from down-stairs. . . . Well, anyhow it was all exploring. With an extreme gingerliness he got himself through the panel. He closed it almost completely behind him.

Careful investigation brought him to the view that he was in a narrow passage of brick or stone that came in a score of paces to a spiral staircase going both up and down. Up this he went, and presently breathed cool night air and had a glimpse of stars

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through a narrow slit-like window almost blocked by ivy. Then—what was very disagreeable—something scampered.

When Bealby's heart recovered he went on up again.

He came to the priest hole, a capacious cell six feet square with a bench bed and a little table and chair. It had a small door upon the stairs that was open and a niche cupboard. Here he remained for a time. Then restlessness made him explore a cramped passage, he had to crawl along it for some yards, that came presently into a curious space with wood on one side and stone on the other. Then ahead, most blessed thing! he saw light.

He went blundering towards it and then stopped appalled. From the other side of this wooden wall to the right of him had come a voice.

"Come in!" said the voice. A rich masculine voice that seemed scarcely two yards away.

Bealby became rigid. Then after a long interval he moved—as softly as he could.

The voice soliloquised.

Bealby listened intently, and then when all was still again crept forward two paces more towards the gleam. It was a peephole.

The unseen speaker was walking about. Bealby listened, and the sound of his beating heart mingled with the pad, pad, of slippered footsteps. Then with a brilliant effort his eye was at the chink. All was still again. For a time he was perplexed by what he saw, a large pink shining dome, against a deep greenish-grey background. At the base of the dome

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was a kind of interrupted hedge, brown and leafless. . . .

Then he realised that he was looking at the top of a head and two enormous eyebrows. The rest was hidden. . . .

Nature surprised Bealby into a penetrating sniff.

"Now," said the occupant of the room, and suddenly he was standing up—Bealby saw a long hairy neck sticking out of a dressing-gown—and walking to the side of the room. "I won't stand it," said the great voice, "I won't stand it. Ape's foolery!"

Then the Lord Chancellor began rapping at the panelling about his apartment.

"Hollow! It all sounds hollow."

Only after a long interval did he resume his writing. . . .

All night long that rat behind the wainscot troubled the Lord Chancellor. Whenever he spoke, whenever he moved about it was still; whenever he composed himself to write it began to rustle and blunder. Again and again it sniffed—an annoying kind of sniff. At last the Lord Chancellor gave up his philosophical relaxation and went to bed, turned out the lights and attempted sleep, but this only intensified his sense of an uneasy, sniffing presence close to him. When the light was out it seemed to him that this Thing, whatever it was, instantly came into the room and set the floor creaking and snapping. A Thing perpetually attempting something and perpetually thwarted. . . .

The Lord Chancellor did not sleep a wink. The first feeble infiltration of day found him sitting up in

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bed, wearily wrathful. . . . And now surely some one was going along the passage outside!

A great desire to hurt somebody very much seized upon the Lord Chancellor. Perhaps he might hurt that dismal *farceur* upon the landing! No doubt it was Douglas sneaking back to his own room after the night's efforts.

The Lord Chancellor slipped on his dressing-gown of purple silk. Very softly indeed did he open his bedroom door and very warily peep out. He heard the soft pad of feet upon the staircase.

He crept across the broad passage to the beautiful old balustrading. Down below he saw Mergleson—, Mergleson again!—in a shameful *deshabille*—going like a snake, like a slinking cat, like an assassin, into the door of the study. Rage filled the great man's soul. Gathering up the skirts of his dressing-gown he started in a swift yet noiseless pursuit.

He followed Mergleson through the little parlour and into the dining-room, and then he saw it all! There was a panel open, and Mergleson very cautiously going in. Of course! They had got at him through the priest hole. They had been playing on his nerves. All night they had been doing it—no doubt in relays. The whole house was in this conspiracy.

With his eyebrows spread like the wings of a fighting-cock the Lord Chancellor in five vast noiseless strides had crossed the intervening space and gripped the butler by his collarless shirt as he was disappearing. It was like a hawk striking a sparrow. Mergleson felt himself clutched, glanced over his shoulder

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and, seeing that fierce familiar face again close to his own, pitiless, vindictive, lost all sense of human dignity and yelled like a lost soul. . . .

§ 9

Sir Peter Laxton was awakened from an uneasy sleep by the opening of the dressing-room door that connected his room with his wife's.

He sat up astonished and stared at her white face, its pallor exaggerated by the cold light of dawn.

"Peter," she said, "I'm sure there's something more going on."

"Something more going on?"

"Something—shouting and swearing."

"You don't mean——?"

She nodded. "The Lord Chancellor," she said, in an awe-stricken whisper. "He's at it again. Downstairs in the dining-room."

Sir Peter seemed disposed at first to receive this quite passively. Then he flashed into extravagant wrath. "I'm *damned*," he cried, jumping violently out of bed, "if I'm going to stand this! Not if he was a hundred Lord Chancellors! He's turning the place into a bally lunatic asylum. *Once*—one might excuse. But to start it again. . . . *What's that?*"

They both stood still listening. Faintly yet quite distinctly came the agonised cry of some imperfectly educated person—"Elp!"

"Here! Where's my trousers?" cried Sir Peter. "He's murdering Mergleson. There isn't a moment to lose."

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§ 10

Until Sir Peter returned Lady Laxton sat quite still just as he had left her on his bed, aghast.

She could not even pray.

The sun had still to rise; the room was full of that cold weak inky light, light without warmth, knowledge without faith, existence without courage, that creeps in before the day. She waited. . . . In such a mood women have waited for massacre. . . .

Down-stairs a raucous shouting. . . .

She thought of her happy childhood upon the Yorkshire wolds, before the idea of week-end parties had entered her mind. The heather. The little birds. Kind things. A tear ran down her cheek. . . .

§ 11

Then Sir Peter stood before her again, alive still, but breathless and greatly ruffled.

She put her hands to her heart. She would be brave.

"Yes," she said. "Tell me."

"He's as mad as a hatter," said Sir Peter.

She nodded for more. She knew that.

"Has he—*killed* any one?" she whispered.

"He looked uncommonly like trying," said Sir Peter.

She nodded, her lips tightly compressed.

"Says Douglas will either have to leave the house or he does."

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"But—Douglas!"

"I know, but he won't hear a word."

"But *why* Douglas?"

"I tell you he's as mad as a hatter. Got persecution mania. People tapping and bells ringing under his pillow all night—that sort of idea. . . . And furious. I tell you—he frightened me. He was *awful*. He's given Mergleson a black eye. Hit him, you know. With his fist. Caught him in the passage to the priest hole—how they got there I don't know—and went for him like a madman."

"But what has Douglas done?"

"*I don't know*. I asked him, but he won't listen. He's just off his head. . . . Says Douglas has got the whole household trying to work a ghost on him. I tell you—he's off his nut."

Husband and wife looked at each other. . . .

"Of course if Douglas didn't mind just going off to oblige me," said Sir Peter at last. . . .

"It might calm him," he explained. . . . "You see, it's all so infernally awkward. . . ."

"Is he back in his room?"

"Yes. Waiting for me to decide about Douglas. Walking up and down."

For a little while their minds remained prostrate and inactive.

"I'd been so looking forward to the lunch," she said with a joyless smile. "The county——"

She could not go on.

"You know," said Sir Peter, "one thing—I'll see to it myself. I won't have him have a single drop of liquor more. If we have to search his room."

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“What I shall say to him at breakfast,” she said,
“I don’t know.”

Sir Peter reflected. “There’s no earthly reason why you should be brought into it at all. Your line is to know nothing about it. *Show* him you know nothing about it. Ask him—ask him if he’s had a good night. . . .”

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE WANDERERS

§ 1

NEVER had the gracious eastward face of Shonts looked more beautiful than it did on the morning of the Lord Chancellor's visit. It glowed as translucent as amber lit by flames, its two towers were pillars of pale gold. It looked over its slopes and parapets upon a great valley of mist-barred freshness through which the distant river shone like a snake of light. The south-west façade was still in the shadow, and the ivy hung from it darkly greener than the greenest green. The stained-glass windows of the old chapel reflected the sunrise as though lamps were burning inside. Along the terrace a pensive peacock trailed his sheathed splendours through the dew.

Amidst the ivy was a fuss of birds.

And presently there was pushed out from amidst the ivy at the foot of the eastward tower a little brownish buff thing, that seemed as natural there as a squirrel or a rabbit. It was a head—a ruffled human head. It remained still for a moment contemplating the calm spaciousness of terrace and garden and countryside. Then it emerged farther and rotated and surveyed the house above it. Its expression was one of alert caution. Its natural freshness and innocence were a little marred by an enormous

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transverse smudge, a bar sinister of smut, and the elfin delicacy of the left ear was festooned with a cobweb—probably a genuine antique. It was the face of Bealby.

He was considering the advisability of leaving Shonts—for good.

Presently his decision was made. His hands and shoulders appeared following his head, and then a dusty but undamaged Bealby was running swiftly towards the corner of the shrubbery. He crouched lest at any moment that pursuing pack of butlers should see him and give tongue. In another moment he was hidden from the house altogether, and rustling his way through a thicket of budding rhododendra. After those dirty passages the morning air was wonderfully sweet—but just a trifle hungry.

Grazing deer saw Bealby fly across the park, stared at him for a time with great gentle unintelligent eyes, and went on feeding.

They saw him stop ever and again. He was snatching at mushrooms, that he devoured forthwith as he sped on.

On the edge of the beech-woods he paused and glanced back at Shonts.

Then his eyes rested for a moment on the clump of trees through which one saw a scrap of the head gardener's cottage, a bit of the garden wall. . . .

A physiognomist might have detected a certain lack of self-confidence in Bealby's eyes.

But his spirit was not to be quelled. Slowly, joylessly perhaps, but with a grave determination, he raised his hand to his face and extended his fingers

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in that prehistoric gesture by which youth, since ever there was youth, has asserted the integrity of its soul against established and predominant things.

“*Ketch me!*” said Bealby.

§ 2

Bealby left Shonts about half past four in the morning. He went westward because he liked the company of his shadow and was amused at first by its vast length. By half past eight he had covered ten miles, and he was rather bored by his shadow. He had eaten nine raw mushrooms, two green apples and a quantity of unripe blackberries. None of these things seemed quite at home in him. And he had discovered himself to be wearing slippers. They were stout carpet slippers, but still they were slippers—and the road was telling on them. At the ninth mile the left one began to give on the outer seam. He got over a stile into a path that ran through the corner of a wood, and there he met a smell of frying bacon that turned his very soul to gastric juice.

He stopped short and sniffed the air—and the air itself was sizzling.

“Oh Krikey,” said Bealby, manifestly to the Spirit of the World. “This is a bit too strong. I wasn’t thinking much before.”

Then he saw something bright yellow and bulky just over the hedge.

From this it was that the sound of frying came.

He went to the hedge, making no effort to conceal himself. Outside a great yellow caravan with dainty

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little windows stood a largish dark woman in a deer-stalker hat, a short brown skirt, a large white apron and spatterdashes (among other things) frying bacon and potatoes in a frying-pan. She was very red in the face, and the frying-pan was spitting at her as frying-pans do at a timid cook. . . .

Quite mechanically Bealby scrambled through the hedge and drew nearer this divine smell. The woman scrutinised him for a moment, and then blinking and averting her face went on with her cookery.

Bealby came quite close to her and remained, noting the bits of potato that swam about in the pan, the jolly curling of the rashers, the dancing of the bubbles, the hymning splash and splutter of the happy fat. . . .

(If it should ever fall to my lot to be cooked, may I be fried with potatoes and butter. May I be fried with potatoes and good butter made from the milk of the cow. God send I am spared boiling; the prison of the pot, the rattling lid, the evil darkness, the greasy water. . . .)

"I suppose," said the lady prodding with her fork at the bacon, "I suppose you call yourself a Boy."

"Yes, Miss," said Bealby.

"Have you ever fried?"

"I could, Miss."

"Like this?"

"Better."

"Just lay hold of this handle—for it's scorching the skin off my face I am." She seemed to think for a moment and added, "entirely."

In silence Bealby grasped that exquisite smell by

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the handle, he took the fork from her hand and put his hungry eager nose over the seething mess. It wasn't only bacon; there were onions, onions giving it—an *edge!* It cut to the quick of appetite. He could have wept with the intensity of his sensations.

A voice almost as delicious as the smell came out of the caravan window behind Bealby's head.

"*Ju-dy!*" cried the voice.

"Here!—I mean—it's here I am," said the lady in the deerstalker.

"Judy—you didn't take my stockings for your own by any chance?"

The lady in the deerstalker gave way to delighted horror. "Sssh, Mavourneen!" she cried—she was one of that large class of amiable women who are more Irish than they need be—"there's a Boy here!"

§ 3

There was indeed an almost obsequiously industrious and obliging Boy. An hour later he was no longer a Boy but *the* Boy, and three friendly women were regarding him with a merited approval.

He had done the frying, renewed a waning fire with remarkable skill and despatch, reboiled a neglected kettle in the shortest possible time, laid almost without direction a simple meal, very exactly set out campstools and cleaned the frying-pan marvellously. Hardly had they taken their portions of that appetising savouriness, than he had whipped off with that implement, gone behind the caravan, busied himself

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there, and returned with the pan—glittering bright. Himself if possible brighter. One cheek indeed shone with an animated glow.

“But wasn’t there some of the bacon and stuff left?” asked the lady in the deerstalker.

“I didn’t think it was wanted, Miss,” said Bealby. “So I cleared it up.”

He met understanding in her eye. He questioned her expression.

“Mayn’t I wash up for you, Miss?” he asked to relieve the tension.

He washed up, swiftly and cleanly. He had never been able to wash up to Mr. Mergleson’s satisfaction before, but now he did everything Mr. Mergleson had ever told him. He asked where to put the things away and he put them away. Then he asked politely if there was anything else he could do for them. Questioned, he said he liked doing things. “You haven’t,” said the lady in the deerstalker, “a taste for cleaning boots?”

Bealby declared he had.

“Surely,” said a voice that Bealby adored, “’tis an angel from heaven.”

He had a taste for cleaning boots! This was an extraordinary thing for Bealby to say. But a great change had come to him in the last half-hour. He was violently anxious to do things, any sort of things, servile things, for a particular person. He was in love.

The owner of the beautiful voice had come out of the caravan, she had stood for a moment in the doorway before descending the steps to the ground and

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the soul of Bealby had bowed down before her in instant submission. Never had he seen anything so lovely. Her straight slender body was sheathed in blue; fair hair a little tinged with red poured gloriously back from her broad forehead, and she had the sweetest eyes in the world. One hand lifted her dress from her feet; the other rested on the lintel of the caravan door. She looked at him and smiled.

So for two years she had looked and smiled across the footlights to the Bealby in mankind. She had smiled now on her entrance out of habit. She took the effect upon Bealby as a foregone conclusion.

Then she had looked to make sure that everything was ready before she descended.

"How good it smells, Judy!" she had said.

"I've had a helper," said the woman who wore spats.

That time the blue-eyed lady had smiled at him quite definitely. . . .

The third member of the party had appeared unobserved; the irradiations of the beautiful lady had obscured her. Bealby discovered her about. She was bareheaded; she wore a simple grey dress with a Norfolk jacket, and she had a pretty, clear white profile under black hair. She answered to the name of "Winnie." The beautiful lady was Madeleine. They made little obscure jokes with each other and praised the morning ardently. "This is the best place of all," said Madeleine.

"All night," said Winnie, "not a single mosquito."

None of these three ladies made any attempt to conceal the sincerity of their hunger or their appreci-

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ation of Bealby's assistance. How good a thing is appreciation! Here he was doing with joy and pride and an eager excellence, the very services he had done so badly under the cuffs of Mergleson and Thomas. . . .

§ 4

And now Bealby, having been regarded with approval for some moments and discussed in tantalising undertones, was called upon to explain himself.

"Boy," said the lady in the deerstalker, who was evidently the leader and still more evidently the spokeswoman of the party, "come here."

"Yes, Miss." He put down the boot he was cleaning on the caravan step.

"In the first place, know by these presents, I am a married woman."

"Yes, Miss."

"And Miss is not a seemly mode of address for me."

"No, Miss. I mean—" Bealby hung for a moment and by the happiest of accidents, a scrap of his instruction at Shonts came up in his mind. "No," he said, "your—ladyship."

A great light shone on the spokeswoman's face. "Not yet, my child," she said, "not yet. He hasn't done his duty by me. I am—a simple Mum."

Bealby was intelligently silent.

"Say—Yes, Mum."

"Yes, Mum," said Bealby, and everybody laughed very agreeably.

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“And now,” said the lady, taking pleasure in her words, “know by these presents— By-the-by, what is your name?”

Bealby scarcely hesitated. “Dick Maltravers, Mum,” he said and almost added, “The Dauntless Daredevil of the Diamond-fields Horse,” which was the second title.

“Dick will do,” said the lady who was called Judy, and added suddenly and very amusingly: “You may keep the rest.”

(These were the sort of people Bealby liked. The *right* sort.)

“Well, Dick, we want to know, have you ever been in service?”

It was sudden. But Bealby was equal to it. “Only for a day or two, Miss—I mean, Mum—just to be useful.”

“*Were* you useful?”

Bealby tried to think whether he had been, and could recall nothing but the face of Thomas with the fork hanging from it. “I did my best, Mum,” he said impartially.

“And all that is over?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“And you’re at home again and out of employment?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Do you live near here?”

“No—leastways, not very far.”

“With your father?”

“Stepfather, Mum. I’m a Norfan.”

“Well, how would you like to come with us for a

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few days and help with things? Seven-and-sixpence a week."

Bealby's face was eloquent.

"Would your stepfather object?"

Bealby considered. "I don't think he would," he said.

"You'd better go round and ask him."

"I—suppose—yes," he said.

"And get a few things."

"Things, Mum?"

"Collars and things. You needn't bring a great box for such a little while."

"Yes, Mum. . . ."

He hovered rather undecidedly.

"Better run along now. Our man and horse will be coming presently. We shan't be able to wait for you long. . . ."

Bealby assumed a sudden briskness and departed.

At the gate of the field he hesitated almost imperceptibly and then directed his face to the Sabbath stillness of the village.

Perplexity corrugated his features. The stepfather's permission presented no difficulties, but it was more difficult about the luggage.

A voice called after him.

"Yes, Mum?" he said attentive and hopeful. Perhaps—somehow—they wouldn't want luggage.

"You'll want boots. You'll have to walk by the caravan, you know. You'll want some good stout boots."

"All right, Mum," he said with a sorrowful break in his voice. He waited a few moments but nothing

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more came. He went on—very slowly. He had forgotten about the boots.

That defeated him. . . .

It is hard to be refused admission to Paradise for the want of a hand-bag and a pair of walking-boots. . . .

§ 5

Bealby was by no means certain that he was going back to that caravan. He wanted to do so quite painfully, but—

He'd just look a fool going back without boots and—nothing on earth would reconcile him to the idea of looking a fool in the eyes of that beautiful woman in blue.

“Dick,” he whispered to himself despondently, “Daredevil Dick!” (A more miserable-looking face you never set eyes on.) “It’s all up with your little schemes, Dick my boy. You *must* get a bag—and nothing on earth will get you a bag.”

He paid little heed to the village through which he wandered. He knew there were no bags there. Chance rather than any volition of his own guided him down a side path that led to the nearly dry bed of a little rivulet, and there he sat down on some weedy grass under a group of willows. It was an untidy place that needed all the sunshine of the morning to be tolerable; one of those places where stinging nettles take heart and people throw old kettles, broken gallipots, jaded gravel, grass cuttings, rusty rubbish, old boots—

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For a time Bealby's eyes rested on the objects with an entire lack of interest.

Then he was reminded of his not so very remote childhood when he had found an old boot and made it into a castle. . . .

Presently he got up and walked across to the rubbish heap and surveyed its treasures with a quickened intelligence. He picked up a widowed boot and weighed it in his hand.

He dropped it abruptly, turned about and hurried back into the village street.

He had ideas, two ideas, one for the luggage and one for the boots. . . . If only he could manage it. Hope beat his great pinions in the heart of Bealby.

Sunday! The shops were shut. Yes, that was a fresh obstacle. He'd forgotten that.

The public-house stood bashfully open, the shy uninviting openness of Sunday morning before closing time, but public-houses alas! at all hours are forbidden to little boys. And besides he wasn't likely to get what he wanted in a public-house; he wanted a shop, a general shop. And here before him was the general shop—and its door ajar! His desire carried him over the threshold. The Sabbatical shutters made the place dark and cool, and the smell of bacon and cheese and chandleries, the very spirit of grocery, calm and unhurried, was cool and Sabbatical too, as if it sat there for the day in its best clothes. And a pleasant woman was talking over the counter to a thin and worried one who carried a bundle.

Their intercourse had a flavour of emergency and

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they both stopped abruptly at the appearance of Bealby.

His desire, his craving was now so great that it had altogether subdued the natural wiriness of his appearance. He looked meek, he looked good, he was swimming in propitiation and tender with respect. He produced an effect of being much smaller. He had got nice eyes. His movements were refined and his manners perfect.

"Not doing business to-day, my boy," said the pleasant woman.

"Oh, *please* 'm," he said from his heart.

"Sunday, you know."

"Oh, *please* 'm. If you could just give me a nold sheet of paper 'm, please."

"What for?" asked the pleasant woman.

"Just to wrap something up 'm."

She reflected and natural goodness had its way with her.

"A nice *big* bit?" said the woman.

"Please 'm."

"Would you like it brown?"

"Oh, *please* 'm."

"And you got some string?"

"Only cottony stuff," said Bealby, disembowelling a trouser pocket. "Wiv knots. But I dessay I can manage."

"You'd better have a bit of good string with it, my dear," said the pleasant woman, whose generosity was now fairly on the run, "then you can do your parcel up nice and tidy. . . ."

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§ 6

The white horse was already in the shafts of the caravan and William, a deaf and clumsy man of uncertain age and a vast sharp nosiness, was lifting in the basket of breakfast gear and grumbling in undertones at the wickedness and unfairness of travelling on Sunday, when Bealby returned to gladden three waiting women.

"Ah!" said the inconspicuous lady, "I knew he'd come."

"Look at his poor little precious parsivel," said the actress.

Regarded as luggage it was rather pitiful, a knobby, brown-paper parcel about the size—to be perfectly frank—of a tin can, two old boots and some grass, very carefully folded and tied up—and carried gingerly.

"But—" the lady in the deerstalker began and then paused.

"Dick," she said, as he came nearer, "where's your boots?"

"Oh, please, Mum," said the dauntless one, "they was away being mended. My stepfather thought perhaps you wouldn't mind if I didn't have boots. He said perhaps I might be able to get some more boots out of my salary. . . ."

The lady in the deerstalker looked alarmingly uncertain and Bealby controlled infinite distresses.

"Haven't you got a mother, Dick?" asked the beautiful voice suddenly. Its owner abounded in such spasmodic curiosities.

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“She—last year . . .” Matricide is a painful business at any time. And just as you see, in spite of every effort you have made, the jolliest lark in the world slipping out of your reach. And the sweet voice so sorry for him! So sorry! Bealby suddenly veiled his face with his elbow and gave way to honourable tears. . . .

A simultaneous desire to make him happy, help him to forget his loss, possessed three women. . . .

“That’ll be all right, Dick,” said the lady in the deerstalker patting his shoulder. “We’ll get you some boots to-morrow. And to-day you must sit up beside William and spare your feet. You’ll have to go to the inns with him. . . .”

“It’s wonderful, the elasticity of youth,” said the inconspicuous lady five minutes later. “To see that boy now, you’d never imagine he’d had a sorrow in the world.”

“Now get up there,” said the lady who was the leader. “We shall walk across the fields and join you later. You understand where you are to wait for us, William?”

She came nearer and shouted, “You understand, William?”

William nodded ambiguously. “’Ent a *Vool*,” he said.

The ladies departed. “*You’ll* be all right, Dick,” cried the actress kindly.

He sat up where he had been put, trying to look as Orphan Dick as possible after all that had occurred.

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§ 7

“Do you know the wind on the heath—have you lived the Gypsy life? Have you spoken, wanderers yourselves, with ‘Romany chi and Romany chal’ on the wind-swept moors at home or abroad? Have you tramped the broad highways, and, at close of day, pitched your tent near a running stream and cooked your supper by starlight over a fire of pine-wood? Do you know the dreamless sleep of the wanderer at peace with himself and all the world?”

For most of us the answer to these questions of the Amateur Camping Club is in the negative.

Yet every year the call of the road, the Borrovian glamour, draws away a certain small number of the imaginative from the grosser comforts of a complex civilisation, takes them out into tents and caravans and intimate communion with Nature and, incidentally, with various ingenious appliances designed to meet the needs of cooking in a breeze. It is an adventure to which high spirits and great expectations must be brought, it is an experience in proximity which few friendships survive—and altogether very great fun.

The life of breezy freedom resolves itself in practice chiefly into washing up and an anxious search for permission to camp. One learns how rich and fruitful our world can be in bystanders, and how easy it is to forget essential groceries. . . .

The heart of the joy of it lies in its perfect detachment. There you are in the morning sunlight under the trees that overhang the road going whither you

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will. Everything you need you have. Your van creaks along at your side. You are outside inns, outside houses, a home, a community, an *imperium in imperio*. At any moment you may draw out of the traffic upon the wayside grass and say, "Here—until the owner catches us at it—is home!" At any time—subject to the complaisance of William and your being able to find him—you may inspan and go onward. The world is all before you. You taste the complete yet leisurely insouciance of the snail.

And two of those three ladies had other satisfactions to supplement their pleasures. They both adored Madeleine Philips. She was not only perfectly sweet and lovely but she was known to be so; she had that most potent charm for women, prestige. They had got her all to themselves. They could show now how false is the old idea that there is no friendship nor conversation among women. They were full of wit and pretty things for one another and snatches of song in between. And they were free too from their "men-folk." They were doing without them. Dr. Bowles, the husband of the lady in the deerstalker, was away in Ireland, and Mr. Geedge, the lord of the inconspicuous woman, was golfing at Sandwich. And Madeleine Philips, it was understood, was only too glad to shake herself free from the crowd of admirers that hovered about her like wasps about honey. . . .

Yet after three days each one had thoughts about the need of helpfulness and more particularly about washing-up, that were better left unspoken, that were indeed conspicuously unspoken beneath their merry

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give and take, like a black and silent river flowing beneath a bridge of ivory. And each of them had a curious feeling in the midst of all this fresh free behaviour, as though the others were not listening sufficiently, as though something of the effect of them was being wasted. Madeleine's smiles became rarer; at times she was almost impassive, and Judy preserved nearly all her wit and verbal fireworks for the times when they passed through villages. . . . Mrs. Geedge was less visibly affected. She had thoughts of writing a book about it all, telling in the gayest, most provocative way, full of the quietest quaintest humour, just how jolly they had been. Men-folk would read it. This kept a little thin smile upon her lips. . . .

As an audience William was tough stuff. He pretended deafness; he never looked. He did not want to look. He seemed always to be holding his nose in front of his face to prevent his observation—as men pray into their hats at church. But once Judy Bowles overheard a phrase or so in his private soliloquy. "Pack o' wimmin," William was saying. "Dratted petticoats. *Dang 'em*. That's what I say to 'um. *Dang 'em!*"

As a matter of fact, he just fell short of saying it to them. But his manner said it. . . .

You begin to see how acceptable an addition was young Bealby to this company. He was not only helpful, immensely helpful, in things material, a vigorous and at first a careful washer-up, an energetic boot-polisher, a most serviceable cleaner and tidier of things, but he was also belief and support. Undis-

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guisedly he thought the caravan the loveliest thing going, and its three mistresses the most wonderful of people. His alert eyes followed them about full of an unstinted admiration and interest, he pricked his ears when Judy opened her mouth, he handed things to Mrs. Geedge. He made no secret about Madeleine. When she spoke to him, he lost his breath, he reddened and was embarrassed. . . .

They went across the fields saying that he was the luckiest of finds. It was fortunate his people had been so ready to spare him. Judy said boys were a race very cruelly maligned; see how *willing* he was! Mrs. Geedge said there was something elfin about Bealby's little face; Madeleine smiled at the thought of his quaint artlessness. She knew quite clearly that he'd die for her. . . .

§ 8

There was a little pause as the ladies moved away. Then William spat and spoke in a note of irrational bitterness.

"Brasted Voolery," said William and then loudly and fiercely, "Cam up y' ode Runt you."

At these words the white horse started into a convulsive irregular redistribution of its feet, the caravan strained and quivered into motion and Bealby's wanderings as a caravanner began.

For a time William spoke no more and Bealby scarcely regarded him. The light of strange fortunes and deep enthusiasm was in Bealby's eyes. . . .

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"One Thing," said William, "they don't 'ave the Sense to lock anythink up—Whatever."

Bealby's attention was recalled to the existence of his companion.

William's face was one of those faces that give one at first the impression of a solitary and very conceited nose. The other features are entirely subordinated to that salient effect. One sees them later. His eyes were small and uneven, his mouth apparently toothless, thin-lipped and crumpled, with the upper lip falling over the other in a manner suggestive of a meagre firmness mixed with appetite. When he spoke he made a faint slobbering sound. "Every-fink," he said, "behind there."

He became confidential. "I been *in* there. I larked about wiv their Fings."

"They got some choc'late," he said, lusciously. "Oo Fine!

"All sorts of Fings."

He did not seem to expect any reply from Bealby.

"We going far before we meet 'em?" asked Bealby.

William's deafness became apparent.

His mind was preoccupied by other ideas. One wicked eye came close to Bealby's face. "We going to 'ave a bit of choc'late," he said in a wet desirous voice.

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the door.

"You get it," said William with reassuring nods and the mouth much pursed and very oblique.

Bealby shook his head.

"It's in a little dror, under 'er place where she sleeps."

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Bealby's head-shake became more emphatic.

"*Yus*, I tell you," said William.

"No," said Bealby.

"Choc'late I tell you," said William and ran the tongue of appetite round the rim of his toothless mouth.

"Don't want choc'late," said Bealby, thinking of a large lump of it.

"Go on," said William. "Nobody won't see you. . . ."

"Go it!" said William. . . .

"You're afraid," said William. . . .

"Here, *I'll* go," said William, losing self-control. "You just 'old these reins."

Bealby took the reins. William got up and opened the door of the caravan. Then Bealby realised his moral responsibility—and, leaving the reins, clutched William firmly by his baggy nether garments. They were elderly garments, much sat upon. "Don't be a Vool," said William, struggling. "Leago my slack."

Something partially gave way and William's head came round to deal with Bealby.

"What you mean pullin' my cloes orf me?"

"That,"—he investigated. "Take me a Nour to sew up."

"I ain't going to steal," shouted Bealby into the ear of William.

"Nobody arst you to steal——"

"Nor you neither," said Bealby.

The caravan bumped heavily against a low garden wall, skidded a little and came to rest. William sat down suddenly. The white horse after a period of

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confusion with its legs, tried the flavour of some overhanging lilac branches and was content.

“Gimme those reins,” said William. “You be the Brastedest Young Vool. . . .”

“Sittin’ ’ere,” said William presently, “chewin’ our teeth, when we might be eatin’ choc’late. . . .”

“I ’ent got no use for *you*,” said William, “blowed if I ’ave. . . .”

Then the thought of his injuries returned to him.

“I’d make you sew ’em up yourself, darned if I woun’t—on’y you’d go running the brasted needle into me. . . . Nour’s work there is—by the feel of it. . . . Mor’n nour. . . . Gooddbye done, too. . . . All I got. . . .”

“I’ll give you Sumpfin you little Beace ’fore I done wi’ you.”

“I wouldn’t steal ’er choc’lates,” said young Bealby, “not if I was starving.”

“Eh?” shouted William.

“*Steal!*” shouted Bealby.

“I’ll steal ye, ’fore I done with ye,” said William. “Tearin’ my cloes for me. . . . Oh! Cam *up* y’old Runt. We don’t want *you* to stop and lissen. Cam *up* I tell you!”

§ 9

They found the ladies rather, it seemed, by accident than design, waiting upon a sandy common rich with purple heather and bordered by woods of fir and spruce. They had been waiting some time and it was clear that the sight of the yellow caravan relieved an

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accumulated anxiety. Bealby rejoiced to see them. His soul glowed with the pride of chocolate resisted and William overcome. He resolved to distinguish himself over the preparation of the midday meal. It was a pleasant little island of green they chose for their midday pitch, a little patch of emerald turf amidst the purple, a patch already doomed to removal, as a bare oblong and a pile of rolled-up turves witnessed. This pile and a little bank of heather and bramble promised shelter from the breeze, and down the hill a hundred yards away was a spring and a built-up pool. This spot lay perhaps fifty yards away from the high road and one reached it along a rutty track which had been made by the turf cutters. And overhead was the glorious sky of an English summer, with great clouds like sunlit, white-sailed ships, the Constable sky. The white horse was hobbled and turned out to pasture among the heather, and William was sent off to get congenial provender at the nearest public-house. "William!" shouted Mrs. Bowles as he departed, shouting confidentially into his ear, "Get your clothes mended!"

"Eh?" said William.

"Mend your clothes."

"Yah! 'E did that," said William viciously with a movement of self-protection and so went.

Nobody watched him go. Almost sternly they set to work upon the luncheon preparation as William receded. "William," Mrs. Bowles remarked, as she bustled with the patent cooker, putting it up wrong way round so that afterwards it collapsed, "William—takes offence. Sometimes I think he takes offence

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almost too often. . . . Did you have any difficulty with him, Dick?"

"It wasn't anything, Miss," said Bealby meekly.

Bealby was wonderful with the fire-lighting, and except that he cracked a plate in warming it, quite admirable as a cook. He burned his fingers twice—and liked doing it; he ate his portion with instinctive modesty on the other side of the caravan, and he washed up as Mr. Mergleson had always instructed him to do. Mrs. Bowles showed him how to clean knives and forks by sticking them into the turf. A little to his surprise these ladies lit and smoked cigarettes. They sat about and talked perplexingly. Clever stuff. Then he had to get water from the neighbouring brook and boil the kettle for an early tea. Madeleine produced a charmingly bound little book and read in it, the other two professed themselves anxious for the view from a neighbouring hill. They produced their sensible spiked Swiss walking-sticks such as one does not see in England; they seemed full of energy. "You go," Madeleine had said, "while I and Dick stay here and make tea. I've walked enough to-day. . . ."

So Bealby, happy to the pitch of ecstasy, first explored the wonderful interior of the caravan—there was a dresser, a stove, let-down chairs and tables and all manner of things—and then nursed the kettle to the singing stage on the patent cooker while the beautiful lady reclined close at hand on a rug.

"Dick!" she said.

He had forgotten he was Dick.

"Dick!"

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He remembered his personality with a start. "Yes, Miss!" He knelt up, with a handful of twigs in his hand and regarded her.

"Well, Dick," she said.

He remained flushed adoration. There was a little pause and the lady smiled at him an unaffected smile.

"What are you going to be, Dick, when you grow up?"

"I don't know, Miss. I've wondered."

"What would you like to be?"

"Something abroad. Something—so that you could see things."

"A soldier?"

"Or a sailor, Miss."

"A sailor sees nothing but the sea."

"I'd rather be a sailor than a common soldier, Miss."

"You'd like to be an officer?"

"Yes, Miss—only——"

"One of my very best friends is an officer," she said, a little irrelevantly it seemed to Bealby.

"I'd be a Norficer like a shot," said Bealby, "if I 'ad 'arf a chance, Miss."

"Officers nowadays," she said, "have to be very brave, able men."

"I know, Miss," said Bealby modestly.

The fire required attention for a little while. . . .

The lady turned over on her elbow. "What do you think you are *likely* to be, Dick?" she asked.

He didn't know.

"What sort of man is your stepfather?"

Bealby looked at her. "He isn't much," he said.

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“What is he?”

Bealby hadn't the slightest intention of being the son of a gardener. “'E's a law-writer.”

“What! in that village.”

“'E 'as to stay there for 'is 'ealth, Miss,” he said. “Every summer. 'Is 'ealth is very pre-precocious, Miss. . . .”

He fed his fire with a few judiciously administered twigs.

“What was your own father, Dick?”

With that she opened a secret door into Bealby's imagination. All stepchildren have those dreams. With him they were so frequent and vivid that they had long since become a kind of second truth. He coloured a little and answered with scarcely an interval for reflection. “'E passed as Mal-travers,” he said.

“Wasn't that his name?”

“I don't rightly know, Miss. There was always something kep' from me. My mother used to say, 'Artie,' she used to say: 'there's things that some day you must know, things that concern you. Things about your farver. But poor as we are now and struggling. . . . Not yet. . . . Some day you shall know truly—*who you are.*' That was 'ow she said it, Miss.”

“And she died before she told you?”

He had almost forgotten that he had killed his mother that very morning. “Yes, miss,” he said.

She smiled at him and something in her smile made him blush hotly. For a moment he could have believed she understood. And indeed she did under-

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stand, and it amused her to find this boy doing what she herself had done at times, what indeed she felt it was still in her to do. She felt that most delicate of sympathies, the sympathy of one rather over-imaginative person for another. But her next question dispelled his doubt of her though it left him red and hot. She asked it with a convincing simplicity.

"Have you any idea, Dick, have you any guess or suspicion, I mean, who it is you really are?"

"I wish I had, Miss," he said. "I suppose it doesn't matter, really—but one can't help wondering. . . ."

How often he had wondered in his lonely wanderings through that dear city of day-dreams where all the people one knows look out of windows as one passes and the roads are paved with pride! How often had he decided and changed and decided again!

§ 10

Now suddenly a realisation of intrusion shattered this conversation. A third person stood over the little encampment, smiling mysteriously and waving a cleek in a slow hieratic manner through the air.

"De licious lill' corn'," said the newcomer in tones of benediction.

He met their inquiring eyes with a luxurious smile. "Licious," he said, and remained swaying insecurely and failing to express some imperfectly apprehended deep meaning by short peculiar movements of the cleek.

He was obviously a golfer astray from some adjacent course—and he had lunched.

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"Mighty Join you," he said, and then very distinctly in a full large voice, "Miss Malleleine Philps." These are the penalties of a public and popular life.

"He's *drunk*," the lady whispered. "Get him to go away, Dick. I can't endure drunken men."

She stood up and Bealby stood up. He advanced in front of her, slowly, with his nose in the air, extraordinarily like a small terrier smelling at a strange dog.

"I said Mighty Join-you," the golfer repeated. His voice was richly excessive. He was a big heavy man with a short-cropped moustache, a great deal of neck and dewlap and a solemn expression.

"Prup. Be'r. Introzuze m'self," he remarked. He tried to indicate himself by waving his hand towards himself but finally abandoned the attempt as impossible. "Ma' Goo' Soch'l Poshishun," he said.

Bealby had a disconcerting sense of retreating footsteps behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Miss Philips standing at the foot of the steps that led up to the fastnesses of the caravan. "Dick," she cried with a sharp note of alarm in her voice, "get rid of that man."

A moment after Bealby heard the door shut and a sound of a key in its lock. He concealed his true feelings by putting his arms akimbo, sticking his legs wider apart and contemplating the task before him with his head a little on one side. He was upheld by the thought that the yellow caravan had a window looking upon him. . . .

The newcomer seemed to consider the ceremony of

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introduction completed. "I done care for goff," he said, almost vaingloriously.

He waved his cleek to express his preference. "Natua," he said with a satisfaction that bordered on fatuity.

He prepared to come down from the little turf crest on which he stood to the encampment.

"'Ere!" said Bealby. "This is Private."

The golfer indicated by solemn movements of the cleek that this was understood but that other considerations overrode it.

"You— You got to go!" cried Bealby in a breathless squeak. "You get out of here."

The golfer waved an arm as who should say, "You do not understand but I forgive you," and continued to advance towards the fire. And then Bealby, at the end of his tact, commenced hostilities.

He did so because he felt he had to do something and he did not know what else to do.

"Wan' nothin' but frenly conversation sushus custom'ry webred peel," the golfer was saying, and then a large fragment of turf hit him in the neck, burst all about him and stopped him abruptly.

He remained for some lengthy moments too astonished for words. He was not only greatly surprised but he chose to appear even more surprised than he was. In spite of the brown-black mould upon his cheek and brow and a slight displacement of his cap, he achieved a sort of dignity. He came slowly to a focus upon Bealby, who stood by the turf pile grasping a second missile. The cleek was extended sceptrewise.

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"Replace the—Divot."

"You go orf," said Bealby. "I'll chuck it if you don't. I tell you fair."

"Replace the—Divot," roared the golfer again in a voice of extraordinary power.

"You—you go!" said Bealby.

"Am I t'ask you. Third time. Reshpect—Roos. . . . Replace the Divot."

It struck him fully in the face.

He seemed to emerge through the mould. He was blinking but still dignified. "Tha'—was intentional," he said.

He seemed to gather himself together. . . .

Then suddenly and with a surprising nimbleness he discharged himself at Bealby. He came with astonishing swiftness. He got within a foot of him. Well it was for Bealby that he had learned to dodge in the village playground. He went down under the golfer's arm and away round the end of the stack, and the golfer with his force spent in concussion remained for a time clinging to the turf pile and apparently trying to remember how he got there. Then he was reminded of recent occurrences by a shrill small voice from the other side of the stack.

"You gow away!" said the voice. "Can't you see you're annoying a lady? You gow away."

"Nowish—'noy anyone. Pease wall wirl."

But this was subterfuge. He meant to catch that boy.

Suddenly and rather brilliantly he turned the flank of the turf pile, and only a couple of loose turfs at the foot of the heap upset his calculations. He found

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himself on all fours on ground from which it was difficult to rise. But he did not lose heart. "Boy—hic—scow," he said, and became for a second rush a nimble quadruped.

Again he got quite astonishingly near to Bealby, and then in an instant was on his feet and running across the encampment after him. He succeeded in kicking over the kettle and the patent cooker without any injury to himself or loss of pace, and succumbed only to the sharp turn behind the end of the caravan and the steps. He hadn't somehow thought of the steps. So he went down rather heavily. But now the spirit of a fine man was roused. Regardless of the scream from inside that had followed his collapse, he was up and in pursuit almost instantly. Bealby only escaped the swiftness of his rush by jumping the shafts and going away across the front of the caravan to the turf pile again. The golfer tried to jump the shafts too, but he was not equal to that. He did in a manner jump. But it was almost as much diving as jumping. And there was something in it almost like the curveting of a Great Horse. . . .

When Bealby turned at the crash, the golfer was already on all fours again and trying very busily to crawl out between the shaft and the front wheel. He would have been more successful in doing this if he had not begun by putting his arm through the wheel. As it was he was trying to do too much; he was trying to crawl out at two points at once and getting very rapidly annoyed at his inability to do so. The caravan was shifting slowly forward. . . .

It was manifest to Bealby that getting this man to

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go was likely to be a much more lengthy business than he had supposed.

He surveyed the situation for a moment and then, realising the entanglement of his opponent, he seized a camp-stool by one leg, went round by the steps and attacked the prostrate enemy from the rear with effectual but inconclusive fury.

He hammered. . . .

"Steady on, young man," said a voice and he was seized from behind. He turned—to discover himself in the grip of a second golfer. . . .

Another! Bealby fought in a fury of fear. . . .

He bit an arm—rather too tweedy to feel much—and got in a couple of shiners—alas! that they were only slippered shiners!—before he was overpowered. . . .

A cuffed, crumpled, disarmed, and panting Bealby found himself watching the careful extraction of the first golfer from the front wheel. Two friends assisted that gentleman with a reproachful gentleness, and his repeated statements that he was all right seemed to reassure them greatly. Altogether there were now four golfers in the field, counting the pioneer.

"He was after this devil of a boy," said the one who held Bealby.

"Yes, but how did he get here?" asked a second friend.

"Feel better now?" said the third, helping the first comer to his uncertain feet. "Let me have your cleek, o' man. . . . You won't want your cleek. . . ."

Across the heather, lifting their heads a little, came Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Geedge returning from their

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walk. They were wondering whoever their visitors could be.

And then like music after a dispute came Madeleine Philips, a beautiful blue-robed thing, coming slowly with a kind of wonder on her face, out of the caravan and down the steps. Instinctively everybody turned to her. The drunkard with a gesture released himself from his supporter and stood erect. His cap was replaced upon him—obliquely. His cleek had been secured.

“I heard a noise,” said Madeleine lifting her pretty chin and speaking in her sweetest tones.

She looked her inquiries. . . .

She surveyed the three sober men with a practised eye. She chose the tallest, a fair, serious-looking young man standing conveniently at the drunkard's elbow.

“Will you please take your friend away?” she said, indicating the offender with her beautiful white hand.

“Simly,” he said in a slightly subdued voice. “Simly coring.”

Everybody tried for a moment to understand him.

“Look here, old man, you've got no business here,” said the fair young man. “You'd better come back to the club-house.”

The drunken man stuck to his statement. “Simly coring,” he said a little louder.

“I *think*,” said a little bright-eyed man with a very cheerful yellow vest, “I *think* he's apologising. I *hope so*.”

The drunken man nodded his head. That among other matters.

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The tall young man took his arm but he insisted on his point. "Simly coring," he said with emphasis. "If—if—done*wan*' me to cor. Notome. Nottot. . . . Mean' say. Nottot tat-tome. Nottotome. Orny way—sayin' notome. No wish 'trude. No wish 'all."

"Well then, you see, you'd better come away."

"I *ars*' you—are you *tome*? Miss—Miss Pips." He appealed to Miss Philips.

"If you'd answer him—" said the tall young man.

"No, sir," she said with great dignity and the pretty chin higher than ever. "I am *not* at home."

"Nuthin' more t'say then," said the drunken man, and with a sudden stoicism he turned away.

"Come," he said, submitting to support.

"Simly orny arfnoon cor," he said generally and permitted himself to be led off.

"Orny frenly cor. . . ."

For some time he was audible as he receded explaining in a rather condescending voice the extreme social correctness of his behaviour. Just for a moment or so there was a slight tussle, due to his desire to return and leave cards. . . .

He was afterwards seen to be distributing a small handful of visiting cards amidst the heather with his free arm, rather in the manner of a paper chase—but much more gracefully. . . .

Then decently and in order he was taken out of sight. . . .

§ 11

Bealby had been unostentatiously released by his captor as soon as Miss Philips appeared, and the two

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remaining golfers now addressed themselves to the three ladies in regret and explanation.

The man who had held Bealby was an aquiline grey-clad person with a cascade moustache and wrinkled eyes and for some obscure reason he seemed to be amused; the little man in the yellow vest however was quite earnest and serious enough to make up for him. He was one of those little fresh-coloured men whose faces stick forward openly. He had open projecting eyes, an open mouth, his cheeks were frank to the pitch of ostentation, his cap was thrust back from his exceptionally open forehead. He had a chest and a stomach. These, too, he held out. He would have held out anything. His legs leaned forward from the feet. It was evidently impossible for a man of his nature to be anything but clean shaved. . . .

"Our fault entirely," he said. "Ought to have looked after him. Can't say how sorry and ashamed we are. Can't say how sorry we are he caused you any inconvenience."

"Of course," said Mrs. Bowles, "our boy-servant ought not to have pelted him."

"He didn't exactly *pelt* him, dear," said Madeleine. . . .

"Well, anyhow our friend ought not to have been off his chain. It was our affair to look after him and we didn't. . . ."

"You see," the open young man went on, with the air of lucid explanation, "he's our worst player. And he got round in a hundred and twenty-seven. And beat—somebody. And—it's upset him. It's not a bit of good disguising that we've been letting him

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drink. . . . We have. To begin with we encouraged him. . . . We oughtn't to have let him go. But we thought a walk alone might do him good. And some of us were a bit off him. Fed up rather. You see he'd been singing. Would go on singing. . . ."

He went on to propitiations. "Anything the club can do to show how we regret. . . . If you would like to pitch later on in our rough beyond the pine-woods. . . . You'd find it safe and secluded. . . . Custodian—most civil man. Get you water or anything you wanted. Especially after all that has happened. . . ."

Bealby took no further part in these concluding politenesses. He had a curious feeling in his mind that perhaps he had not managed this affair quite so well as he might have done. He ought to have been more tactful like, more persuasive. He was a fool to have started chucking. . . . Well, well. He picked up the overturned kettle and went off down the hill to get water. . . .

What had she thought of him? . . .

In the meantime one can at least boil kettles.

§ 12

One consequence of this little incident of the rejoicing golfer was that the three ladies were no longer content to dismiss William and Bealby at nightfall and sleep unprotected in the caravan. And this time their pitch was a lonely one with only the golf clubhouse within call. They were inclined even to distrust the golf club. So it was decided, to his great

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satisfaction, that Bealby should have a certain sleeping-sack Mrs. Bowles had brought with her and that he should sleep therein between the wheels.

This sleeping-sack was to have been a great feature of the expedition, but when it came to the test Judy could not use it. She had not anticipated that feeling of extreme publicity the open air gives one at first. It was like having all the world in one's bed-room. Every night she had relapsed into the caravan.

Bealby did not mind what they did with him so long as it meant sleeping. He had had a long day of it. He undressed sketchily and wriggled into the nice woolly bag and lay for a moment listening to the soft bumpings that were going on overhead. *She* was there. He had the instinctive confidence of our sex in women, and here were three of them. He had a vague idea of getting out of his bag again and kissing the under side of the van that held this dear beautiful creature. . . .

He didn't. . . .

Such a lot of things had happened that day—and the day before. He had been going without intermission, it seemed now for endless hours. He thought of trees, roads, dew-wet grass, frying-pans, pursuing packs of gigantic butlers hopelessly at fault—no doubt they were hunting now—chinks and crannies, tactless missiles flying, bursting, missiles it was vain to recall. He stared for a few seconds through the wheel spokes at the dancing, crackling fire of pinecones which it had been his last duty to replenish, stared and blinked much as a little dog might do,

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and then he had slipped away altogether into the world of dreams. . . .

§ 13

In the morning he was extraordinarily hard to wake. . . .

“Is it after sleeping all day ye’d be?” cried Judy Bowles, who was always at her most Irish about breakfast-time.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE UNOBTRUSIVE PARTING

§ 1

MONDAY was a happy day for Bealby.

The caravan did seventeen miles and came to rest at last in a sloping field outside a cheerful little village set about a green on which was a long tent professing to be a theatre.

At the first stopping-place that possessed a general shop Mrs. Bowles bought Bealby a pair of boots. Then she had a bright idea. "Got any pocket money, Dick?" she asked.

She gave him half a crown, that is to say she gave him two shillings and sixpence, or five sixpences or thirty pennies—according as you choose to look at it—in one large undivided shining coin.

Even if he had not been in love here surely was incentive to a generous nature to help and do distinguished services. He dashed about doing things. The little accident on Sunday had warned him to be careful of the plates, and the only flaw upon a perfect day's service was the dropping of an egg on its way to the frying-pan for supper. It remained where it fell and there presently he gave it a quiet burial. There was nothing else to be done with it. . . .

All day long at intervals Miss Philips smiled at him and made him do little services for her. And in the evening, after the custom of her great profession

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when it keeps holiday, she insisted on going to the play. She said it would be the loveliest fun. She went with Mrs. Bowles because Mrs. Geedge wanted to sit quietly in the caravan and write down a few little things while they were still fresh in her mind. And it wasn't in the part of Madeleine Philips not to insist that both William and Bealby must go too; she gave them each a shilling—though the prices were sixpence, threepence, twopence and a penny—and Bealby saw his first real play.

It was called "Brothers in Blood or the Gentleman Ranker." There was a poster—which was only very slightly justified by the performance—of a man in khaki with a bandaged head proposing to sell his life dearly over a fallen comrade.

One went to the play through an open and damaged field gate and across trampled turf. Outside the tent were two paraffin flares illuminating the poster and a small cluster of the impecunious young. Within on grass that was worn and bleached were benches, a gathering audience, a piano played by an offhand lady and a drop scene displaying the Grand Canal, Venice. The Grand Canal was infested by a crowded multitude of zealous and excessive reflections of the palaces above and by peculiar crescentic black boats floating entirely out of water and having no reflections at all. The offhand lady gave a broad impression of the Wedding March in "Lohengrin" and the back seats assisted by a sort of gastric vocalisation called humming and by whistling between the teeth. Madeleine Philips evidently found it tremendous fun, even before the curtain rose.

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And then—illusion. . . .

The scenery was ridiculous, it waved about, the actors and actresses were surely the most pitiful of their tribe and every invention in the play impossible, but the imagination of Bealby like the loving-kindness of God made no difficulties, it rose up and met and embraced and gave life to all these things. It was a confused story in the play, everybody was more or less somebody else all the way through, and it got more confused in Bealby's mind, but it was clear from the outset that there was vile work afoot, nets spread and sweet simple people wronged. And never were sweet and simple people quite so sweet and simple. There was the wrongful brother who was weak and wicked and the rightful brother who was vindictively, almost viciously good, and there was an ingrained villain who was a baronet, a man who wore a frock-coat and a silk hat and carried gloves and a stick in every scene and upon all occasions—that sort of man. He looked askance, always. There was a dear simple girl, with a vast sweet smile, who was loved according to their natures by the wrongful and the rightful brother, and a large wicked red-clad, lip-biting woman whose passions made the crazy little stage quiver. There was a comic butler—very different stuff from old Mergleson—who wore an evening coat and plaid trousers and nearly choked Bealby. Why weren't all butlers like that? Funny. And there were constant denunciations. Always there were denunciations going on or denunciations impending. That took Bealby particularly. Never surely in all the world were bad people so steadily

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and thoroughly scolded and told what. Everybody hissed them; Bealby hissed them. And when they were told what, he applauded. And yet they kept on with their wickedness to the very curtain. They retired—askance to the end. Foiled but pursuing. “A time will come,” they said.

There was a moment in the distresses of the heroine when Bealby dashed aside a tear. And then at last most wonderfully it all came right. The company lined up and hoped that Bealby was satisfied. Bealby wished he had more hands. His heart seemed to fill his body. Oh *prime! prime!* . . .

And out he came into the sympathetic night. But he was no longer a trivial Bealby, his soul was purged, he was a strong and silent man, ready to explode into generous repartee or nerve himself for high endeavour. He slipped off in the opposite direction from the caravan because he wanted to be alone for a time and *feel*. He was in a sphere of glorious illusion. . . .

He was quite sure that he had been wronged. Not to be wronged is to forgo the first privilege of goodness. He had been deeply wronged by a plot—all those butlers were in the plot or why should they have chased him—he was much older than he really was, it had been kept from him, and in truth he was a rightful earl. “Earl Shonts,” he whispered; and indeed, why not? And Madeleine too had been wronged; she had been reduced to wander in this uncomfortable caravan; this Gypsy Queen; she had been brought to it by villains, the same villains who had wronged Bealby. . . .

Out he went into the night, the kindly consenting

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summer night, where there is nothing to be seen or heard that will contradict these delicious wonderful persuasions.

He was so full of dreams that he strayed far away along the dark country lanes and had at last the utmost difficulty in finding his way back to the caravan. And when ultimately he got back after hours and hours of heroic existence it did not even seem that they had missed him. It did not seem that he had been away half an hour.

§ 2

Tuesday was not so happy a day for Bealby as Monday.

Its shadows began when Mrs. Bowles asked him in a friendly tone when it was clean-collar day.

He was unready with his answer.

“And don’t you ever use a hair-brush, Dick?” she asked. “I’m sure now there’s one in your parcel.”

“I do use it *sometimes*, Mum,” he admitted.

“And I’ve never detected you with a tooth-brush yet. Though that perhaps is extreme. And Dick—soap? I think you’d better be letting me give you a cake of soap.”

“I’d be very much obliged, Mum.”

“I hardly dare hint, Dick, at a clean handkerchief. Such things are known.”

“If you wouldn’t mind—when I’ve got the breakfast things done, Mum. . . .”

The thing worried him all through breakfast. He had not expected personalities from Mrs. Bowles.

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More particularly personalities of this kind. He felt he had to think hard.

He affected modesty after he had cleared away breakfast, and carried off his little bundle to a point in the stream which was masked from the encampment by willows. With him he also brought that cake of soap. He began by washing his handkerchief, which was bad policy because that left him no dry towel but his jacket. He ought, he perceived, to have secured a dish-cloth or a newspaper. (This he must remember on the next occasion.) He did over his hands and the more exposed parts of his face with soap and jacket. Then he took off and examined his collar. It certainly was pretty bad. . . .

"Why!" cried Mrs. Bowles when he returned, "that's still the same collar."

"They all seem to've got crumpled, 'm," said Bealby.

"But are they all as dirty?"

"I'd some blacking in my parcel," said Bealby, "and it got loose, Mum. I'll have to get another collar when we come to a shop."

It was a financial sacrifice but it was the only way, and when they came to the shop Bealby secured a very nice collar indeed, high with pointed turn-down corners, so that it cut his neck all round, jabbed him under the chin and gave him a proud upcast carriage of the head that led to his treading upon and very completely destroying a stray plate while preparing lunch. But it was more of a man's collar, he felt, than anything he had ever worn before. And it cost sixpence halfpenny, six dee and a half.

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(I should have mentioned that while washing up the breakfast things he had already broken the handle off one of the breakfast-cups. Both these accidents deepened the cloud upon his day.)

And then there was the trouble of William. William having meditated upon the differences between them for a day had now invented an activity. As Bealby sat beside him behind the white horse he was suddenly and frightfully pinched. *Gee!* One wanted to yelp.

"Choc'late," said William through his teeth and very very savagely. "*Now* then."

After William had done that twice Bealby preferred to walk beside the caravan. Thereupon William whipped up the white horse and broke records and made all the crockery sing together and forced the pace until he was spoken to by Mrs. Bowles. . . .

It was upon a Bealby thus depressed and worried that the rumour of impending "men-folk" came. It began after the party had stopped for letters at a village post-office; there were not only letters but a telegram, that Mrs. Bowles read with her spats far apart and her head on one side. "Ye'd like to know about it," she said waggishly to Miss Philips, "and you just shan't."

She then went into her letters.

"You've got some news," said Mrs. Geedge.

"I have that," said Mrs. Bowles, and not a word more could they get from her. . . .

"I'll keep my news no longer," said Mrs. Bowles, lighting her cigarette after lunch as Bealby hovered about clearing away the banana-skins and suchlike

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vestiges of dessert. "To-morrow night as ever is, if so be we get to Winthorpe-Sutbury, there'll be Men among us."

"But Tom's not coming?" said Mrs. Geedge.

"He asked Tim to tell me to tell you."

"And you've kept it these two hours, Judy?"

"For your own good and peace of mind. But now the murther's out. Come they will, your Man and my Man, pretending to a pity because they can't do without us. But like the self-indulgent monsters they are, they must needs stop at some grand hotel, Redlake he calls it, the Royal, on the hill above Winthorpe-Sutbury. The Royal! The very name describes it. Can't you see the lounge, girls, with its white cane chairs? And saddlebacks! No other hotel it seems is good enough for them, and we if you please are asked to go in and have—what does the man call it—the 'comforts of decency'—and let the caravan rest for a bit."

"Tom promised me I should run wild as long as I chose," said Mrs. Geedge, looking anything but wild.

"They're after thinking we've had enough of it," said Mrs. Bowles.

"It sounds like that."

"Sure I'd go on like this for ever," said Judy. "'Tis the Man and the House and all of it that oppresses me. Vans for Women. . . ."

"Let's not go to Winthorpe-Sutbury," said Madeleine.

(The first word of sense Bealby had heard.)

"Ah!" said Mrs. Bowles archly, "who knows but

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what there'll be a Man for you? Some sort of Man anyhow."

(Bealby thought that a most improper remark.)

"I want no man."

"Ah!"

"Why do you say *Ah* like that?"

"Because I mean *Ah* like that."

"Meaning?"

"Just that."

Miss Philips eyed Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Bowles eyed Miss Philips.

"Judy," she said, "you've got something up your sleeve."

"Where it's perfectly comfortable," said Mrs. Bowles.

And then quite maddeningly, she remarked, "Will you be after washing up presently, Dick?" and looked at him with a roguish quiet over her cigarette. It was necessary to disabuse her mind at once of the idea that he had been listening. He took up the last few plates and went off to the washing-place by the stream. All the rest of that conversation *had* to be lost.

Except that as he came back for the Hudson's soap he heard Miss Philips say, "Keep your old Men. I'll just console myself with Dick, my dears. Making such a Mystery!"

To which Mrs. Bowles replied darkly, "She *little* knows. . . ."

A kind of consolation was to be got from that. . . . But what was it she little knew? . . .

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§ 3

The men-folk when they came were nothing so terrific to the sight as Bealby had expected. And thank Heaven there were only two of them and each assigned. Something he perceived was said about some one else, he couldn't quite catch what, but if there was to have been some one else, at any rate there now wasn't. Professor Bowles was animated and Mr. Geedge was gracefully cold, they kissed their wives but not offensively, and there was a chattering pause while Bealby walked on beside the caravan. They were on the bare road that runs along the high ridge above Winthorpe-Sutbury, and the men had walked to meet them from some hotel or other—Bealby wasn't clear about that—by the golf-links. Judy was the life and soul of the encounter, and all for asking the men what they meant by intruding upon three independent women who, sure-alive, could very well do without them. Professor Bowles took her pretty calmly, and seemed on the whole to admire her.

Professor Bowles was a compact little man wearing spectacles with alternative glasses, partly curved, partly flat, he was hairy and dressed in that sort of soft tweedy stuff that ravel out—he seemed to have been sitting among thorns—and baggy knickerbockers with straps and very thick stockings and very sensible, open-air, in fact quite mountainous, boots. And yet though he was short and stout and active he had a kind of authority about him, and it was clear that for all her persuasiveness his wife merely ran over him like a creeper without making any great

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difference to him. "I've found," he said, "the perfect place for your encampment." She had been making suggestions. And presently he left the ladies and came hurrying after the caravan to take control.

He was evidently a very controlling person.

"Here, you get down," he said to William. "That poor beast's got enough to pull without *you*."

And when William mumbled he said, "Hey?" in such a shout that William for ever after held his peace.

"Where d'you come from, you boy, you?" he asked suddenly, and Bealby looked to Mrs. Bowles to explain.

"Great silly collar you've got," said the Professor, interrupting her reply. "Boy like this ought to wear a wool shirt. Dirty too. Take it off, boy. It's choking you. Don't you *feel* it?"

Then he went on to make trouble about the tackle William had rigged to contain the white horse.

"This harness makes me sick," said Professor Bowles. "It's worse than Italy. . . ."

"Ah!" he cried and suddenly darted off across the turf, going inelegantly and very rapidly, with peculiar motions of the head and neck as he brought first the flat and then the curved surface of his glasses into play. Finally he dived into the turf, remained scrabbling on all fours for a moment or so, became almost still for the fraction of a minute and then got up and returned to his wife, holding in an exquisite manner something that struggled between his finger and his thumb.

"That's the third to-day," he said, triumphantly. "They swarm here. It's a migration."

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Then he resumed his penetrating criticism of the caravan outfit.

“That boy,” he said suddenly with his glasses oblique, “hasn’t taken off his collar yet.”

Bealby revealed the modest secrets of his neck and pocketed the collar. . . .

Mr. Geedge did not appear to observe Bealby. He was a man of the super-aquiline type with a nose like a rudder, he held his face as if it was a hatchet in a procession, and walked with the dignity of a man of honour. You could see at once he was a man of honour. Inflexibly, invincibly he was a man of honour. You felt that anywhen, in a fire, in an earthquake, in a railway accident when other people would be running about and doing things he would have remained—a man of honour. It was his pride rather than his vanity to be mistaken for Sir Edward Grey. He now walked along with Miss Philips and his wife behind the disputing Bowleses, and discoursed in deep sonorous tones about the healthiness of healthy places and the stifling feeling one had in towns when there was no air.

§ 4

The Professor was remarkably active when at last the point he had chosen for the encampment was reached. Bealby was told to “look alive” twice, and William was assigned to his genus and species: “The man’s an absolute idiot,” was the way the Professor put it. William just shot a glance at him over his nose.

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The place certainly commanded a wonderful view. It was a turfy bank protected from the north and south by bushes of yew and the beech-bordered edge of a chalk pit; it was close beside the road, a road which went steeply down the hill into Winthorpe-Sutbury, with that intrepid decision peculiar to the hill roads of the south of England. It looked indeed as though you could throw the rinse of your teacups into the Winthorpe-Sutbury street; as if you could jump and impale yourself upon the church spire. The hills bellied out east and west and carried hangers, and then swept round to the west in a long level succession of projections, a perspective that merged at last with the general horizon of hilly bluenesses, amidst which Professor Bowles insisted upon a "sapphire glimpse" of sea. "The Channel," said Professor Bowles, as though that made it easier for them. Only Mr. Geedge refused to see even that mitigated version of the sea. There was something perhaps bluish and level, but he was evidently not going to admit it was sea until he had paddled in it and tested it in every way known to him. . . .

"Good *Lord!*" cried the Professor. "What's the man doing now?"

William stopped the struggles and confidential discouragements he was bestowing upon the white horse and waited for a more definite reproach.

"Putting the caravan alongside to the sun! Do you think it will ever get cool again? And think of the blaze of the sunset—through the glass of that door!"

William spluttered. "If I put'n t'other way—goo runnin' down t'hill like," said William.

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"Imbecile!" cried the Professor. "Put something under the wheels. *Here!*" He careered about and produced great grey fragments of a perished yew-tree. "Now then," he said. "Head up-hill."

William did his best.

"Oh! *not* like that! Here, *you!*"

Bealby assisted with obsequious enthusiasm.

It was some time before the caravan was adjusted to the complete satisfaction of the Professor. But at last it was done, and the end door gaped at the whole prospect of the Weald with the steps hanging out idiotically like a tongue. The hind wheels were stayed up very cleverly by lumps of chalk and chunks of yew, living and dead, and certainly the effect of it was altogether taller and better. And then the preparations for the midday cooking began. The Professor was full of acute ideas about camping and cooking, and gave Bealby a lively but instructive time. There was no stream handy, but William was sent off to the hotel to fetch a garden water-cart that the Professor with infinite foresight had arranged should be ready.

The Geedges held aloof from these preparations—they were unassuming people; Miss Philips concentrated her attention upon the Weald—it seemed to Bealby a little discontentedly, as if it was unworthy of her—and Mrs. Bowles hovered, smoking cigarettes, over her husband's activities, acting great amusement.

"You see it pleases me to get Himself busy," she said. "You'll end a Camper yet, Darlint, and us in the hotel."

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The Professor answered nothing, but seemed to plunge deeper into practicality.

Under the urgency of Professor Bowles Bealby stumbled and broke a glass jar of marmalade over some fried potatoes, but otherwise did well as a cook's assistant. Once things were a little interrupted by the Professor going off to catch a cricket, but whether it was the right sort of cricket or not he failed to get it. And then with three loud reports—for a moment Bealby thought the mad butlers from Shonts were upon him with firearms—Captain Douglas arrived and got off his motor-bicycle and left it by the roadside. His machine accounted for his delay, for those were the early days of motor-bicycles. It also accounted for a black smudge under one of his bright little eyes. He was fair and flushed, dressed in oilskins and a helmet-shaped cap and great gauntlets that made him, in spite of the smudge, look strange and brave and handsome like a Crusader—only that he was clad in oilskin and not steel, and his moustache was smaller than those of Crusaders were—and when he came across the turf to the encampment Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Geedge both set up a cry of "A-Ah!" and Miss Philips turned an accusing face upon those two ladies. Bealby knelt with a bunch of knives and forks in his hand laying the cloth for lunch, and when he saw Captain Douglas approaching Miss Philips, he perceived clearly that that lady had already forgotten her lowly adorer, and his little heart was smitten with desolation. This man was arrayed like a chivalrous god, and how was a poor Bealby, whose very collar, his one little circlet of

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manhood, had been reft from him, how was he to compete with this tremendousness? In that hour the ambition for mechanism, the passion for leather and oilskin was sown in Bealby's heart.

"I told you not to come near me for a month," said Madeleine, but her face was radiant.

"These motor-bicycles—very difficult to control," said Captain Douglas, and all the little golden-white hairs upon his sunlit cheek glittered in the sun.

"And besides," said Mrs. Bowles, "it's all nonsense."

The Professor was in a state of arrested administration; the three others were frankly audience to a clearly understood scene.

"You ought to be in France."

"I'm not in France."

"I sent you into exile for a month," and she held out a hand for the Captain to kiss.

He kissed it.

Some day, somewhere, it was written in the book of destiny Bealby should also kiss hands. It was a lovely thing to do.

"Month! It's been years," said the Captain.
"Years and years."

"Then you ought to have come back before," she replied, and the Captain had no answer ready. . . .

§ 5

When William arrived with the water-cart, he brought also further proofs of the Professor's organ-

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ising ability. He brought various bottles of wine, red Burgundy and sparkling hock, two bottles of cider, and peculiar and meritorious waters; he brought tinned things for *hors d'œuvre*; he brought some luscious pears.

When he had a moment with Bealby behind the caravan he repeated thrice in tones of hopeless sorrow, "They'll eat um all. I *knows* they'll eat um all." And then plumbing a deeper tone of woe, "Ef they *don't* they'll count um. Ode Goggles'll bag um. . . . 'E's a *bagger*, 'e is."

It was the brightest of luncheons that was eaten that day in the sunshine and spaciousness above Winthorpe-Sutbury. Every one was gay, and even the love-lorn Bealby, who might well have sunk into depression and lethargy, was galvanised into an activity that was almost cheerful by flashes from the Professor's glasses.

They talked of this and that; Bealby hadn't much time to attend, though the laughter that followed various sallies from Judy Bowles was very tantalising, and it had come to the pears before his attention wasn't so much caught as felled by the word "Shonts." . . .

It was as if the sky had suddenly changed to vermilion. *All these people were talking of Shonts!* . . .

"Went there," said Captain Douglas, "in perfect good faith. Wanted to fill up Lucy's little party. One doesn't go to Shonts nowadays for idle pleasure. And then—I get ordered out of the house, absolutely Told to Go."

(This man had been at Shonts !)

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“That was on Sunday morning?” said Mrs. Geedge.

“On Sunday morning,” said Mrs. Bowles suddenly, “we were almost within sight of Shonts.”

(This man had been at Shonts even at the time when Bealby was there!)

“Early on Sunday morning. Told to go. I was fairly flabbergasted. What the deuce is a man to do? Where’s he to go? Sunday! One doesn’t go to places, Sunday morning. There I’d been sleeping like a lamb all night and suddenly in came Laxton and said, ‘Look here, you know,’ he said, ‘you’ve got to oblige me and pack your bag and go. Now.’ ‘Why?’ said I. ‘Because you’ve driven the Lord Chancellor stark staring mad!’”

“But how?” asked the Professor almost angrily, “how? I don’t see it. Why should he ask you to go?”

“I don’t know!” cried Captain Douglas.

“Yes, but—!” said the Professor, protesting against the unreasonableness of mankind.

“I’d had a word or two with him in the train. Nothing to speak of. About occupying two corner seats—always strikes me as a cad’s trick—but on my honour I didn’t rub it in. And then he got it into his head we were laughing at him at dinner—we were a bit, but only the sort of thing one says about any one—way he works his eyebrows and all that—and then he thought I was ragging him. . . . I *don’t* rag people. Got it so strongly he made a row that night. Said I’d made a ghost slap him on his back. Hang it!—what *can* you say to a thing like that? In my room all the time.”

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"You suffer for the sins of your brother," said Mrs. Bowles.

"Heavens!" cried the Captain, "I never thought of that! Perhaps he mistook me. . . ."

He reflected for a moment and continued his narrative. "Then in the night, you know, he heard noises."

"They always do," said the Professor nodding confirmation.

"Couldn't sleep."

"A sure sign," said the Professor.

"And finally he sallied out in the early morning, caught the butler in one of the secret passages—"

"How did the butler get into the secret passage?"

"Going round, I suppose. Part of his duties. . . . Anyhow he gave the poor beggar an awful doing—awful—*brutal*—black eye—all that sort of thing; man much too respectful to hit back. Finally declared I'd been getting up a kind of rag—squaring the servants to help and so forth. . . . Laxton, I fancy, half believed it. . . . Awkward thing, you know, having it said about that you ragged the Lord Chancellor. Makes a man seem a sort of mischievous idiot. Injures a man. Then going away, you see, seems a kind of admission. . . ."

"Why did you go?"

"Lucy," said the Captain compactly. "Hysterics.

"Shonts would have burst," he added, "if I hadn't gone."

Madeleine was helpful. "But you'll have to do *something* further," she said.

"What is one to *do*?" squealed the Captain.

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“The sooner you get the Lord Chancellor certified a lunatic,” said the Professor soundly, “the better for your professional prospects.”

“He went on pretty bad after I’d gone.”

“You’ve heard?”

“Two letters. I picked ’em up at Wheatley Post-Office this morning. You know he hadn’t done with that butler. Actually got out of his place and scuffed the poor devil at lunch. Shook him like a rat, she says. Said the man wasn’t giving him anything to drink—nice story, eh? Anyhow he scuffed him until things got broken. . . .

“I had it all from Minnie Timbre—you know, used to be Minnie Flax.” He shot a propitiatory glance at Madeleine. “Used to be neighbours of ours you know, in the old time. Half the people, she says, didn’t know what was happening. Thought the butler was apoplectic and that old Moggeridge was helping him stand up. Taking off his collar. It was Laxton thought of saying it was a fit. Told everybody, she says. Had to tell ’em Something, I suppose. But she saw better, and she thinks a good many others did. Laxton ran ’em both out of the room. Nice scene for Shonts, eh? Thundering awkward for poor Lucy. Not the sort of thing the county expected. Has her both ways. Can’t go to a house where the Lord Chancellor goes mad. One alternative. Can’t go to a house where the butler has fits. That’s the other. See the dilemma? . . .

“I’ve got a letter from Lucy too. It’s here”—he struggled—“See? Eight sheets—pencil. No Joke for a man to read that. And she writes worse than

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any decent, self-respecting, illiterate woman has a right to do. Quivers. Like writing in a train. Can't read half of it. But *she's* got something about a boy on her mind. Mad about a boy. Have I taken away a boy? They've lost a boy. Took him in my luggage, I suppose. She'd better write to the Lord Chancellor. Likely as not he met him in some odd corner and flew at him. Smashed him to atoms. Dispersed him. Anyhow they've lost a boy."

He protested to the world. "I can't go hunting lost boys for Lucy. I've done enough coming away as I did. . . ."

Mrs. Bowles held out an arresting cigarette.

"What sort of boy was lost?" she asked.

"I don't know. Some little beast of a boy. I dare say she'd only imagined it. Whole thing been too much for her."

"Read that over again," said Mrs. Bowles, "about losing a boy. We've found one."

"That *little* chap?"

"We found that boy"—she glanced over her shoulder, but Bealby was nowhere to be seen—"on Sunday morning near Shonts. He strayed into us like a lost kitten."

"But I thought you said you knew his father, Judy," objected the Professor.

"Didn't verify," said Mrs. Bowles shortly, and then to Captain Douglas, "Read over again what Lady Laxton says about him. . . ."

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§ 6

Captain Douglas struggled with the difficulties of his cousin's handwriting.

Everybody drew together over the fragments of the dessert with an eager curiosity, and helped to weigh Lady Laxton's rather dishevelled phrases. . . .

§ 7

"We'll call the principal witness," said Mrs. Bowles at last, warming to the business. "Dick!"

"Di—ick!"

"*Dick!*"

The Professor got up and strolled round behind the caravan. Then he returned. "No boy there."

"He *heard!*" said Mrs. Bowles in a large whisper and making round wonder-eyes.

"She *says,*" said Douglas, "that the chances are he's got into the secret passages. . . ."

The Professor strolled out to the road and looked up it and then down upon the roofs of Winthorpe-Sutbury. "No," he said. "He's mizzled."

"He's only gone away for a bit," said Mrs. Geedge. "He does sometimes after lunch. He'll come back to wash up."

"He's probably taking a snooze among the yew bushes before facing the labours of washing up," said Mrs. Bowles. "He *can't* have mizzled. You see—in there— He can't by any chance have taken his luggage!"

BEALBY

She got up and clambered—with a little difficulty because of its piled-up position, into the caravan. “It’s all right,” she called out of the door. “His little parsivel is still here.”

Her head disappeared again.

“I don’t think he’d go away like this,” said Madeleine. “After all, what is there for him to go to—even if he is Lady Laxton’s missing boy? . . .”

“I don’t believe he heard a word of it,” said Mrs. Geedge. . . .

Mrs. Bowles reappeared, with a curious-looking brown-paper parcel in her hand. She descended carefully. She sat down by the fire and held the parcel on her knees. She regarded it and her companions waggishly and lit a fresh cigarette. “Our link with Dick,” she said, with the cigarette in her mouth.

She felt the parcel, she poised the parcel, she looked at it more and more waggishly. “*I wonder,*” she said.

Her expression became so waggish that her husband knew she was committed to behaviour of the utmost ungentlemanliness. He had long ceased to attempt restraint in these moods. She put her head on one side and tore open the corner of the parcel just a little way.

“A tin can,” she said in a stage whisper.

She enlarged the opening. “Blades of grass,” she said.

The Professor tried to regard it humorously. “Even if you have ceased to be decent you can still be frank. . . . I think now, my dear, you might just straightforwardly undo the parcel.”

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She did. Twelve unsympathetic eyes surveyed the evidences of Bealby's utter poverty.

"He's coming," cried Madeleine suddenly.

Judy re-packed hastily, but it was a false alarm.

"I said he'd mizzled," said the Professor.

"And without washing up!" wailed Madeleine.

"I couldn't have thought it of him. . . ."

§ 8

But Bealby had not "mizzled," although he was conspicuously not in evidence about the camp. There was neither sight nor sound of him for all the time they sat about the vestiges of their meal. They talked of him and of topics arising out of him, and whether the Captain should telegraph to Lady Laxton, "Boy practically found."

"I'd rather just find him," said the Captain, "and anyhow until we get hold of him we don't know it's her particular boy."

Then they talked of washing up and how detestable it was. And suddenly the two husbands, seeing their advantage, renewed their proposals that the caravanners should put up at the golf-links hotel, and have baths and the comforts of civilisation for a night or so—and anyhow walk thither for tea. And as William had now returned—he was sitting on the turf afar off smoking a nasty-looking short clay pipe—they rose up and departed. But Captain Douglas and Miss Philips for some reason did not go off exactly with the others but strayed apart, straying away more and more into a kind of solitude. . . .

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First the four married people and then the two lovers disappeared over the crest of the downs. . . .

§ 9

For a time except for its distant sentinel the caravan seemed absolutely deserted, and then a clump of bramble against the wall of the old chalk-pit became agitated and a small, rueful, disillusioned, white-smearred little Bealby crept back into the visible universe again. His heart was very heavy.

The time had come to go.

And he did not want to go. He had loved the caravan. He had adored Madeleine.

He would go, but he would go beautifully—touchingly.

He would wash up before he went, he would make everything tidy, he would leave behind him a sense of irreparable loss. . . .

With a mournful precision he set about this undertaking. If Mergleson could have seen him Mergleson would have been amazed. . . .

He made everything look wonderfully tidy.

Then in the place where she had sat, lying on her rug, he found her favourite book, a small volume of Swinburne's poems very beautifully bound. Captain Douglas had given it to her.

Bealby handled it with a kind of reverence. So luxurious it was, so unlike the books in Bealby's world, so altogether of her quality. . . .

Strange forces prompted him. For a time he hesitated. Then decision came with a rush. He selected

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a page, drew the stump of a pencil from his pocket, wetted it very wet and, breathing hard, began to write that traditional message, "Farewell. Remember Art Bealby."

To this he made an original addition: "I washt up before I went."

Then he remembered that so far as this caravan went he was not Art Bealby at all. He renewed the wetness of his pencil and drew black lines athwart the name of "Art Bealby" until it was quite unreadable; then across this again and pressing still deeper so that the subsequent pages re-echoed it he wrote these singular words, "Ed rightful Earl Shonts." Then he was ashamed, and largely obliterated this by still more forcible strokes. Finally above it all plainly and nakedly he wrote "Dick Maltravers. . . ."

He put down the book with a sigh and stood up.

Everything was beautifully in order. But could he not do something yet? There came to him the idea of wreathing the entire camping-place with boughs of yew. It would look lovely—and significant. He set to work. At first he toiled zealously, but yew is tough to get and soon his hands were painful. He cast about for some easier way, and saw beneath the hind wheels of the caravan great green boughs—one particularly a splendid long branch. . . . It seemed to him that it would be possible to withdraw this branch from the great heap of sticks and stones that stayed up the hind wheels of the caravan. It seemed to him that that was so. He was mistaken, but that was his idea.

He set to work to do it. It was rather more diffi-

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cult to manage than he had supposed; there were unexpected ramifications, wider resistances. Indeed the thing seemed rooted.

Bealby was a resolute youngster at bottom.

He warmed to his task. . . . He tugged harder and harder. . . .

§ 10

How various is the quality of humanity!

About Bealby there was ever an imaginative touch; he was capable of romance, of gallantries, of devotion. William was of a grosser clay, slave of his appetites, a materialist. Such men as William drive one to believe in born inferiors, in the existence of a lower sort, in the natural inequality of men.

While Bealby was busy at his gentle task of reparation, a task foolish perhaps and not too ably conceived, but at any rate morally gracious, William had no thought in the world but the satisfaction of those appetites that the consensus of all mankind has definitely relegated to the lower category. And which Heaven has relegated to the lower region of our frame. He came now slinking towards the vestiges of the caravanners' picnic, and no one skilled in the interpretation of the human physiognomy could have failed to read the significance of the tongue tip that drifted over his thin oblique lips. He came so softly towards the encampment that Bealby did not note him. Partly William thought of remnants of food but chiefly he was intent to drain the bottles. Bealby had stuck them all neatly in a

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row a little way up the hill. There was a cider-bottle with some heel-taps of cider, William drank that; then there was nearly half a bottle of hock and William drank that; then there were the drainings of the Burgundy and Apollinaris. It was all drink to William.

And after he had drained each bottle William winked at the watching angels and licked his lips, and patted the lower centres of his being with a shameless base approval. Then fired by alcohol, robbed of his last vestiges of self-control, his thoughts turned to the delicious chocolates that were stored in a daintily beribboned box in the little drawers beneath the sleeping-bunk of Miss Philips. There was a new brightness in his eye, a spot of pink in either cheek. With an expression of the lowest cunning he reconnoitred Bealby.

Bealby was busy about something at the back end of the caravan, tugging at something.

With swift stealthy movements of an entirely graceless sort, William got up into the front of the caravan.

Just for a moment he hesitated before going in. He craned his neck to look round the side at the unconscious Bealby, wrinkled the vast nose into an unpleasant grimace and then—a crouching figure of appetite—he crept inside.

Here they were! He laid his hand in the drawer, halted listening. . . .

What was that? . . .

Suddenly the caravan swayed. He stumbled, and fear crept into his craven soul. The caravan lurched.

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It was moving. . . . Its hind wheels came to the ground with a crash. . . .

He took a step doorward and was pitched sideways and thrown upon his knees. . . . Then he was hurled against the dresser and hit by a falling plate. A cup fell and smashed and the caravan seemed to leap and bound. . . .

Through the little window he had a glimpse of yew bushes hurrying upward. The caravan was going down-hill. . . .

"Lummy!" said William, clutching at the bunks to hold himself upright. . . .

"Ca-arnt be that drink!" said William, aspread and aghast. . . .

He attempted the door.

"Crikey! Here! Hold on! My shin! . . . 'Tis thut Brasted Vool of a Boy!"

". . ." said William. ". . . — . . ."

"████████████████████"

"██████████"

"██████████████████"

"██████████████████"

§ 11

The caravan party soon came to its decision. They would stay the night in the hotel. And so as soon as they had had some tea they decided to go back and make William bring the caravan and all the ladies' things round to the hotel. With characteristic eagerness Professor Bowles led the way.

And so it was Professor Bowles who first saw the release of the caravan. He barked. One short sharp

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bark. "Whup!" he cried, and very quickly, "Whatstheboydoing?"

Then quite a different style of noise, with the mouth open: "Wha—hoop!"

Then he set off running very fast down towards the caravan, waving his arms and shouting as he ran, "Yaaps! You *Idiot*. Yaaps!"

The others were less promptly active.

Down the slope they saw Bealby, a little struggling active Bealby, tugging away at a yew branch until the caravan swayed with his efforts, and then—then there was a movement as though the thing tossed its head and reared, and a smash as the heap of stuff that stayed up its hind wheels collapsed. . . .

It plunged like a horse with a dog at its heels, it lurched sideways, and then with an air of quiet deliberation started down the grass slope to the road and Winthorpe-Sutbury. . . .

Professor Bowles sped in pursuit like the wind, and Mrs. Bowles after a gasping moment set off after her lord, her face round and resolute. Mr. Geedge followed at a more dignified pace, making the only really sound suggestion that was offered on the occasion. "Hue! Stop it!" cried Mr. Geedge, for all the world like his great prototype at the Balkan Conference. And then like a large languid pair of scissors he began to run. Mrs. Geedge after some indefinite moments decided to see the humour of it all, and followed her husband in a fluttering rush, emitting careful little musical giggles as she ran, giggles that she had learned long ago from a beloved schoolfellow. Captain Douglas and Miss Philips were some way behind the others,

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and the situation had already developed considerably before they grasped what was happening. Then obeying the instincts of a soldier the Captain came charging to support the others, and Miss Madeleine Philips after some wasted gestures realised that nobody was looking at her, and sat down quietly on the turf until this paralysing state of affairs should cease.

The caravan remained the centre of interest.

Without either indecent haste or any complete pause it pursued its way down the road towards the tranquil village below. Except for the rumbling of its wheels and an occasional concussion it made very little sound; once or twice there was a faint sound of breaking crockery from its interior and once the phantom of an angry yell, but that was all.

There was an effect of discovered personality about the thing. This vehicle which had hitherto been content to play a background part, a yellow patch amidst the scenery, was now revealing an individuality. It was purposeful and touched with a suggestion of playfulness, at once kindly and human; it had its thoughtful instants, its phases of quick decision, yet never once did it altogether lose a certain mellow dignity. There was nothing servile about it; never for a moment for example did it betray its blind obedience to gravitation. It was rather as if it and gravitation were going hand in hand. It came out into the road, butted into the bank, swept round, meditated for a full second, and then headed down-hill, shafts foremost, going quietly faster and faster and swaying from bank to bank. The shafts went before it like arms held out. . . .

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It had a quality—as if it were a favourite elephant running to a beloved master from whom it had been over-long separated. Or a slightly intoxicated and altogether happy yellow guinea-pig making for some coveted food. . . .

At a considerable distance followed Professor Bowles, a miracle of compact energy, running so fast that he seemed only to touch the ground at very rare intervals. . . .

And then, dispersedly, in their order and according to their natures, the others. . . .

There was fortunately very little on the road.

There was a perambulator containing twins, whose little girl guardian was so lucky as to be high up on the bank gathering blackberries.

A ditcher, ditching.

A hawker lost in thought.

His cart, drawn by a poor little black screw of a pony and loaded with the cheap flawed crockery that is so popular among the poor.

A dog asleep in the middle of the village street. . . .

Amidst this choice of objects the caravan displayed a whimsical humanity. It reduced the children in the perambulator to tears, but passed. It might have reduced them to a sort of red-currant jelly. It lurched heavily towards the ditcher and spared him, it chased the hawker up the bank, it whipped off a wheel from the cart of crockery (which after an interval of astonishment fell like a vast objurgation) and then it directed its course with a grim intentness towards the dog.

It just missed the dog.

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He woke up not a moment too soon. He fled with a yelp of dismay.

And then the caravan careered on a dozen yards farther, lost energy and—the only really undignified thing in its whole career—stood on its head in a wide wet ditch. It did this with just the slightest lapse into emphasis. *There!* It was as if it gave a grunt—and perhaps there was the faintest suggestion of William in that grunt—and then it became quite still. . . .

For a time the caravan seemed finished and done. Its steps hung from its upper end like the tongue of a tired dog. Except for a few minute noises as though it was scratching itself inside, it was as inanimate as death itself.

But up the hill road the twins were weeping, the hawker and the ditcher were saying raucous things, the hawker's pony had backed into the ditch and was taking ill-advised steps, for which it was afterwards to be sorry, amidst the stock-in-trade, and Professor Bowles, Mrs. Bowles, Mr. Geedge, Captain Douglas and Mrs. Geedge were running—running—one heard the various patter of their feet.

And then came signs of life at the upward door of the caravan, a hand, an arm, an active investigating leg seeking a hold, a large nose, a small intent vicious eye; in fact—William.

William maddened.

Professor Bowles had reached the caravan. With a startling agility he clambered up by the wheels and step and confronted the unfortunate driver. It was an occasion for mutual sympathy rather than anger,

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but the Professor was hasty, efficient and unsympathetic with the lower classes, and William's was an ill-regulated temperament.

"You consummate *ass!*" began Professor Bowles.

. . .
When William heard Professor Bowles say this, incontinently he smote him in the face, and when Professor Bowles was smitten in the face he grappled instantly and very bravely and resolutely with William.

For a moment they struggled fearfully, they seemed to be endowed instantaneously with innumerable legs, and then suddenly they fell through the door of the caravan into the interior, their limbs seemed to whirl for a wonderful instant and then they were swallowed up. . . .

The smash was tremendous. You would not have thought there was nearly so much in the caravan still left to get broken. . . .

A healing silence. . . .

At length smothered noises of still inadequate adjustment within. . . .

The village population in a state of scared delight appeared at a score of points and converged upon the catastrophe. Sounds of renewed dissension between William and the Professor inside the rearing yellow bulk promised further interests and added an element of mystery to this manifest disaster.

§ 12

As Bealby, still grasping his great branch of yew, watched these events, a sense of human futility in-

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vaded his youthful mind. For the first time he realised the gulf between intention and result. He had meant so well. . . .

He perceived it would be impossible to explain. . . .

The thought of even attempting to explain things to Professor Bowles was repellent to him. . . .

He looked about him with round despairful eyes. He selected a direction which seemed to promise the maximum of concealment with the minimum of conversational possibility, and in that direction and without needless delay he set off, eager to turn over an entirely fresh page in his destiny as soon as possible. . . .

To get away;—the idea possessed all his being.

From the crest of the downs a sweet voice floated after his retreating form and never overtook him.

“Di—ick!”

§ 13

Then presently Miss Philips arose to her feet, gathered her skirts in her hand, and with her delicious chin raised and an expression of countenance that was almost business-like, descended towards the gathering audience below. She wore wide flowing skirts and came down the hill in Artemisian strides.

It was high time that somebody looked at her.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

THE SEEKING OF BEALBY

§ 1

ON the same Monday evening that witnessed Bealby's first experience of the theatre, Mr. Mergleson, the house steward of Shonts, walked slowly and thoughtfully across the corner of the park between the laundry and the gardens. His face was much recovered from the accidents of his collision with the Lord Chancellor, resort to raw meat in the kitchen had checked the development of his injuries, and only a few contusions on the side of his face were more than faintly traceable. And suffering had on the whole rather ennobled than depressed his bearing. He had a black eye, but it was not, he felt, a common black eye. It came from high quarters and through no fault of Mr. Mergleson's own. He carried it well. It was a fruit of duty rather than the outcome of wanton pleasure-seeking or misdirected passion.

He found Mr. Darling in profound meditation over some peach-trees against the wall. They were not doing so well as they ought to do, and Mr. Darling was engaged in wondering why.

"Good evening, Mr. Darling," said Mr. Mergleson.

Mr. Darling ceased rather slowly to wonder and turned to his friend. "Good evening, Mr. Mergle-

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son," he said. "I don't quite like the look of these here peaches, *blowed* if I do."

Mr. Mergleson glanced at the peaches and then came to the matter that was nearest his heart.

"You 'aven't I suppose seen anything of your stepson these last two days, Mr. Darling?"

"Naturally *not*," said Mr. Darling, putting his head on one side and regarding his interlocutor. "Naturally not,—I've left that to you, Mr. Mergleson."

"Well, that's what's awkward," said Mr. Mergleson, and then, with a forced easiness, "You see, I ain't seen 'im either."

"No!"

"No. I lost sight of 'im"—Mr. Mergleson appeared to reflect—"late on Sattiday night."

"'Ow's that, Mr. Mergleson?"

Mr. Mergleson considered the difficulties of lucid explanation. "We missed 'im," said Mr. Mergleson, simply regarding the well-weeded garden path with a calculating expression and then lifting his eyes to Mr. Darling's with an air of great candour. "And we continue to miss him."

"*Well!*" said Mr. Darling. "That's rum."

"Yes," said Mr. Mergleson.

"It's decidedly rum," said Mr. Darling.

"We thought 'e might be 'iding from 'is work. Or cut off 'ome."

"You didn't send down to ask."

"We was too busy with the week-end people. On the 'ole we thought if 'e 'ad cut 'ome, on the 'ole 'e wasn't a very serious loss. 'E got in the way at times."

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. . . And there was one or two things 'appened—. . . Now that they're all gone and 'e 'asn't turned up— Well, I came down, Mr. Darling, to arst you. Where's 'e gone?"

"'E ain't come 'ere," said Mr. Darling surveying the garden.

"I 'arf expected 'e might and I 'arf expected 'e mightn't," said Mr. Mergleson with the air of one who had anticipated Mr. Darling's answer but hesitated to admit as much.

The two gentlemen paused for some seconds and regarded each other searchingly.

"Where's 'e *got* to?" said Mr. Darling.

"Well," said Mr. Mergleson, putting his hands where the tails of his short jacket would have been if it hadn't been short and looking extraordinarily like a parrot in its more thoughtful moods, "to tell you the truth, Mr. Darling, I've 'ad a dream about 'im—and it worries me. I got a sort of ideer of 'im as being in one of them secret passages. 'Iding away. There was a guest, well, I say it with all respec' but *anyone* might 'ave 'id from 'im. . . . S'morning soon as the week-end 'ad cleared up and gone 'ome, me and Thomas went through them passages as well as we could. Not a trace of 'im. But I still got that ideer. 'E was a wriggling, climbing, enterprising sort of boy."

"I've checked 'im for it once or twice," said Mr. Darling with the red light of fierce memories gleaming for a moment in his eyes.

"'E might even," said Mr. Mergleson, "well, very likely 'ave got 'imself jammed in one of them secret passages. . . ."

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“Jammed,” repeated Mr. Darling.

“Well—got ’imself somewhere where ’e can’t get out. I’ve ’eard tell there’s walled-up dungeons.”

“They say,” said Mr. Darling, “there’s underground passages to the Abbey ruins—three good mile away.”

“Orkward,” said Mr. Mergleson. . . .

“Drat ’is eyes!” said Mr. Darling, scratching his head. “What does ’e mean by it?”

“We can’t leave ’im there,” said Mr. Mergleson.

“I knowed a young devil once what crawled up a culvert,” said Mr. Darling. “’Is father ’ad to dig ’im out like a fox. . . . Lord! ’ow ’e walloped ’im for it.”

“Mistake to ’ave a boy in so young,” said Mr. Mergleson.

“It’s all very awkward,” said Mr. Darling, surveying every aspect of the case. “You see— ’Is mother sets a most estrordinary value on ’im. Most estrordinary.”

“I don’t know whether she oughtn’t to be told,” said Mr. Mergleson. “I was thinking of that.”

Mr. Darling was not the sort of man to meet trouble half-way. He shook his head at that. “Not yet, Mr. Mergleson. I don’t think yet. Not until everything’s been tried. I don’t think there’s any need to give her needless distress,—none whatever. If you don’t mind I think I’ll come up to-night—nineish say—and ’ave a talk to you and Thomas about it—a quiet talk. Best to begin with a *quiet* talk. It’s a dashed rum go, and me and you we got to think it out a bit.”

“That’s what *I* think,” said Mr. Mergleson with

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unconcealed relief at Mr. Darling's friendliness. "That's exactly the light, Mr. Darling, in which it appears to me. Because you see—if 'e's all right and in the 'ouse, why doesn't 'e come for 'is vittels?"

§ 2

In the pantry that evening the question of telling some one was discussed further. It was discussed over a number of glasses of Mr. Mergleson's beer. For, following a sound tradition, Mr. Mergleson brewed at Shonts, and sometimes he brewed well and sometimes he brewed ill, and sometimes he brewed weak and sometimes he brewed strong, and there was no monotony in the cups at Shonts. This was sturdy stuff and suited Mr. Darling's mood, and ever and again with an author's natural weakness and an affectation of abstraction Mr. Mergleson took the jug out empty and brought it back foaming.

Henry, the second footman, was disposed to a forced hopefulness so as not to spoil the evening, but Thomas was sympathetic and distressed. The red-haired youth made cigarettes with a little machine, licked them and offered them to the others, saying little, as became him. Etiquette deprived him of an unproffered beer, and Mr. Mergleson's inattention completed what etiquette began.

"I can't bear to think of the poor little beggar, stuck head foremost into some cobwebby cranny, blowed if I can," said Thomas, getting help from the jug.

"He was an interesting kid," said Thomas in a

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tone that was frankly obituary. "He didn't like his work, one could see that, but he was lively—and I tried to help him along all I could, when I wasn't too busy myself."

"There was something sensitive about him," said Thomas.

Mr. Mergleson sat with his arms loosely thrown out over the table.

"What we got to do is to tell some one," he said, "I don't see 'ow I can put off telling 'er ladyship—after to-morrow morning. And then—'eaven 'elp us!"

"Course *I* got to tell *my* missis," said Mr. Darling, and poured in a preoccupied way, some running over.

"We'll go through them passages again now before we go to bed," said Mr. Mergleson, "far as we can. But there's 'oles and chinks on'y a boy could get through."

"*I* got to tell the missis," said Mr. Darling. "That's what's worrying me. . . ."

As the evening wore on there was a tendency on the part of Mr. Darling to make this the refrain of his discourse. He sought advice. "'Ow'd you tell the missis?" he asked Mr. Mergleson, and emptied a glass to control his impatience before Mr. Mergleson replied.

"I shall tell 'er ladyship, just simply, the fact. I shall say, 'Your ladyship, here's my boy gone and we don't know where.' And as she arsts me questions so shall I give particulars."

Mr. Darling reflected and then shook his head slowly.

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"'Ow'd *ju* tell the missis?" he asked Thomas.

"Glad I haven't got to," said Thomas. "*Poor* little beggar!"

"Yes, but 'ow *would* you tell 'er?" Mr. Darling said, varying the accent very carefully.

"I'd go to 'er and I'd pat her back and I'd say 'Bear up,' see, and when she asked what for, I'd just tell her what for—gradual like."

"You don't know the missis," said Mr. Darling. "Henry, 'ow'd *ju* tell 'er?"

"Let 'er find out," said Henry. "Wimmin do."

Mr. Darling reflected, and decided that too was unworkable.

"'Ow'd *you*?" he asked with an air of desperation of the red-haired youth.

The red-haired youth remained for a moment with his tongue extended, licking the gum of a cigarette paper, and his eyes on Mr. Darling. Then he finished the cigarette slowly, giving his mind very carefully to the question he had been honoured with. "I think," he said, in a low serious voice, "I should say, just simply, 'Mary'—or 'Susan'—or whatever her name is."

"Tilda," supplied Mr. Darling.

"'Tilda,' I should say, 'the Lord gave and the Lord 'ath taken away. Tilda!—'e's gone.' Somethin' like that!"

The red-haired boy cleared his throat. He was rather touched by his own simple eloquence.

Mr. Darling reflected on this with profound satisfaction for some moments. Then he broke out almost querulously, "Yes, but brast him!—*where's* 'e gone?"

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"Anyhow," said Mr. Darling, "I ain't going to tell 'er not till the morning. I ain't going to lose my night's rest if I 'ave lost my stepson. Nohow. Mr. Mergleson, I *must* say, I don't think I ever 'ave tasted better beer. Never. It's—it's famous beer."

He had some more. . . .

On his way back through the moonlight to the gardens Mr. Darling was still unsettled as to the exact way of breaking things to his wife. He had come out from the house a little ruffled because of Mr. Mergleson's opposition to a rather good idea of his that he should go about the house and "holler for 'im a bit. He'd know my voice you see. Ladyship wouldn't mind. Very likely 'sleep by now." But the moonlight dispelled his irritation.

How was he to tell his wife? He tried various methods to the listening moon.

There was for example the offhand newsy way. "You know tha' boy yours?" Then a pause for the reply. Then, "'E's toley dis'peared."

Only there are difficulties about the word totally.

Or the distressed impersonal manner. "Dre'fle thing happen'd. Dre'fle thing. Tha' poo' lill' chap, Artie—toley dis'peared."

Totally again.

Or the personal intimate note. "Dunno wha' you'll say t' me, Tilda, when you hear whattogottasay. Thur'ly bad news. Seems they los' our Artie up there—clean los' 'im. Can't fine 'im nowhere 'tall."

Or the authoritative kindly. "Tilda—you go' control yourself. Go' show whadyou made of. Our boy—'e's—hic—los'."

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Then he addressed the park at large with a sudden despair. "Don' care wha' I say, she'll blame it on to me. I *know* 'er!"

After that the enormous pathos of the situation got hold of him. "Poor lill' chap," he said. "Poor lill' fell'," and shed a few natural tears.

"Loved 'im jessis mione son."

As the circumambient night made no reply he repeated the remark in a louder, almost domineering tone. . . .

He spent some time trying to climb the garden wall because the door did not seem to be in the usual place. (Have to inquire about that in the morning. Difficult to see everything is all right when one is so bereaved.) But finally he came on the door round a corner.

He told his wife merely that he intended to have a peaceful night, and took off his boots in a defiant and intermittent manner.

The morning would be soon enough.

She looked at him pretty hard, and he looked at her ever and again, but she never made a guess at it.
Bed.

§ 3

So soon as the week-enders had dispersed and Sir Peter had gone off to London to attend to various matters affecting the peptonising of milk and the distribution of baby soothers about the habitable globe, Lady Laxton went back to bed and remained in bed until midday on Tuesday. Nothing short of

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complete rest and the utmost kindness from her maid would, she felt, save her from a nervous breakdown of the most serious description. The festival had been stormy to the end. Sir Peter's ill-advised attempts to deprive Lord Moggeridge of alcohol had led to a painful struggle at lunch, and this had been followed by a still more unpleasant scene between host and guest in the afternoon. "This is an occasion for tact," Sir Peter had said, and had gone off to tackle the Lord Chancellor, leaving his wife to the direst, best founded apprehensions. For Sir Peter's tact was a thing by itself, a mixture of misconception, recrimination and familiarity that was rarely well received. . . .

She had had to explain to the Sunday dinner party that his lordship had been called away suddenly. "Something connected with the Great Seal," Lady Laxton had whispered in a discreet mysterious whisper. One or two simple hearers were left with the persuasion that the Great Seal had been taken suddenly unwell—and probably in a slightly indelicate manner. Thomas had to paint Mergleson's eye with grease-paint left over from some private theatricals. It had been a patched-up affair altogether, and before she retired to bed that night Lady Laxton had given way to her accumulated tensions and wept.

There was no reason whatever why to wind up the day Sir Peter should have stayed in her room for an hour saying what he thought of Lord Moggeridge. She felt she knew quite well enough what he thought of Lord Moggeridge, and on these occasions he always used a number of words that she did her best

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to believe, as a delicately brought-up woman, were unfamiliar to her ears. . . .

So on Monday, as soon as the guests had gone, she went to bed again and stayed there, trying as a good woman should to prevent herself thinking of what the neighbours could be thinking—and saying—of the whole affair, by studying a new and very circumstantial pamphlet by Bishop Fowle on social evils, turning over the moving illustrations of some recent antivivisection literature and re-reading the accounts in the morning papers of a colliery disaster in the north of England.

To such women as Lady Laxton, brought up in an atmosphere of refinement that is almost colourless and living a life troubled only by small social conflicts and the minor violence of Sir Peter, blameless to the point of complete uneventfulness, and secure and comfortable to the point of tedium, there is something amounting to fascination in the wickedness and sufferings of more normally situated people, there is a real attraction and solace in the thought of pain and stress; and as her access to any other accounts of vice and suffering was restricted she kept herself closely in touch with the more explicit literature of the various movements for human moralisation that distinguish our age, and responded eagerly and generously to such painful catastrophes as enliven it. The counterfoils of her cheque-book witnessed to her gratitude for these vicarious sensations. She figured herself to herself in her day dreams as a calm and white and shining intervention checking and reproving amusements of an undesirable nature,

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and earning the tearful blessings of the mangled by-products of industrial enterprise.

There is a curious craving for entire reality in the feminine composition, and there were times when in spite of these feasts of particulars, she wished she could come just a little nearer to the heady dreadful-nesses of life than simply writing a cheque against it. She would have liked to have actually *seen* the votaries of evil blench and repent before her contributions, to have herself unstrapped and revived and pitied some doomed and chloroformed victim of the so-called "scientist," to have herself participated in the stretcher and the hospital and humanity made marvellous by enlistment under the red-cross badge. But Sir Peter's ideals of womanhood were higher than his language, and he would not let her soil her refinement with any vision of the pain and evil in the world. "Sort of woman they want up there is a Trained Nurse," he used to say when she broached the possibility of *going* to some famine or disaster. "*You don't want to go prying, old girl. . . .*"

She suffered, she felt, from repressed heroism. If ever she was to shine in disaster that disaster, she felt, must come to her, she might not go to meet it, and so you realise how deeply it stirred her, how it brightened her and uplifted her to learn from Mr. Mergleson's halting statements that perhaps, that probably, that almost certainly, a painful and tragical thing was happening even now within the walls of Shonts, that there was urgent necessity for action—if anguish was to be witnessed before it had ended and life saved.

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She clasped her hands; she surveyed her large servant with agonised green-grey eyes.

“Something must be done at once,” she said. “Everything possible must be done. Poor little Mite!”

“Of course, my lady, 'e *may* 'ave run away!”

“Oh no!” she cried, “he hasn't run away. He hasn't run away. How can you be so *wicked*, Mergleson? Of course he hasn't run away. He's there now. And it's too dreadful.”

She became suddenly very firm and masterful. The morning's colliery tragedy inspired her imagination.

“We must get pick-axes,” she said. “We must organise search parties. Not a moment is to be lost, Mergleson—not a moment. . . . Get the men in off the roads. Get every one you can. . . .”

And not a moment was lost. The road men were actually at work in Shonts before their proper dinner-hour was over.

They did quite a lot of things that afternoon. Every passage attainable from the dining-room opening was explored, and where these passages gave off chinks and crannies they were opened up with a vigour which Lady Laxton had greatly stimulated by an encouraging presence and liberal doses of whisky. Through their efforts a fine new opening was made into the library from the wall near the window, a hole big enough for a man to fall through, because one did, and a great piece of stonework was thrown down from the Queen Elizabeth tower exposing the upper portion of the secret passage to the light of

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day. Lady Laxton herself and the head housemaid went round the panelling with a hammer and a chisel, and called out "Are you there?" and attempted an opening wherever it sounded hollow. The sweep was sent for to go up the old chimneys outside the present flues. Meanwhile Mr. Darling had been set with several of his men to dig for, discover, pick up and lay open the underground passage or disused drain, whichever it was, that was known to run from the corner of the laundry towards the old ice-house, and that was supposed to reach to the Abbey ruins. After some bold exploratory excavations this channel was located and a report sent at once to Lady Laxton.

It was this and the new and alarming scar on the Queen Elizabeth tower that brought Mr. Beaulieu Plummer post-haste from the estate office up to the house. Mr. Beaulieu Plummer was the Marquis of Cranberry's estate agent, a man of great natural tact, and charged among other duties with the task of seeing that the Laxtons did not make away with Shonts during the period of their tenancy. He was a sound compact little man, rarely out of extreme riding breeches and gaiters, and he wore glasses, that now glittered with astonishment as he approached Lady Laxton and her band of spade workers.

At his approach Mr. Darling attempted to become invisible, but he was unable to do so.

"Lady Laxton," Mr. Beaulieu Plummer appealed, "may I ask——?"

"Oh, Mr. Beaulieu Plummer, I'm so *glad* you've come. A little boy—suffocating! I can hardly *bear* it."

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"Suffocating!" cried Mr. Beaulieu Plummer, "*where?*" and was in a confused manner told.

He asked a number of questions that Lady Laxton found very tiresome. But how did she *know* the boy was in the secret passages? Of course she knew; was it likely she would do all this if she didn't know? But mightn't he have run away? How could he when he was in the secret passages? But why not first scour the countryside? By which time he would be smothered and starved and dead! . . .

They parted with a mutual loss of esteem, and Mr. Beaulieu Plummer, looking very serious indeed, ran as fast as he could straight to the village telegraph-office. Or to be more exact he walked until he thought himself out of sight of Lady Laxton and then he took to his heels and ran. He sat for some time in the parlour post-office spoiling telegraph forms, and composing telegrams to Sir Peter Laxton and Lord Cranberry.

He got these off at last, and then drawn by an irresistible fascination went back to the park and watched from afar the signs of fresh activities on the part of Lady Laxton.

He saw men coming from the direction of the stables with large rakes. With these they dragged the ornamental waters.

Then a man with a pick-axe appeared against the skyline and crossed the roof in the direction of the clock tower, bound upon some unknown but probably highly destructive mission.

Then he saw Lady Laxton going off to the gardens. She was going to console Mrs. Darling in her trouble.

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This she did through nearly an hour and a half. And on the whole it seemed well to Mr. Beaulieu Plummer that so she should be occupied. . . .

It was striking five when a telegraph boy on a bicycle came up from the village with a telegram from Sir Peter Laxton.

"Stop all proceedings absolutely," it said, "until I get to you."

Lady Laxton's lips tightened at the message. She was back from much weeping with Mrs. Darling and altogether finely strung. Here she felt was one of those supreme occasions when a woman must assert herself. "A matter of life or death," she wired in reply, and to show herself how completely she overrode such dictation as this, she sent Mr. Mergleson down to the village public-house with orders to engage any one he could find there for an evening's work on an extraordinarily liberal overtime scale.

After taking this step the spirit of Lady Laxton quailed. She went and sat in her own room and quivered. She quivered but she clenched her delicate fist.

She would go through with it, come what might, she would go on with the excavation all night if necessary, but at the same time she began a little to regret that she had not taken earlier steps to demonstrate the improbability of Bealby having simply run away. She set to work to repair this omission. She wrote off to the Superintendent of Police in the neighbouring town, to the nearest magistrate, and then on the off-chance to various of her week-end guests, including Captain Douglas. If it was true that he had organised the annoyance of the Lord Chancellor (and

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though she still rejected that view she did now begin to regard it as a permissible hypothesis), then he might also know something about the mystery of this boy's disappearance.

Each letter she wrote she wrote with greater fatigue and haste than its predecessor and more illegibly.

Sir Peter arrived long after dark. He cut across the corner of the park to save time, and fell into one of the trenches that Mr. Darling had opened. This added greatly to the *éclat* with which he came into the hall.

Lady Laxton withstood him for five minutes and then returned abruptly to her bedroom and locked herself in, leaving the control of the operations in his hands. . . .

"If he's not in the house," said Sir Peter, "all this is thunderin' foolery, and if he's in the house he's dead. If he's dead he'll smell in a bit and then'll be the time to look for him. Somethin' to go upon instead of all this blind hacking the place about. No wonder they're threatenin' proceedings. . . ."

§ 4

Upon Captain Douglas Lady Laxton's letter was destined to have a very distracting effect. Because as he came to think it over, as he came to put her partly illegible allusions to secret passages and a missing boy side by side with his memories of Lord Moggeridge's accusations and the general mystery of his expulsion from Shonts, it became more and more

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evident to him that he had here something remarkably like a clue, something that might serve to lift the black suspicion of irreverence and levity from his military reputation. And he had already got to the point of suggesting to Miss Philips that he ought to follow up and secure Bealby forthwith, before ever they came over the hill crest to witness the disaster to the caravan.

Captain Douglas, it must be understood, was a young man at war within himself.

He had been very nicely brought up, first in a charming English home, then in a preparatory school for selected young gentlemen, then in a good set at Eton, then at Sandhurst, where the internal trouble had begun to manifest itself. Afterwards the Bistershires.

There were three main strands in the composition of Captain Douglas. In the first place and what was peculiarly his own quality was the keenest interest in the *why* of things and the *how* of things and the general mechanism of things. He was fond of clocks, curious about engines, eager for science; he had a quick brain and nimble hands. He read Jules Verne and liked to think about going to the stars and making flying machines and submarines—in those days when everybody knew quite certainly that such things were impossible. His brain teemed with larval ideas that only needed air and light to become active full-fledged ideas. There he excelled most of us. In the next place—but this second strand was just a strand that most young men have—he had a natural keen interest in the other half of humanity, he thought them lovely, interesting, wonderful, and they

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filled him with warm curiosities and set his imagination cutting the prettiest capers. And in the third place, and there again he was ordinarily human, he wanted to be liked, admired, approved, well thought of. . . . And so constituted he had passed through the educational influence of that English home, that preparatory school, the good set at Eton, the Sandhurst discipline, the Bistershire mess. . . .

Now the educational influence of the English home, the preparatory school, the good set at Eton and Sandhurst in those days—though Sandhurst has altered a little since—was all to develop that third chief strand of his being to the complete suppression of the others, to make him look well and unobtrusive, dress well and unobtrusively, behave well and unobtrusively, carry himself well, play games reasonably well, do nothing else well, and in the best possible form. And the two brothers Douglas, who were both really very much alike, did honestly do their best to be such plain and simple gentlemen as our country demands, taking pretentious established things seriously, and not being odd or intelligent—in spite of those insurgent strands.

But the strands were in them. Below the surface the disturbing impulses worked and at last forced their way out. . . .

In one Captain Douglas, as Mrs. Rampound Pilby told the Lord Chancellor, the suppressed ingenuity broke out in disconcerting mystifications and practical jokes that led to a severance from Portsmouth, in the other the pent-up passions came out before the other ingredients in an uncontrollable devotion to

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the obvious and challenging femininity of Miss Madeleine Philips. . . . His training had made him proof against ordinary women, deaf as it were to their charms, but she—she had penetrated. And impulsive forces that have been pent up go with a bang when they go. . . .

The first strand in the composition of Captain Douglas has still to be accounted for, the sinister strain of intelligence and inventiveness and lively curiosity. On that he had kept a warier hold. So far that had not been noted against him. He had his motor bicycle it is true at a time when motor bicycles were on the verge of the caddish; to that extent a watchful eye might have found him suspicious; that was all that showed. I wish I could add it was all that there was, but other things—other things were going on. Nobody knew about them. But they were going on more and more.

He read books.

Not decent fiction, not official biographies about other fellows' fathers and all the old anecdotes brought up to date and so on, but books with ideas,—you know, philosophy, social philosophy, scientific stuff, all that rot. *The sort of stuff they read in mechanics' institutes.*

He thought. He could have controlled it. But he did not attempt to control it. He *tried* to think. He knew perfectly well that it wasn't good form, but a vicious attraction drew him on.

He used to sit in his bedroom-study at Sandhurst, with the door locked, and write down on a bit of paper what he really believed and why. He would cut all

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sorts of things to do this. He would question things no properly trained English gentleman ever questions.

And—he experimented.

This you know was long before the French and American aviators. It was long before the coming of that emphatic lead from abroad without which no well-bred English mind permits itself to stir. In the darkest secrecy he used to make little models of cane and paper and elastic in the hope that somehow he would find out something about flying. Flying—that dream! He used to go off by himself to lonely places and climb up as high as he could and send these things fluttering earthward. He used to moon over them and muse about them. If any one came upon him suddenly while he was doing these things, he would sit on his model, or pretend it didn't belong to him or clap it into his pocket, whichever was most convenient, and assume the vacuous expression of a well-bred gentleman at leisure—and so far nobody had caught him. But it was a dangerous practice.

And finally, and this now is the worst and last thing to tell of his eccentricities, he was keenly interested in the science of his profession and intensely ambitious.

He thought—though it wasn't his business to think, the business of a junior officer is to obey and look a credit to his regiment—that the military science of the British army was not nearly so bright as it ought to be, and that if big trouble came there might be considerable scope for an inventive man who had done what he could to keep abreast with foreign work, and a considerable weeding out of generals whose

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promotion had been determined entirely by their seniority, amiability and unruffled connubial felicity. He thought that the field artillery would be found out—there was no good in making a fuss about it beforehand—that no end of neglected dodges would have to be picked up from the enemy, that the transport was feeble, and a health service—other than surgery and ambulance—an unknown idea; but he saw no remedy but experience. So he worked hard in secret; he worked almost as hard as some confounded foreigner might have done; in the belief that after the first horrid smash-up there might be a chance to do things.

Outwardly of course he was sedulously all right. But he could not quite hide the stir in his mind. It broke out upon his surface in a chattering activity of incompleted sentences which he tried to keep as decently silly as he could. He had done his utmost hitherto to escape the observation of the powers that were. His infatuation for Madeleine Philips had at any rate distracted censorious attention from these deeper infamies. . . .

And now here was a crisis in his life. Through some idiotic entanglement manifestly connected with this missing boy, he had got tarred by his brother's brush and was under grave suspicion for liveliness and disrespect.

The thing might be his professional ruin. And he loved the suppressed possibilities of his work beyond measure.

It was a thing to make him absent-minded even in the company of Madeleine.

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§ 5

Not only were the first and second strands in the composition of Captain Douglas in conflict with all his appearances and pretensions, but they were also in conflict with one another.

He was full of that concealed resolve to do and serve and accomplish great things in the world. That was surely purpose enough to hide behind an easy-going unpretending gentlemanliness. But he was also tremendously attracted by Madeleine Philips, more particularly when she was not there.

A beautiful woman may be the inspiration of a great career. This however he was beginning to find was not the case with himself. He had believed it at first and written as much and said as much, and said it very variously and gracefully. But becoming more and more distinctly clear to his intelligence was the fact that the reverse was the case. Miss Madeleine Philips was making it very manifest to Captain Douglas that she herself was a career; that a lover with any other career in view need not—as the advertisements say—apply.

And the time she took up!

The distress of being with her!

And the distress of *not* being with her!

She was such a proud and lovely and entrancing and distressing being to remember, and such a vain and difficult thing to be with.

She knew clearly that she was made for love, for she had made herself for love, and she went through life like its empress with all mankind and numerous

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women at her feet. And she had an ideal of the lover who should win her which was like an oleographic copy of a Laszlo portrait of Douglas greatly magnified. He was to rise rapidly to great things, he was to be a conqueror and administrator, while attending exclusively to her. And incidentally she would gather desperate homage from all other men of mark, and these attentions would be an added glory to her love for him. At first Captain Douglas had been quite prepared to satisfy all these requirements. He had met her at Shorncliffe, for her people were quite good military people, and he had worshipped his way straight to her feet. He had made the most delightfully simple and delicate love to her. He had given up his secret vice of thinking for the writing of quite surprisingly clever love-letters, and the little white paper models had ceased for a time to flutter in lonely places.

And then the thought of his career returned to him from a new aspect, as something he might lay at her feet. And once it had returned to him it remained with him.

"Some day," he said, "and it may not be so very long, some of those scientific chaps will invent flying. Then the army will have to take it up, you know."

"I should *love*," she said, "to soar through the air."

He talked one day of going on active service. How would it affect them if he had to do so? It was a necessary part of a soldier's lot.

"But I should come too!" she said. "I should come with you."

"It might not be altogether convenient," he said,

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for already he had learned that Madeleine Philips usually travelled with quite a large number of trunks and considerable impressiveness.

"Of course," she said, "it would be splendid! How could I let you go alone? You would be the great general and I should be with you always."

"Not always very comfortable," he suggested.

"Silly boy!—I shouldn't mind *that!* How little you know me! Any hardship!"

"A woman—if she isn't a nurse——"

"I should come dressed as a man. I would be your groom. . . ."

He tried to think of her dressed as a man, but nothing on earth could get his imagination any further than a vision of her dressed as a Principal Boy. She was so delightfully and valiantly not virile; her hair would have flowed, her body would have moved, a richly fluent femininity—visible through any disguise.

§ 6

That was in the opening stage of the controversy between their careers. In those days they were both acutely in love with each other. Their friends thought the spectacle quite beautiful; they went together so well. Admirers, fluttered with the pride of participation, asked them for week-ends together; those theatrical week-ends that begin on Sunday morning and end on Monday afternoon. She confided widely.

And when at last there was something like a rupture it became the concern of a large circle of friends.

The particulars of the breach were differently

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stated. It would seem that looking ahead he had announced his intention of seeing the French army manoeuvres just when it seemed probable that she would be out of an engagement.

“But I ought to see what they are doing,” he said. “They’re going to try those new dirigibles.”

Then should she come?

He wanted to whisk about. It wouldn’t be any fun for her. They might get landed at nightfall in any old hole. And besides people would talk— Especially as it was in France. One could do unconventional things in England one couldn’t in France. Atmosphere was different.

For a time after that halting explanation she maintained a silence. Then she spoke in a voice of deep feeling. She perceived, she said, that he wanted his freedom. She would be the last person to hold a reluctant lover to her side. He might go—to *any* manoeuvres. He might go if he wished round the world. He might go away from her for ever. She would not detain him, cripple him, hamper a career she had once been assured she inspired. . . .

The unfortunate man torn between his love and his profession protested that he hadn’t meant *that*.

Then what *had* he meant?

He realised he had meant something remarkably like it, and he found great difficulty in expressing these fine distinctions. . . .

She banished him from her presence for a month, said he might go to his manoeuvres—with her blessing. As for herself, that was her own affair. Some day perhaps he might know more of the heart of a woman.

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. . . She choked back tears—very beautifully, and military science suddenly became a trivial matter. But she was firm. He wanted to go. He must go. For a month anyhow.

He went sadly. . . .

Into this opening breach rushed friends. It was the inestimable triumph of Judy Bowles to get there first. To begin with, Madeleine confided in her and then, availing herself of the privilege of a distant cousinship, she commanded Douglas to tea in her Knightsbridge flat and had a good straight talk with him. She liked good straight talks with honest young men about their love affairs; it was almost the only form of flirtation that the Professor, who was a fierce tough undiscriminating man upon the essentials of matrimony, permitted her. And there was something peculiarly gratifying about Douglas's complexion. Under her guidance he was induced to declare that he could not live without Madeleine, that her love was the heart of his life, without it he was nothing and with it he could conquer the world. . . . Judy permitted herself great protestations on behalf of Madeleine, and Douglas was worked up to the pitch of kissing her intervening hand. He had little silvery hairs, she saw, all over his temples. And he was such a simple perplexed dear. It was a rich beautiful afternoon for Judy.

And then in a very obvious way Judy, who was already deeply in love with the idea of a caravan tour and the "wind on the heath" and the "Gipsy life" and the "open road" and all the rest of it, worked this charming little difficulty into her scheme, utilised

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her reluctant husband to arrange for the coming of Douglas, confided in Mrs. Geedge. . . .

And Douglas went off with his perplexities. He gave up all thought of France, week-ended at Shonts instead, to his own grave injury, returned to London unexpectedly by a Sunday train, packed for France and started. He reached Rheims on Monday afternoon. And then the image of Madeleine which always became more beautiful and mysterious and commanding with every mile he put between them would not let him go on. He made unconvincing excuses to *The Daily Excess* military expert with whom he was to have seen things—"There's a woman in it, my boy, and you're a fool to go," said *The Daily Excess* man, "but of course you'll go, and I for one don't blame you—" He hurried back to London and was at Judy's trysting-place even as Judy had anticipated.

And when he saw Madeleine standing in the sunlight, pleased and proud and glorious, with a smile in her eyes and trembling on her lips, with a strand or so of her beautiful hair and a streamer or so of delightful blue fluttering in the wind about her gracious form, it seemed to him for the moment that leaving the manoeuvres and coming back to England was quite a right and almost a magnificent thing to do.

§ 7

This meeting was no exception to their other meetings.

The coming to her was a crescendo of poetical de-

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sire, the sight of her a climax and then—an accumulation of irritations.

He had thought being with her would be pure delight, and as they went over the down straying after the Bowles and the Geedges towards the Redlake Hotel he already found himself rather urgently asking her to marry him, and being annoyed by what he regarded as her evasiveness.

He walked along with the restrained movement of a decent Englishman, he seemed as it were to gesticulate only through his clenched teeth, and she floated beside him, in a blue dress that with a wonderful foresight she had planned for breezy uplands on the basis of Botticelli's *Primavera*. He was urging her to marry him soon; he needed her, he could not live in peace without her. It was not at all what he had come to say; he could not recollect that he had come to say anything, but now that he was with her it was the only thing he could find to say to her.

“But, my dearest boy,” she said, “how are we to marry? What is to become of *your* career and *my* career?”

“I've *left* my career!” cried Captain Douglas with the first clear note of irritation in his voice.

“Oh! don't let us quarrel,” she cried. “Don't let us talk of all those *distant* things. Let us be happy. Let us enjoy just this lovely day and the sunshine and the freshness and the beauty. . . . Because you know we are snatching these days. We have so few days together. Each—each must be a gem. . . . Look, dear, how the breeze sweeps through these tall dry stems that stick up everywhere—low broad ripples.”

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She was a perfect work of art, abolishing time and obligations.

For a time they walked in silence. Then Captain Douglas said, "All very well—beauty and all that—but a fellow likes to know where he is."

She did not answer immediately and then she said, "I believe you are angry because you have come away from France."

"Not a bit of it," said the Captain stoutly. "I'd come away from anywhere to be with you."

"I wonder," she said.

"Well,—haven't I?"

"I wonder if you ever are with me. . . . Oh!—I know you *want* me. I know you desire me. But the real thing, the happiness,—love. What is anything to love—anything at all?"

In this strain they continued until their footsteps led them through the shelter of a group of beeches. And there the gallant Captain sought expression in deeds. He kissed her hands, he sought her lips. She resisted softly.

"No," she said, "only if you love me with all your heart."

Then suddenly, wonderfully, conqueringly she yielded him her lips.

"Oh!" she sighed presently, "if only you understood."

And leaving speech at that enigma she kissed again. . . .

But you see now how difficult it was under these mystically loving conditions to introduce the idea of a prompt examination and dispatch of Bealby. Already these days were consecrated. . . .

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And then Bealby vanished—going seaward. . . .

Even the crash of the caravan disaster did little to change the atmosphere. In spite of a certain energetic quality in the Professor's direction of the situation—he was a trifle embittered because his thumb was sprained and his knee bruised rather badly and he had a slight abrasion over one ear and William had bitten his calf—the general disposition was to treat the affair hilariously. Nobody seemed really hurt except William,—the Professor was not so much hurt as annoyed—and William's injuries though striking were all superficial, a sprained jaw and grazes and bruises and little things like that; everybody was heartened up to the idea of damages to be paid for; and neither the internal injuries to the caravan nor the hawker's estimate of his stock-in-trade proved to be as great as one might reasonably have expected. Before sunset the caravan was safely housed in the Winthorpe-Sutbury public-house, William had found a congenial corner in the bar parlour, where his account of an inside view of the catastrophe and his views upon Professor Bowles were much appreciated, the hawker had made a bit extra by carting all the luggage to the Redlake Royal Hotel, and the caravanners and their men-folk had loitered harmoniously back to this refuge. Madeleine had walked along the road beside Captain Douglas and his motor bicycle, which he had picked up at the now desolate encampment.

“It only remains,” she said, “for that thing to get broken.”

“But I may want it,” he said.

“No,” she said, “Heaven has poured us together and now He has smashed the vessels. At least He has

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smashed one of the vessels. And look!—like a great shield, there is the moon. It's the Harvest Moon, isn't it?"

"No," said the Captain, with his poetry running away with him. "It's the Lovers' Moon."

"It's like a benediction rising over our meeting."

And it was certainly far too much like a benediction for the Captain to talk about Bealby.

That night was a perfect night for lovers, a night flooded with a kindly radiance, so that the warm mystery of the centre of life seemed to lurk in every shadow, and hearts throbbed instead of beating and eyes were stars. After dinner every one found wraps and slipped out into the moonlight; the Geedges vanished like moths; the Professor made no secret that Judy was transfigured for him. Night works these miracles. The only other visitors there, a brace of couples, resorted to the boats upon the lake.

Two enormous waiters removing the coffee cups from the small tables upon the veranda heard Madeleine's beautiful voice for a little while, and then it was stilled. . . .

§ 8

The morning found Captain Douglas in a state of reaction. He was anxious to explain quite clearly to Madeleine how necessary it was that he should go in search of Bealby forthwith. He was beginning to realise now just what a chance in the form of Bealby had slipped through his fingers. He had dropped Bealby, and now the thing to do was to pick up Bealby again before he was altogether lost. Her professional life

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unfortunately had given Miss Philips the habit of never rising before midday, and the Captain had to pass the time as well as he could until the opportunity for his explanation came.

A fellow couldn't go off without an explanation. . . .

He passed the time with Professor Bowles upon the golf-links.

The Professor was a first-rate player and an unselfish one; he wanted all other players to be as good as himself. He would spare no pains to make them so. If he saw them committing any of the many errors into which golfers fall he would tell them of it and tell them why it was an error, and insist upon showing them just how to avoid it in future. He would point out any want of judgment, and not confine himself as so many professional golf teachers do merely to the stroke. After a time he found it necessary to hint to the Captain that nowadays a military man must accustom himself to self-control. The Captain kept Pishing and Tushing and presently it was only too evident swearing softly; his play got jerky, his strokes were forcible without any real strength, once he missed the globe altogether and several times he sliced badly. The eyes under his light eyelashes were wicked little things.

He remembered that he had always detested golf.

And the Professor. He had always detested the Professor.

And his caddie; at least he would have always detested his caddie if he had known him long enough. His caddie was one of those maddening boys with no expression at all. It didn't matter what he did or

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failed to do, there was the silly idiot with his stuffed face, unmoved. Really of course overjoyed—but apparently unmoved. . . .

“Why did I play it that way?” the Captain repeated. “Oh! because I like to play it that way.”

“Well,” said the Professor. “It isn’t a recognised way anyhow. . . .”

Then came a moment of evil pleasure.

He sliced. Old Bowles sliced. For once in a while he’d muffed something. Always teaching others and here he was slicing! Why, sometimes the Captain didn’t slice! . . .

He’d got out of that neatly enough. Luck! He’d get the hole yet. What a bore it all was! . . .

Why couldn’t Madeleine get up at a decent hour to see a fellow? Why must she lie in bed when she wasn’t acting? If she had got up all this wouldn’t have happened. The shame of it! Here he was, an able-bodied capable man in the prime of life and the morning of a day playing this blockhead’s game——!

Yes—blockhead’s game!

“You play the like,” said the Professor.

“Rather,” said the Captain and addressed himself to his stroke.

“That’s not your ball,” said the Professor.

“Similar position,” said the Captain.

“You know, you might *win* this hole,” said the Professor.

“Who cares?” said the Captain under his breath, and putted extravagantly.

“That saves me,” said the Professor and went down from a distance of twelve yards.

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The Captain, full of an irrational resentment, did his best to halve the hole and failed.

“You ought to put in a week at nothing but putting,” said the Professor. “It would save you at least a stroke a hole. I’ve noticed that on almost every green, if I haven’t beaten you before I pull up in the putting.”

The Captain pretended not to hear and said a lot of rococo things inside himself.

It was Madeleine who had got him in for this game. A beautiful healthy girl ought to get up in the mornings. Mornings and beautiful healthy girls are all the same thing really. She ought to be *dewy*—positively dewy. . . . There she must be lying, warm and beautiful in bed—like Catherine the Great or somebody of that sort. No. It wasn’t right. All very luxurious and so on, but not *right*. She ought to have understood that he was bound to fall a prey to the Professor if she didn’t get up. Golf! Here he was, neglecting his career; hanging about on these *beastly* links, all the sound men away there in France—it didn’t do to think of it!—and he was playing this retired tradesman’s consolation!

(Beastly the Professor’s legs looked from behind. The uglier a man’s legs are the better he plays golf. It’s almost a law.)

That’s what it was, a retired tradesman’s consolation. A decent British soldier has no more business to be playing golf than he has to be dressing dolls. It’s a game at once worthless and exasperating. If a man isn’t perfectly fit he cannot play golf, and when he is perfectly fit he ought to be doing a man’s work in the

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world. If ever anything deserved the name of vice, if ever anything was pure, unforgivable dissipation, surely golf was that thing. . . .

And meanwhile that boy was getting more and more start. Any one with a ha'porth of sense would have been up at five and after that brat—might have had him bagged and safe and back to lunch. *Ass* one was at times !

“You’re here, sir,” said the caddie.

The Captain perceived he was in a nasty place, open green ahead but with some tumbled country near at hand and to the left, a rusty old gravel pit, furze at the sides, water at the bottom. Nasty attractive hole of a place. Sort of thing one gets into. He must pull himself together for this. After all, having undertaken to play a game one must play the game. If he hit the infernal thing, that is to say the ball, if he hit the ball so that if it didn’t go straight it would go to the right rather—clear of the hedge it wouldn’t be so bad to the right. Difficult to manage. Best thing was to think hard of the green ahead, a long way ahead,—with just the slightest deflection to the right. Now then,—heels well down, club up, a good swing, keep your eye on the ball, keep your eye on the ball, keep your eye on the ball just where you mean to hit it—far below there and a little to the right—and *don’t* worry. . . .

Rap.

“In the pond, I *think*, sir.”

“The water would have splashed if it had gone in the pond,” said the Professor. “It must be over there in the wet sand. You hit it pretty hard, I thought.”

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Search. The caddie looked as though he didn't care whether he found it or not. *He* ought to be interested. It was his profession, not just his game. But nowadays everybody had this horrid disposition towards slacking. A Tired generation we are. The world is too much with us. Too much to think about, too much to do, Madeleines, army manœuvres, angry lawyers, lost boys—let alone such exhausting foolery as this game. . . .

"Got it, sir!" said the caddie.

"Where?"

"Here, sir! Up in the bush, sir!"

It was resting in the branches of a bush two yards above the slippery bank.

"I doubt if you can play it," said the Professor, "but it will be interesting to try."

The Captain scrutinised the position. "I can play it," he said.

"You'll slip, I'm afraid," said the Professor.

They were both right. Captain Douglas drove his feet into the steep slope of rusty sand below the bush, held his iron a little short and wiped the ball up and over and as he found afterwards out of the rough. All eyes followed the ball except his. The Professor made sounds of friendly encouragement. But the Captain was going—going. He was on all fours, he scrabbled handfuls of prickly gorse, of wet sand. His feet, his ankles, his calves slid into the pond. How much more? No. He'd reached the bottom. He proceeded to get out again as well as he could. Not so easy. The bottom of this pond sucked at him. . . .

When at last he rejoined the other three his hands

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were sandy red, his knees were sandy red, his feet were of clay, but his face was like the face of a little child. Like the face of a little fair child after it has been boiled red in its bath and then dusted over with white powder. His ears were the colour of roses, Lancaster roses. And his eyes too had something of the angry wonder of a little child distressed. . . .

"I was afraid you'd slip into the pond," said the Professor.

"I didn't," said the Captain.

"!"

"I just got in to see how deep it was and cool my feet—I hate warm feet."

He lost that hole but he felt a better golfer now, his anger he thought was warming him up so that he would presently begin to make strokes by instinct and do remarkable things unawares. After all there is something in the phrase "getting one's blood up." If only the Professor wouldn't dally so with his ball and let one's blood get down again. Tap!—the Professor's ball went soaring. Now for it. The Captain addressed himself to his task, altered his plans rather hastily, smote and topped the ball.

The least one could expect was a sympathetic silence. But the Professor thought fit to improve the occasion.

"You'll never drive," said the Professor, "you'll never drive with that *irritable* jerk in the middle of the stroke. You might just as well smack the ball without raising your club. If you think——"

The Captain lost his self-control altogether.

"Look here," he said, "if *you* think that *I* care a

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single rap about how I hit the ball, if you think that I really want to win and do well at this beastly silly elderly childish game——”

He paused on the verge of ungentlemanly language.

“If a thing’s worth doing at all,” said the Professor after a pause for reflection, “it’s worth doing well.”

“Then it isn’t worth doing at all. As this hole gives you the game—if you don’t mind——”

The Captain’s hot moods were so rapid that already he was acutely ashamed of himself.

“Oh *certainly* if you wish it,” said the Professor.

With a gesture the Professor indicated the altered situation to the respectful caddies, and the two gentlemen turned their faces towards the hotel.

For a time they walked side by side in silence, the caddies following with hushed expressions.

“Splendid weather for the French manoeuvres,” said the Captain presently in an off-hand tone, “that is to say if they are getting this weather.”

“At present there is a series of high-pressure systems over the whole of Europe north of the Alps,” said the Professor. “It is as near set fair as Europe can be.”

“Fine weather for tramps and wanderers,” said the Captain after a further interval.

“There’s a drawback to everything,” said the Professor. “But it’s very lovely weather.”

§ 9

They got back to the hotel about half-past eleven and the Captain went and had an unpleasant time

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with one of the tires of his motor bicycle which had got down in the night. In replacing the tire he pinched the top of one of his fingers rather badly. Then he got the ordnance map of the district and sat at a green table in the open air in front of the hotel windows and speculated on the probable flight of Bealby. He had been last seen going south by east. That way lay the sea, and all boy fugitives go naturally for the sea.

He tried to throw himself into the fugitive's mind and work out just exactly the course Bealby *must* take to the sea.

For a time he found this quite an absorbing occupation.

Bealby probably had no money or very little money. Therefore he would have to beg or steal. He wouldn't go to the workhouse because he wouldn't know about the workhouse, respectable poor people never know anything about the workhouse, and the chances were he would be both too honest and too timid to steal. He'd beg. He'd beg at front doors because of dogs and things and he'd probably go along a highroad. He'd be more likely to beg from houses than from passers-by because a door is at first glance less formidable than a pedestrian and more accustomed to being addressed. And he'd try isolated cottages rather than the village street doors, an isolated wayside cottage is so much more confidential. He'd ask for food—not money. All that seemed pretty sound.

Now this road on the map—into it he was bound to fall and along it he would go begging. No other? . . .
No.

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In the fine weather he'd sleep out. And he'd go—ten, twelve, fourteen—thirteen, thirteen miles a day.

So now, he ought to be about here. And to-night,—here.

To-morrow at the same pace,—here.

But suppose he got a lift! . . .

He'd only get a slow lift if he got one at all. It wouldn't make much difference in the calculation. . . .

So if to-morrow one started and went on to these cross roads marked *Inn*, just about twenty-six miles it must be by the scale, and beat round it one ought to get something in the way of tidings of Mr. Bealby. Was there any reason why Bealby shouldn't go on south by east and seaward? . . .

None.

And now there remained nothing to do but to explain all this clearly to Madeleine. And why didn't she come down? Why didn't she come down?

But when one got Bealby what would one do with him?

Wring the truth out of him—half by threats and half by persuasion. Suppose after all he hadn't any connection with the upsetting of Lord Moggeridge? He had. Suppose he hadn't. He had. He had. He had.

And when one had the truth?

Whisk the boy right up to London and confront the Lord Chancellor with the facts. But suppose he wouldn't be confronted with the facts. He was a touchy old sinner. . . .

For a time Captain Douglas balked at this difficulty. Then suddenly there came into his head the

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tall figure, the long moustaches of that kindly popular figure, his adopted uncle Lord Chickney. Suppose he took the boy straight to Uncle Chickney, told him the whole story. Even the Lord Chancellor would scarcely refuse ten minutes to General Lord Chickney. . . .

The clearer the plans of Captain Douglas grew the more anxious he became to put them before Madeleine—clearly and convincingly. . . .

Because first he had to catch his boy. . . .

Presently as Captain Douglas fretted at the continued eclipse of Madeleine, his thumb went into his waistcoat pocket and found a piece of paper. He drew it out and looked at it. It was a little piece of stiff note-paper cut into the shape of a curved V rather after the fashion of a soaring bird. It must have been there for months. He looked at it. His care-wrinkled brow relaxed. He glanced over his shoulder at the house and then held this little scrap high over his head and let go. It descended with a slanting flight curving round to the left, and then came about and swept down to the ground to the right. . . . Now why did it go like that? As if it changed its mind. He tried it again. Same result. . . . Suppose the curvature of the wings was a little greater? Would it make a more acute or a less acute angle? He did not know. . . . Try it.

He felt in his pocket for a piece of paper, found Lady Laxton's letter, produced a stout pair of nail scissors in a sheath from his waistcoat pocket, selected a good clear sheet, and set himself to cut out his improved V. . . .

As he did so his eyes were on V number one, on the

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ground. It would be interesting to see if this thing turned about to the left again. If in fact it would go on zig-zagging. It ought he felt to do so. But to test that one ought to release it from some higher point so as to give it a longer flight. Stand on the chair? . . .

Not in front of the whole rotten hotel. And there was a beastly looking man in a green apron coming out of the house,—the sort of man who looks at you. He might come up and watch; these fellows are equal to anything of that sort. Captain Douglas replaced his scissors and scraps in his pockets, leaned back with an affectation of boredom, got up, lit a cigarette—sort of thing the man in the green apron would think all right—and strolled off towards a clump of beech-trees, beyond which were bushes and a depression. There perhaps one might be free from observation. Just try these things for a bit. That point about the angle was a curious one; it made one feel one's ignorance not to know that. . . .

§ 10

The ideal King has a careworn look, he rules, he has to do things, but the ideal Queen is radiant happiness, tall and sweetly dignified, simply she has to be things. And when at last towards midday Queen Madeleine dispelled the clouds of the morning and came shining back into the world that waited outside her door, she was full of thankfulness for herself and for the empire that was given her. She knew she was a delicious and wonderful thing, she knew she was well done, her hands, the soft folds of her dress as she held it up, the

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sweep of her hair from her forehead pleased her, she lifted her chin but not too high for the almost unenviable homage in the eyes of the housemaid on the staircase. Her descent was well timed for the lunch gathering of the hotel guests; there was "Ah!—here she comes at last!" and there was her own particular court out upon the veranda before the entrance, Geedge and the Professor and Mrs. Bowles—and Mrs. Geedge coming across the lawn,—and the lover?

She came on down and out into the sunshine. She betrayed no surprise. The others met her with flattering greetings that she returned smilingly. But the lover——?

He was not there!

It was as if the curtain had gone up on almost empty stalls.

He ought to have been worked up and waiting tremendously. He ought to have spent the morning in writing a poem to her or in writing a delightful poetical love-letter she could carry away and read, or in wandering alone and thinking about her. He ought to be feeling now like the end of a vigil. He ought to be standing now, a little in the background and with that pleasant flush of his upon his face and that shy, subdued, reluctant look that was so infinitely more flattering than any boldness of admiration. And then she would go towards him, for she was a giving type, and hold out both hands to him, and he, as though he couldn't help it, in spite of all his British reserve, would take one and hesitate—which made it all the more marked—and kiss it. . . .

Instead of which he was just not there. . . .

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No visible disappointment dashed her bravery. She knew that at the slightest flicker Judy and Mrs. Geedge would guess and that anyhow the men would guess nothing. "I've rested," she said, "I've rested delightfully. What have you all been doing?"

Judy told of great conversations, Mr. Geedge had been looking for trout in the stream, Mrs. Geedge with a thin little smile said she had been making a few notes and—she added the word with deliberation—"observations," and Professor Bowles said he had had a round of golf with the Captain. "And he lost?" asked Madeleine.

"He's careless in his drive and impatient at the greens," said the Professor modestly.

"And then?"

"He vanished," said the Professor, recognising the true orientation of her interest.

There was a little pause and Mrs. Geedge said, "You know—" and stopped short.

Interrogative looks focused upon her.

"It's so odd," she said.

Curiosity increased.

"I suppose one ought not to say," said Mrs. Geedge, "and yet—why shouldn't one?"

"Exactly," said Professor Bowles and everyone drew a little nearer to Mrs. Geedge.

"One can't help being amused," she said. "It was so—extraordinary."

"Is it something about the Captain?" asked Madeleine.

"Yes. You see,—he didn't see me."

"Is he—is he writing poetry?" Madeleine was

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much entertained and relieved at the thought. That would account for everything. The poor dear! He hadn't been able to find some rhyme!

But one gathered from the mysterious airs of Mrs. Geedge that he was not writing poetry. "You see," she said, "I was lying out there among the bushes, just jotting down a few little things,—and he came by. And he went down into the hollow out of sight. . . . And what do you think he is doing? You'd never guess. He's been at it for twenty minutes."

They didn't guess.

"He's playing with bits of paper—oh! like a kitten plays with dead leaves. He throws them up—and they flutter to the ground—and then he pounces on them."

"But—" said Madeleine. And then very brightly, "Let's go and see!"

She was amazed. She couldn't understand. She hid it under a light playfulness, that threatened to become distraught. Even when presently, after a very careful stalking of the dell under the guidance of Mrs. Geedge, with the others in support, she came in sight of him, she still found him incredible. There was her lover, her devoted lover, standing on the top bar of a fence, his legs wide apart and his body balanced with difficulty, and in his fingers poised high was a scrap of paper. This was the man who should have been waiting in the hall with feverish anxiety. His fingers released the little model and down it went drifting. . . .

He seemed to be thinking of nothing else in the world. She might never have been born! . . .

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Some noise, some rustle, caught his ear. He turned his head quickly, guiltily, and saw her and her companions.

And then he crowned her astonishment. No love-light leaped to his eyes; he uttered no cry of joy. Instead he clutched wildly at the air, shouted, "Oh *damn!*" and came down with a complicated inelegance on all fours upon the ground.

He was angry with her—angry; she could see that he was extremely angry.

§ 11

So it was that the incompatibilities of man and woman arose again in the just recovering love-dream of Madeleine Philips. But now the discord was far more evident than it had been at the first breach.

Suddenly her dear lover, her flatterer, her worshipper, had become a strange averted man. He scrabbled up two of his paper scraps before he came towards her, still with no love-light in his eyes. He kissed her hand as if it was a matter of course and said almost immediately: "I've been hoping for you all the endless morning. I've had to amuse myself as best I can."

His tone was resentful. He spoke as if he had a claim upon her, upon her attentions. As if it wasn't entirely upon his side that obligations lay.

She resolved that shouldn't deter her from being charming.

And all through the lunch she was as charming as she could be, and under such treatment that rebel-

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lions ruffled quality vanished from his manner, vanished so completely that she could wonder if it had really been evident at any time. The alert servitor returned.

She was only too pleased to forget the disappointment of her descent and forgive him, and it was with a puzzled incredulity that she presently saw his "difficult" expression returning. It was an odd little knitting of the brows, a faint absent-mindedness, a filming of the brightness of his worship. He was just perceptibly indifferent to the charmed and charming things he was saying.

It seemed best to her to open the question herself. "Is there something on your mind, Dot?"

"Dot" was his old school nickname.

"Well no—not exactly on my mind. But— It's a bother of course. There's that confounded boy. . . ."

"Were you trying some sort of divination about him? With those pieces of paper?"

"No. That was different. That was—just something else. But you see that boy— Probably clear up the whole of the Moggeridge bother—and you know it is a bother. Might turn out beastly awkward. . . ."

It was extraordinarily difficult to express. He wanted so much to stay with her and he wanted so much to go.

But all reason, all that was expressible, all that found vent in words and definite suggestions was on the side of an immediate pursuit of Bealby. So that it seemed to her he wanted and intended to go much more definitely than he actually did.

That divergence of purpose flawed a beautiful after-

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noon, cast chill shadows of silences over their talk, arrested endearments. She was irritated. About six o'clock she urged him to go; she did not mind, anyhow she had things to see to, letters to write, and she left him with an effect of leaving him for ever. He went and overhauled his motor bicycle thoroughly, and then an aching dread of separation from her arrested him.

Dinner, the late June sunset and the moon seemed to bring them together again. Almost harmoniously he was able to suggest that he should get up very early the next morning, pursue and capture Bealby and return for lunch.

"You'd get up at dawn!" she cried. "But how perfectly Splendid the midsummer dawn must be."

Then she had an inspiration. "Dot!" she cried, "I will get up at dawn also and come with you. . . . Yes, but as you say he cannot be more than thirteen miles away we'd catch him warm in his little bed somewhere. And the freshness! The dewy freshness!"

And she laughed her beautiful laugh and said it would be "Such *Fun!*" entering as she supposed into his secret desires and making the most perfect of reconciliations. They were to have tea first, which she would prepare with the caravan lamp and kettle. Mrs. Geedge would hand it over to her.

She broke into song. "A Hunting we will go—ooh," she sang. "A Hunting we will go. . . ."

But she could not conquer the churlish underside of the Captain's nature even by such efforts. She threw a glamour of vigour and fun over the adventure, but some cold streak in his composition was insisting all

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the time that as a boy hunt the attempt failed. Various delays in her preparations prevented a start before half-past seven, he let that weigh with him, and when sometimes she clapped her hands and ran—and she ran like a deer, and sometimes she sang, he said something about going at an even pace.

At a quarter-past one Mrs. Geedge observed them returning. They were walking abreast and about six feet apart, they bore themselves grimly after the manner of those who have delivered ultimata and they conversed no more. . . .

In the afternoon Madeleine kept her own room exhausted, and Captain Douglas sought opportunities of speaking to her in vain. His face expressed distress and perplexity, with momentary lapses into wrathful resolution, and he evaded Judy and her leading questions and talked about the weather with Geedge. He declined a proposal of the Professor's to go round the links, with especial reference to his neglected putting. "You ought to, you know," said the Professor.

About half-past three and without any publication of his intention, Captain Douglas departed upon his motor bicycle. . . .

Madeleine did not reappear until dinner-time, and then she was clad in lace and gaiety that impressed the naturally very good observation of Mrs. Geedge as unreal.

§ 12

The Captain, a confusion of motives that was as it were a mind returning to chaos, started upon his mo-

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tor bicycle. He had seen tears in her eyes. Just for one instant, but certainly they were tears. Tears of vexation. Or sorrow? (Which is the worse thing for a lover to arouse, grief or resentment?) But this boy must be caught, because if he was not caught a perpetually developing story of imbecile practical joking upon eminent and influential persons would eat like a cancer into the Captain's career. And if his career was spoiled what sort of thing would he be as a lover? Not to mention that he might never get a chance then to try flying for military purposes. . . . So anyhow, anyhow this boy must be caught. But quickly, for women's hearts are tender, they will not stand exposure to hardship. There is a kind of unreasonableness natural to goddesses. Unhappily this was an expedition needing wariness, deliberation, and one brought to it a feverish hurry to get back. There must be self-control. There must be patience. Such occasions try the soldierly quality of a man. . . .

It added nothing to the Captain's self-control that after he had travelled ten miles he found he had forgotten his quite indispensable map and had to return for it. Then he was seized again with doubts about his inductions and went over them again, sitting by the roadside. (There must be patience.) . . . He went on at a pace of thirty-five miles an hour to the Inn he had marked upon his map as Bealby's limit for the second evening. It was a beastly little inn, it stewed tea for the Captain atrociously, and it knew nothing of Bealby. In the adjacent cottages also they had never heard of Bealby. Captain Douglas revised his deductions for the third time and came to the con-

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clusion that he had not made a proper allowance for Wednesday afternoon. Then there was all Thursday, and the longer, lengthening part of Friday. He might have done thirty miles or more already. And he might have crossed this corner—inconspicuously.

Suppose he hadn't after all come along this road!

He had a momentary vision of Madeleine with eyes brightly tearful. "You left me for a Wild Goose Chase," he fancied her saying. . . .

One must stick to one's job. A soldier more particularly must stick to his job. Consider Balaclava. . . .

He decided to go on along this road and try the incidental cottages that his reasoning led him to suppose were the most likely places at which Bealby would ask for food. It was a business demanding patience and politeness.

So a number of cottagers, for the greater part they were elderly women past the fiercer rush and hurry of life, grandmothers and ancient dames or wives at leisure with their children away at the Council schools, had a caller that afternoon. Cottages are such lonely places in the daytime that even district visitors and canvassers are godsend, and only tramps ill-received. Captain Douglas ranked high in the scale of visitors. There was something about him, his fairness, a certain handsomeness, his quick colour, his active speech, which interested women at all times, and now an indefinable flow of romantic excitement conveyed itself to his interlocutors. He encountered the utmost civility everywhere, doors at first tentatively ajar opened wider at the sight of him, and there was a kindly disposition to enter into his troubles lengthily and delib-

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erately. They listened attentively to his demands, and before they testified to Bealby's sustained absence from their perception they would for the most part ask numerous questions in return. They wanted to hear the Captain's story, the reason for his research, the relationship between himself and the boy, they wanted to feel something of the sentiment of the thing. After that was the season for negative facts. Perhaps when everything was stated they might be able to conjure up what he wanted. He was asked in to have tea twice, for he looked not only pink and dusty but dry, and one old lady said that years ago she had lost just such a boy as Bealby seemed to be—"Ah! not in the way *you* have lost him"—and she wept, poor old dear! and was only comforted after she had told the Captain three touching but extremely lengthy and detailed anecdotes of Bealby's vanished prototype.

(Fellow cannot rush away, you know; still all this sort of thing, accumulating, means a confounded lot of delay.)

And then there was a deaf old man. . . . A very, very tiresome deaf old man who said at first he *had* seen Bealby. . . .

After all the old fellow was deaf. . . .

The sunset found the Captain on a breezy common forty miles away from the Redlake Royal Hotel, and by this time he knew that fugitive boys cannot be trusted to follow the lines even of the soundest inductions. This business meant a search.

Should he pelt back to Redlake and start again more thoroughly on the morrow?

A moment of temptation.

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If he did he knew she wouldn't let him go.

No!

NO!

He must make a sweeping movement through the country to the left, trying up and down the roads that, roughly speaking, radiated from Redlake between the twenty-fifth and the thirty-fifth milestone. . . .

It was night and high moonlight when at last the Captain reached Crayminster, that little old town decayed to a village, in the Crays valley. He was hungry, dispirited, quite unsuccessful, and here he resolved to eat and rest for the night.

He would have a meal, for by this time he was ravenous, and then go and talk in the bar or the tap about Bealby.

Until he had eaten he felt he could not endure the sound of his own voice repeating what had already become a tiresome stereotyped formula: "You haven't I suppose seen or heard anything during the last two days of a small boy—little chap of about thirteen—wandering about? He's a sturdy, resolute little fellow with a high colour, short wiry hair, rather dark. . . ."

The White Hart at Crayminster after some negotiations produced mutton cutlets and Australian hock. As he sat at his meal in the small ambiguous respectable dining-room of the inn—adorned with framed and glazed beer advertisements, crinkled paper fringes and insincere sporting prints—he became aware of a murmurous confabulation going on in the bar parlour. It must certainly, he felt, be the bar parlour. . . .

He could not hear distinctly, and yet it seemed to

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him that the conversational style of Crayminster was abnormally rich in expletive. And the tone was odd. It had a steadfast quality of commination.

He brushed off a crumb from his jacket, lit a cigarette and stepped across the passage to put his hopeless questions.

The talk ceased abruptly at his appearance.

It was one of those deep-toned bar parlours that are so infinitely more pleasant to the eye than the tawdry decorations of the genteel accommodation. It was brown with a trimming of green paper hops and it had a mirror and glass shelves sustaining bottles and tankards. Six or seven individuals were sitting about the room. They had a numerous effect. There was a man in very light flourey tweeds, with a flourey bloom on his face and hair and an anxious depressed expression. He was clearly a baker. He sat forward as though he nursed something precious under the table. Next him was a respectable-looking, regular-featured, fair man with a large head, and a ruddy-faced butcher-like individual smoked a clay pipe by the side of the fireplace. A further individual with an alert intrusive look might have been a grocer's assistant associating above himself.

"Evening," said the Captain.

"Evening," said the man with the large head guardedly.

The Captain came to the hearth-rug with an affectation of ease.

"I suppose," he began, "that you haven't any of you seen anything of a small boy, wandering about. He's a little chap about thirteen. Sturdy, resolute-

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looking little fellow with a high colour, short wiry hair, rather dark. . . .”

He stopped short arrested by the excited movements of the butcher's pipe and by the changed expressions of the rest of the company.

“We—we seen 'im,” the man with the big head managed to say at last.

“We seen 'im all right,” said a voice out of the darkness beyond the range of the lamp.

The baker with the melancholy expression interjected, “I don't care if I don't ever see 'im again.”

“Ah!” said the Captain, astonished to find himself suddenly beyond hoping on a hot fresh scent. “Now all that's very interesting. Where did you see him?”

“Thunderin' vicious little varmint,” said the butcher. “Owdacious.”

“Mr. Benshaw,” said the voice from the shadows, “'e's arter 'im now with a shotgun loaded up wi' oats. 'E'll pepper 'im if 'e gets 'im, Bill will, you bet your 'at. And serve 'im jolly well right *terw*.”

“I doubt,” said the baker, “I doubt if I'll ever get my stummik—not thoroughly proper again. It's a Blow I've 'ad. 'E give me a Blow. Oh! Mr. 'Or-rocks, *could* I trouble you for another thimbleful of brandy? Just a thimbleful neat. It eases the ache. . . .”

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

BEALBY AND THE TRAMP

§ 1

BEALBY was loath to leave the caravan party even when by his own gross negligence it had ceased to be a caravan party. He made off regretfully along the crest of the hills through bushes of yew and box until the clamour of the disaster was no longer in his ears. Then he halted for a time and stood sorrowing and listening, and then turned up by a fence along the border of a plantation and so came into a little overhung road.

His ideas of his immediate future were vague in the extreme. He was a receptive expectation. Since his departure from the gardener's cottage circumstances had handed him on. They had been interesting but unstable circumstances. He supposed they would still hand him on. So far as he had any definite view about his intentions it was that he was running away to sea. And that he was getting hungry.

It was also, he presently discovered, getting dark very gently and steadily. And the overhung road after some tortuosities expired suddenly upon the bosom of a great grey empty common with distant mysterious hedges.

It seemed high time to Bealby that something happened of a comforting nature.

Always hitherto something or someone had come to his help when the world grew dark and cold, and given

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him supper and put him or sent him to bed. Even when he had passed a night in the interstices of Shonts he had known there was a bed at quite a little distance under the stairs. If only that loud Voice hadn't shouted curses whenever he moved he would have gone to it. But as he went across this common in the gloaming it became apparent that this amiable routine was to be broken. For the first time he realised the world could be a homeless world.

And it had become very still.

Disagreeably still, and full of ambiguous shadows.

That common was not only an unsheltered place, he felt, but an unfriendly place, and he hurried to a gate at the farther end. He kept glancing to the right and to the left. It would be pleasanter when he had got through that gate and shut it after him.

In England there are no grey wolves.

Yet at times one thinks of wolves, grey wolves, the colour of twilight and running noiselessly, almost noiselessly, at the side of their prey for quite a long time before they close in on it.

In England, I say, there are no grey wolves.

Wolves were extinguished in the reign of Edward the Third; it was in the histories, and since then no free wolf has trod the soil of England; only menagerie captives.

Of course there may be *escaped* wolves!

Now the gate!—sharp through it and slam it behind you, and a brisk run and so into this plantation that slopes downhill. This is a sort of path, vague, but it must be a path. Let us hope it is a path.

What was that among the trees?

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It stopped, surely it stopped, as Bealby stopped. Pump, pump— Of course! that was one's heart.

Nothing there! Just fancy. Wolves live in the open; they do not come into woods like this. And besides, there are no wolves. And if one shouts—even if it is but a phantom voice one produces, they go away. They are cowardly things—really. Such as there aren't.

And there is the power of the human eye.

Which is why they stalk you and watch you and evade you when you look, and creep and creep and creep behind you!

Turn sharply.

Nothing.

How this stuff rustled under the feet! In woods at twilight, with innumerable things darting from trees and eyes watching you everywhere, it would be pleasanter if one could walk without making quite such a row. Presently surely, Bealby told himself, he would come out on a high road and meet other people and say "Good-night" as they passed. Jolly other people they would be, answering, "Good-night." He was now going at a moistening trot. It was getting darker and he stumbled against things.

When you tumble down wolves leap. Not of course that there *are* any wolves.

It was stupid to keep thinking of wolves in this way. Think of something else. Think of things beginning with a B. Beautiful things, boys, beads, butterflies, bears. The mind stuck at bears. *Are there such things as long grey bears?* Ugh! Almost endless, noiseless bears? . . .

BEALBY

It grew darker until at last the trees were black. The night was swallowing up the flying Bealby and he had a preposterous persuasion that it had teeth and would begin at the back of his legs. . . .

§ 2

“Hi!” cried Bealby weakly, hailing the glow of the fire out of the darkness of the woods above.

The man by the fire peered at the sound, he had been listening to the stumbling footsteps for some time, and he answered nothing.

In another minute Bealby had struggled through the hedge into the visible world and stood regarding the man by the fire. The phantom wolves had fled beyond Sirius. But Bealby’s face was pale still from the terrors of the pursuit and altogether he looked a smallish sort of small boy.

“Lost?” said the man by the fire.

“Couldn’t find my way,” said Bealby.

“Any one with you?”

“No.”

The man reflected. “Tired?”

“Bit.”

“Come and sit down by the fire and rest yourself.”

“I won’t ’urt you,” he added as Bealby hesitated.

So far in his limited experience Bealby had never seen a human countenance lit from behind by a flickering red flame. The effect he found remarkable rather than pleasing. It gave him the most active and un-

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stable countenance Bealby had ever seen. The nose seemed to be in active oscillation between Pug and Roman, the eyes jumped out of black caves and then went back into them, the more permanent features appeared to be a vast triangle of neck and chin. The tramp would have impressed Bealby as altogether inhuman if it had not been for the smell of cooking he diffused. There were onions in it and turnips and pepper—mouth-watering constituents, testimonials to virtue. He was making a stew in an old can that he had slung on a cross-stick over a brisk fire of twigs that he was constantly replenishing.

“I won’t ’urt you, darn you,” he repeated. “Come and sit down on these leaves here for a bit and tell me all abart it.”

Bealby did as he was desired. “I got lost,” he said, feeling too exhausted to tell a good story.

The tramp, examined more closely, became less pyrotechnic. He had a large loose mouth, a confused massive nose, much long fair hair, a broad chin with a promising beard and spots—a lot of spots. His eyes looked out of deep sockets and they were sharp little eyes. He was a lean man. His hands were large and long and they kept on with the feeding of the fire as he sat and talked to Bealby. Once or twice he leaned forward and smelled the pot judiciously, but all the time the little eyes watched Bealby very closely.

“Lose yer collar?” said the tramp.

Bealby felt for his collar. “I took it orf,” he said.

“Come far?”

“Over there,” said Bealby.

“Where?”

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"Over there."

"What place?"

"Don't know the name of it."

"Then it ain't your 'ome?"

"No."

"You've run away," said the man.

"P'raps I 'ave," said Bealby.

"P'raps you 'ave! Why p'raps? You 'ave? What's the good of telling lies about it? When d'you start?"

"Monday," said Bealby.

The tramp reflected. "Had about enough of it?"

"Dunno," said Bealby truthfully.

"Like some soup?"

"Yes."

"'Ow much?"

"I could do with a lot," said Bealby.

"Ah yah! I didn't mean that. I meant, 'ow much for some? 'Ow much will you pay for a nice, nice 'arf can of soup? I ain't a darn charity. See?"

"Tuppence," said Bealby.

The tramp shook his head slowly from side to side and took out the battered iron spoon he was using to stir the stuff and tasted the soup lusciously. It was—jolly good soup and there were potatoes in it.

"Thrippence," said Bealby.

"'Ow much you got?" asked the tramp.

Bealby hesitated perceptibly. "Sixpence," he said weakly.

"It's sixpence," said the tramp. "Pay up."

"'Ow big a can?" asked Bealby.

The tramp felt about in the darkness behind him and produced an empty can with a jagged mouth that

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had once contained, the label witnessed—I quote, I do not justify—“*Deep Sea Salmon.*” “That,” he said, “and this chunk of bread. . . . Right enough?”

“You *will* do it?” said Bealby.

“Do I look a swindle?” cried the tramp, and suddenly a lump of the abundant hair fell over one eye in a singularly threatening manner. Bealby handed over the sixpence without further discussion. “I’ll treat you fairly, you see,” said the tramp, after he had spat on and pocketed the sixpence, and he did as much. He decided that the soup was ready to be served and he served it with care. Bealby began at once. “There’s a nextry onion,” said the tramp, throwing one over. “It didn’t cost me much and I gives it you for nothin’. That’s all right, eh? Here’s ‘ealth!”

Bealby consumed his soup and bread meekly with one eye upon his host. He would, he decided, eat all he could and then sit a little while, and then get this tramp to tell him the way to—anywhere else. And the tramp wiped soup out of his can with gobbets of bread very earnestly and meditated sagely on Bealby.

“You better pal in with me, matey, for a bit,” he said at last. “You can’t go nowhere else—not to-night.”

“Couldn’t I walk perhaps to a town or sump-thing?”

“These woods ain’t safe.”

“’Ow d’you mean?”

“Ever ’eard tell of a gurrillia?—sort of big black monkey thing.”

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“Yes,” said Bealby faintly.

“There’s been one loose abät ’ere—oh week or more. Fact. And if you wasn’t a grown-up man quite and going along in the dark, well—’e might say something *to* you. . . . Of course ’e wouldn’t do nothing where there was a fire or a man—but a little chap like you. I wouldn’t like to let you do it, ’strewth I wouldn’t. It’s risky. Course I don’t want to *keep* you. There it is. You go if you like. But I’d rather you didn’t. ’Onest.”

“Where’d he come from?” asked Bealby.

“M’nagery,” said the tramp.

“’E very near bit through the fist of a chap that tried to stop ’im,” said the tramp.

Bealby after weighing tramp and gorilla very carefully in his mind decided he wouldn’t, and drew closer to the fire—but not too close—and the conversation deepened.

§ 3

It was a long and rambling conversation and the tramp displayed himself at times as quite an amiable person. It was a discourse varied by interrogations, and as a thread of departure and return it dealt with the life of the road and with life at large and—life, and with matters of “must” and “may.”

Sometimes and more particularly at first Bealby felt as though a ferocious beast lurked in the tramp and peeped out through the fallen hank of hair and might leap out upon him, and sometimes he felt the tramp was large and fine and gay and amusing, more particularly when he lifted his voice and his bristling

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chin. And ever and again the talker became a nasty creature and a disgusting creature, and his red-lit face was an ugly creeping approach that made Bealby recoil. And then again he was strong and wise. So the unstable needle of a boy's moral compass spins.

The tramp used strange terms. He spoke of the "deputy" and the "doss-house," of the "spike" and "padding the hoof," of "screevers" and "tarts" and "copper's narks." To these words Bealby attached such meanings as he could, and so the things of which the tramp talked floated unsurely into his mind and again and again he had to readjust and revise his interpretations. And through these dim and fluctuating veils a new side of life dawned upon his consciousness, a side that was strange and lawless and dirty—in every way dirty—and dreadful and—attractive. That was the queer thing about it, that attraction. It had humour. For all its squalor and repulsiveness it was lit by defiance and laughter, bitter laughter perhaps but laughter. It had a gaiety that Mr. Mergleson for example did not possess, it had a penetration, like the penetrating quality of onions or acids or asafœtida, that made the memory of Mr. Darling insipid.

The tramp assumed from the outset that Bealby had "done something" and run away, and some mysterious etiquette prevented his asking directly what was the nature of his offence. But he made a number of insidious soundings. And he assumed that Bealby was taking to the life of the road and that, until good cause to the contrary appeared, they were to remain together. "It's a tough life," he said, "but it has its points, and you got a toughish look about you."

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He talked of roads and the quality of roads and countryside. This was a good countryside; it wasn't overdone and there was no great hostility to wanderers and sleeping out. Some roads—the London to Brighton for example—if a chap struck a match somebody came running. But here unless you went pulling the haystacks about too much they left you alone. And they weren't such dead nuts on their pheasants, and one had a chance of an empty cowshed. "If I've spotted a shed or anything with a roof to it I stay out," said the tramp, "even if it's raining cats and dogs. Otherwise it's the doss-'ouse or the 'spike.' It's the rain is the worst thing—getting wet. You haven't been wet yet, not if you only started Monday. Wet—with a chilly wind to drive it. Gaw! I been blown out of a holly hedge. You *would* think there'd be protection in a holly hedge. . . .

"Spike's the last thing," said the tramp, "I'd rather go bare-gutted to a doss-'ouse anywhen. Gaw!—you've not 'ad your first taste of the spike yet."

But it wasn't heaven in the doss-houses. He spoke of several of the landladies in strange but it would seem unflattering terms. "And there's always such a blamed lot of washing going on in a doss-'ouse. Always washing they are! One chap's washing 'is socks and another's washing 'is shirt. Making a steam drying it. Disgustin'. Carn't see what they want with it all. Bänd to git dirty again. . . ."

He discoursed of spikes, that is to say of work-houses, and of masters. "And then," he said with revolting yet alluring adjectives, "there's the bath.

"That's the worst side of it," said the tramp. . . .

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“’Owever it doesn’t always rain, and if it doesn’t rain, well, you can keep yourself dry.”

He came back to the pleasanter aspects of the nomadic life. He was all for the outdoor style. “Ain’t we comfortable ’ere?” he asked. He sketched out the simple larcenies that had contributed and given zest to the evening’s meal. But it seemed there were also doss-houses that had the agreeable side. “Never been in one!” he said. “But where you been sleeping since Monday?”

Bealby described the caravan in phrases that seemed suddenly thin and anæmic to his ears.

“You hit it lucky,” said the tramp. “If a chap’s a kid he strikes all sorts of luck of that sort. Now ef *I* come up against three ladies travellin’ in a van—think they’d arst me in? Not it!”

He dwelt with manifest envy on the situation and the possibilities of the situation for some time. “You ain’t dangerous,” he said; “that’s where you get in. . . .”

He consoled himself by anecdotes of remarkable good fortunes of a kindred description. Apparently he sometimes travelled in the company of a lady named Izzy Berners—“a fair scorcher, been a regular, slap-up circus actress.” And there was also “good old Susan.” It was a little difficult for Bealby to see the point of some of these flashes because of a tendency on the part of the tramp while his thoughts turned on these matters to adopt a staccato style of speech, punctuated by brief, darkly significant guffaws. There grew in the mind of Bealby a vision of the doss-house as a large crowded place, lit by a great

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central fire, with much cooking afoot and much jawing and disputing going on, and then "me and Izzy sailed in. . . ."

The fire sank, the darkness of the woods seemed to creep nearer. The moonlight pierced the trees only in long beams that seemed to point steadfastly at unseen things, it made patches of ashen light that looked like watching faces. Under the tramp's direction Bealby skirmished round and got sticks and fed the fire until the darkness and thoughts of a possible gorilla were driven back for some yards and the tramp pronounced the blaze a "fair treat." He had made a kind of bed of leaves which he now invited Bealby to extend and share, and lying feet to the fire he continued his discourse.

He talked of stealing and cheating by various endearing names; he made these enterprises seem adventurous and facetious; there was it seemed a peculiar sort of happy find one came upon called a "flat," that it was not only entertaining but obligatory to swindle. He made fraud seem so smart and bright at times that Bealby found it difficult to keep a firm grasp on the fact that it was—fraud. . . .

Bealby lay upon the leaves close up to the prone body of the tramp, and his mind and his standards became confused. The tramp's body was a dark but protecting ridge on one side of him; he could not see the fire beyond his toes but its flickerings were reflected by the tree stems about them, and made perplexing sudden movements that at times caught his attention and made him raise his head to watch them. . . . Against the terrors of the night the tramp had

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become humanity, the species, the moral basis. His voice was full of consolation; his topics made one forget the watchful silent circumambient. Bealby's first distrusts faded. He began to think the tramp a fine, brotherly, generous fellow. He was also growing accustomed to a faint something—shall I call it an olfactory bar—that had hitherto kept them apart. The monologue ceased to devote itself to the elucidation of Bealby; the tramp was lying on his back with his fingers interlaced beneath his head and talking not so much to his companion as to the stars and the universe at large. His theme was no longer the wandering life simply but the wandering life as he had led it, and the spiritedness with which he had led it and the real and admirable quality of himself. It was that soliloquy of consolation which is the secret preservative of innumerable lives.

He wanted to make it perfectly clear that he was a tramp by choice. He also wanted to make it clear that he was a tramp and no better because of the wicked folly of those he had trusted and the evil devices of enemies. In the world that contained those figures of spirit, Isopel Berners and Susan, there was also it seemed a bad and spiritless person, the tramp's wife, who had done him many passive injuries. It was clear she did not appreciate her blessings. She had been much to blame. "Anybody's opinion is better than 'er 'usband's," said the tramp. "Always 'as been." Bealby had a sudden memory of Mr. Darling saying exactly the same thing of his mother. "She's the sort," said the tramp, "what would rather go to a meetin' than a music 'all. She'd rather drop a shilling

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down a crack than spend it on anything decent. If there was a choice of jobs going she'd ask which 'ad the lowest pay and the longest hours and she'd choose *that*. She'd feel safer. She was born scared. When there wasn't anything else to do she'd stop at 'ome and scrub the floors. Gaw! it made a chap want to put the darn' pail over 'er 'ed, so's she'd get enough of it. . . ."

"I don't hold with all this crawling through life and saying *Please*," said the tramp. "I say it's *my* world just as much as it's *your* world. You may have your 'orses and carriages, your 'ouses and country places and all that, and you may think Gawd sent me to run abart and work for you; but *I* don't. See?"

Bealby saw.

"I seek my satisfactions just as you seek your satisfactions, and if you want to get me to work you've jolly well got to make me. I don't choose to work. I choose to keep on my own and a bit loose, and take my chance where I find it. You got to take your chances in this world. Sometimes they come bad and sometimes they come good. And very often you can't tell which it is when they 'ave come. . . ."

Then he fell questioning Bealby again and then he talked of the immediate future. He was beating for the seaside. "Always something doing," he said. "You got to keep your eye on for cops; those seaside benches, they're 'ot on tramps—give you a month for begging soon as look at you—but there's flats dropping sixpences thick as flies on a sore 'orse. You want a pal there for all sorts of jobs. You're just the chap for it, matey. Saw it soon's ever I set eyes on you. Then you can 'ave fun. . . ."

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He made projects. . . .

Finally he became more personal and very flattering.

“Now you and me,” he said, suddenly shifting himself quite close to Bealby, “we’re going to be downright pals. I’ve took a liking to you. Me and you are going to pal together. See?”

He breathed into Bealby’s face and laid a hand on his knee and squeezed it, and Bealby, on the whole, felt honoured by his protection. . . .

§ 4

In the unsympathetic light of a bright and pushful morning the tramp was shorn of much of his overnight glamour. It became manifest that he was not merely offensively unshaven but extravagantly dirty. It was not ordinary rural dirt. During the last few days he must have had dealings of an intimate nature with coal. He was taciturn and irritable, he declared that this sleeping out would be the death of him, and the breakfast was only too manifestly wanting in the comforts of a refined home. He seemed a little less embittered after breakfast, he became even faintly genial, but he remained unpleasing. A distaste for the tramp arose in Bealby’s mind, and as he walked on behind his guide and friend, he revolved schemes of unobtrusive detachment.

Far be it from me to accuse Bealby of ingratitude. But it is true that that same disinclination which made him a disloyal assistant to Mr. Mergleson was

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now affecting his comradeship with the tramp. And he was deceitful. He allowed the tramp to build projects in the confidence of his continued adhesion, he did not warn him of the defection he meditated. But on the other hand Bealby had acquired from his mother an effective horror of stealing. And one must admit, since the tramp admitted it, that the man stole.

And another little matter had at the same time estranged Bealby from the tramp and linked the two of them together. The attentive reader will know that Bealby had exactly two shillings and twopence-halfpenny when he came down out of the woods to the fireside. He had Mrs. Bowles' half-crown and the balance of Madeleine Philips' theatre shilling, minus sixpence-halfpenny for a collar and sixpence he had given the tramp for the soup overnight. But all this balance was now in the pocket of the tramp. Money talks and the tramp had heard it. He had not taken it away from Bealby, but he had obtained it in this manner: "We two are pals," he said, "and one of us had better be Treasurer. That's Me. I know the ropes better. So hand over what you got there, matey."

And after he had pointed out that a refusal might lead to Bealby's evisceration the transfer occurred. Bealby was searched, kindly but firmly. . . .

It seemed to the tramp that this trouble had now blown over completely.

Little did he suspect the rebellious and treacherous thoughts that seethed in the head of his companion. Little did he suppose that his personal appearance,

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his manners, his ethical flavour—nay, even his physical flavour—were being judged in a spirit entirely unamiable. It seemed to him that he had obtained youthful and subservient companionship, companionship that would be equally agreeable and useful; he had adopted a course that he imagined would cement the ties between them; he reckoned not with ingratitude. “If anyone arsts you who I am, call me uncle,” he said. He walked along, a little in advance, sticking his toes out right and left in a peculiar wide pace that characterised his walk, and revolving schemes for the happiness and profit of the day. To begin with—great draughts of beer. Then tobacco. Later perhaps, some bread and cheese for Bealby. “You can’t come in ’ere,” he said at the first public-house. “You’re under age, me boy. It ain’t my doing, matey; it’s ’Erbert Samuel. You blame ’im. ’E don’t objec’ to you going to work for any other Mr. Samuel there may ’appen to be abart or anything of that sort, that’s good for you, that is; but ’e’s most particular you shouldn’t go into a public-’ouse. So you just wait about outside ’ere. *I’ll ’ave my eye on you.*”

“You going to spend my money?” asked Bealby.

“I’m going to ration the party,” said the tramp.

“You—you got no right to spend my money,” said Bealby.

“I— ’Ang it!—I’ll get you some acid drops,” said the tramp in tones of remonstrance. “I tell you, blame you,—it’s ’Erbert Samuel. I can’t ’elp it! I can’t fight against the lor.”

“You ’aven’t any right to spend my money,” said Bealby.

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"*Down't* cut up crusty. 'Ow can I 'elp it?"

"I'll tell a policeman. You gimme back my money and lemme go."

The tramp considered the social atmosphere. It did not contain a policeman. It contained nothing but a peaceful kindly corner public-house, a sleeping dog and the back of an elderly man digging.

The tramp approached Bealby in a confidential manner. "Oo's going to believe you?" he said. "And besides, 'ow did you come by it?"

Moreover. "*I ain't* going to spend *your* money. I got money of my own. '*Ere!* See?" And suddenly before the dazzled eyes of Bealby he held and instantly withdrew three shillings and two coppers that seemed familiar. He had had a shilling of his own. . . .

Bealby waited outside. . . .

The tramp emerged in a highly genial mood, with acid drops, and a short clay pipe going strong. "'Ere," he said to Bealby with just the faintest flavour of magnificence over the teeth-held pipe and handed over not only the acid drops but a virgin short clay. "Fill," he said, proffering the tobacco. "It's yours jus' much as it's mine. Be'r not let 'Erbert Samuel see you though; that's all. 'E's got a lor abart it."

Bealby held his pipe in his clenched hand. He had already smoked—once. He remembered it quite vividly still, although it had happened six months ago. Yet he hated not using that tobacco. "No," he said, "I'll smoke later."

The tramp replaced the screw of red Virginia in his pocket with the air of one who has done the gentlemanly thing. . . .

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They went on their way, an ill-assorted couple.

All day Bealby chafed at the tie and saw the security in the tramp's pocket vanish. They lunched on bread and cheese and then the tramp had a good sustaining drink of beer for both of them, and after that they came to a common where it seemed agreeable to repose. And after a due meed of repose in a secluded hollow among the gorse the tramp produced a pack of exceedingly greasy cards and taught Bealby to play Euchre. Apparently the tramp had no distinctive pockets in his tail coat, the whole lining was one capacious pocket. Various knobs and bulges indicated his cooking tin, his feeding tin, a turnip and other unknown properties. At first they played for love and then they played for the balance in the tramp's pocket. And by the time Bealby had learned Euchre thoroughly, that balance belonged to the tramp. But he was very generous about it and said they would go on sharing just as they had done. And then he became confidential. He scratched about in the bagginess of his garment and drew out a little dark blade of stuff, like a flint implement, regarded it gravely for a moment and held it out to Bealby.

"Guess what this is."

Bealby gave it up.

"Smell it."

It smelled very nasty. One familiar smell indeed there was with a paradoxical sanitary quality that he did not quite identify, but that was a mere basis for a complex reek of acquisitions. "What is it?" said Bealby.

"Soap!"

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“But what’s it for?”

“I thought you’d ask that. . . . What’s soap usually for?”

“Washing,” said Bealby guessing wildly.

The tramp shook his head. “Making a foam,” he corrected. “That’s what I has my fits with. See? I shoves a bit in my mouth and down I goes and I rolls about. Making a sort of moaning sound. Why, I been given brandy often—neat brandy. . . . It isn’t always a cert—nothing’s absolutely a cert. I’ve ’ad some let-downs. . . . Once I was bit by a nasty little dog—that brought me to pretty quick, and once I ’ad an old gentleman go through my pockets. ‘Poor chap!’ ’e ses, ‘very likely ’e’s destitoot, let’s see if ’e’s got anything.’ . . . I’d got all sorts of things, I didn’t want ’im prying about. But I didn’t come-to sharp enough to stop ’im. Got me into trouble that did. . . .”

“It’s an old lay,” said the tramp, “but it’s astonishing ’ow it’ll go in a quiet village. Sort of amuses ’em. Or dropping suddenly in front of a bicycle party. Lot of them old tricks are the best tricks, and there ain’t many of ’em Billy Bridget don’t know. That’s where you’re lucky to ’ave met me, matey. Billy Bridget’s a ’ard man to starve. And I know the ropes. I know what you *can* do and what you can’t do. And I got a feeling for a policeman—same as some people ’ave for cats. I’d know if one was ’idden in the room.”

He expanded into anecdotes and the story of various encounters in which he shone. It was amusing and it took Bealby on his weak side. Wasn’t he the Champion Dodger of the Chelsome playground?

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The tide of talk ebbed. "Well," said the tramp, "time we was up and doing. . . ."

They went along shady lanes and across an open park, and they skirted a breezy common from which they could see the sea. And among other things that the tramp said was this, "Time we began to forage a bit."

He turned his large observant nose to the right of him and the left.

§ 5

Throughout the afternoon the tramp discoursed upon the rights and wrongs of property, in a way that Bealby found very novel and unsettling. The tramp seemed to have his ideas about owning and stealing arranged quite differently from those of Bealby. Never before had Bealby thought it possible to have them arranged in any other than the way he knew. But the tramp contrived to make most possession seem unrighteous and honesty a code devised by those who have for those who haven't. "They've just got hold of it," he said. "They want to keep it to themselves. . . . Do I look as though I'd stole much of anybody's? It isn't me got 'old of this land and sticking up my notice boards to keep everybody off. It isn't me spends my days and nights scheming 'ow I can get 'old of more and more of the stuff. . . ."

"I don't *envy* it 'em," said the tramp. "Some 'as one taste and some another. But when it comes to making all this fuss because a chap who *isn't* a schemer 'elps 'imself to a mæthful,—well, it's Rot. . . ."

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“It’s them makes the rules of the game and nobody ever arst me to play it. I don’t blame ’em, mind you. Me and you might very well do the same. But brast me if I see where the sense of *my* keeping the rules comes in. This world ought to be a share out, Gawd meant it to be a share out. And me and you—we been done out of our share. That justifies us.”

“It isn’t right to steal,” said Bealby.

“It isn’t right to steal—certainly. It isn’t right—but it’s universal. Here’s a chap here over this fence, ask ’im where ’e got ’is land. Stealing! What you call stealing, matey, *I* call restitootion. You ain’t probably never even ’eard of Socialism.”

“I’ve ’eard of Socialists right enough. Don’t believe in Gawd and ’aven’t no morality.”

“Don’t you believe it. Why!—’Arf the Socialists are parsons. What I’m saying *is* Socialism—practically. *I’m* a Socialist. I know all abät Socialism. There isn’t nothing you can tell me abät Socialism. Why!—for three weeks I was one of these here Anti-Socialist speakers. Paid for it. And I tell you there ain’t such a thing as property left; it’s all a blooming old pinch. Lords, commons, judges, all of them they’re just a crew of brasted old fences and the lawyers getting in the stuff. Then you talk to me of stealing! *Stealing!*”

The tramp’s contempt and his long intense way of saying “stealing” were very unsettling to a sensitive mind.

They bought some tea and grease in a village shop and the tramp made tea in his old tin with great dexterity, and then they gnawed bread on which two ounces of margarine had been generously distributed.

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“Live like fighting cocks, we do,” said the tramp wiping out his simple cuisine with the dragged-out end of his shirt sleeve. “And if I’m not very much mistaken we’ll sleep to-night on a nice bit of hay. . . .”

But these anticipations were upset by a sudden temptation, and instead of a starry summer comfort the two were destined to spend a night of suffering and remorse.

A green lane lured them off the road, and after some windings led them past a field of wire-netted enclosures containing a number of perfect and conceited-looking hens close beside a little cottage, a vegetable garden and some new elaborate outhouses. It was manifestly a poultry farm, and something about it gave the tramp the conviction that it had been left, that nobody was at home.

These realisations are instinctive, they leap to the mind. He knew it, and an ambition to know further what was in the cottage came with the knowledge. But it seemed to him desirable that the work of exploration should be done by Bealby. He had thought of dogs, and it seemed to him that Bealby might be unembarrassed by that idea. So he put the thing to Bealby. “Let’s have a look round ’ere,” he said. “You go in and see what’s abät. . . .”

There was some difference of opinion. “I don’t ask you to take anything,” said the tramp. . . . “Nobody won’t catch you. . . . I tell you nobody won’t catch you. . . . I tell you there ain’t nobody here to catch you. . . . Just for the fun of seeing in. I’ll go up by them outhouses. And I’ll see nobody comes. . . . Ain’t afraid to go up a garden path, are you?”

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. . . I tell you, I don't want you to steal. . . . You ain't got much guts to funk a thing like that. . . . I'll be abät too. . . . Thought you'd be the very chap for a bit of scouting. . . . Well, if you ain't afraid you'd do it. . . . Well, why didn't you say you'd do it at the beginning? . . .”

Bealby went through the hedge and up a grass track between poultry runs, made a cautious inspection of the outhouses and then approached the cottage. Everything was still. He thought it more plausible to go to the door than peep into the window. He rapped. Then after an interval of stillness he lifted the latch, opened the door and peered into the room. It was a pleasantly furnished room, and before the empty summer fireplace a very old white man was sitting in a chints-covered armchair, lost it would seem in painful thought. He had a peculiar grey shrunken look, his eyes were closed, a bony hand with the shiny texture of alabaster gripped the chair arm. . . . There was something about him that held Bealby quite still for a moment.

And this old gentleman behaved very oddly.

His body seemed to crumple into his chair, his hands slipped down from the arms, his head nodded forwards and his mouth and eyes seemed to open together. And he made a snoring sound. . . .

For a moment Bealby remained rigidly agape and then a violent desire to rejoin the tramp carried him back through the hen-runs. . . .

He tried to describe what he had seen.

“Asleep with his mouth open,” said the tramp.
“Well, that ain't anything so wonderful. You got

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anything? That's what I want to know. . . . Did anyone ever see such a boy? 'Ere! I'll go. . . .

"You keep a look out here," said the tramp.

But there was something about that old man in there, something so strange and alien to Bealby, that he could not remain alone in the falling twilight. He followed the cautious advances of the tramp towards the house. From the corner by the outhouses he saw the tramp go and peer in at the open door. He remained for some time peering; his head hidden from Bealby. . . .

Then he went in. . . .

Bealby had an extraordinary desire that somebody else would come. His soul cried out for help against some vaguely apprehended terror. And in the very moment of his wish came its fulfilment. He saw advancing up the garden path a tall woman in a blue serge dress, hatless and hurrying and carrying a little package—it was medicine—in her hand. And with her came a big black dog. At the sight of Bealby the dog came forward barking, and Bealby after a moment's hesitation turned and fled.

The dog was quick. But Bealby was quicker. He went up the netting of a hen-run and gave the dog no more than an ineffectual snap at his heels. And then dashing from the cottage door came the tramp. Under one arm was a brass-bound workbox and in the other was a candlestick and some smaller articles. He did not instantly grasp the situation of his treed companion, he was too anxious to escape the tall woman, and then with a yelp of dismay he discovered himself between woman and dog. All too late he sought to emu-

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late Bealby. The workbox slipped from under his arm, the rest of his plunder fell from him, for an uneasy moment he was clinging to the side of the swaying hen-run and then it had caved in and the dog had got him.

The dog bit, desisted and then finding itself confronted by two men retreated. Bealby and the tramp rolled and scrambled over the other side of the collapsed netting into a parallel track and were half-way to the hedge before the dog,—but this time in a less vehement fashion,—resumed his attack.

He did not close with them again and at the hedge he halted altogether and remained hacking the gloaming with his rage.

The woman it seemed had gone into the house, leaving the tramp's scattered loot upon the field of battle.

"This means mizzle," said the tramp, leading the way at a trot.

Bealby saw no other course but to follow.

He had a feeling as though the world had turned against him. He did not dare to think what he was thinking of the events of these crowded ten minutes. He felt he had touched something dreadful; that the twilight was full of accusations. . . . He feared and hated the tramp now, but he perceived something had linked them as they had not been linked before. Whatever it was they shared it.

§ 6

They fled through the night; it seemed to Bealby for interminable hours. At last when they were worn

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out and footsore they crept through a gate and found an uncomfortable cowering-place in the corner of a field.

As they went they talked but little, but the tramp kept up a constant muttering to himself. He was troubled by the thought of hydrophobia. "I know I'll 'ave it," he said, "I know I'll get it."

Bealby after a time ceased to listen to his companion. His mind was preoccupied. He could think of nothing but that very white man in the chair and the strange manner of his movement.

"Was 'e awake when you saw 'im?" he asked at last.

"Awake—who?"

"That old man."

For a moment or so the tramp said nothing.

"'E wasn't awake, you young silly," he said at last.

"But—wasn't he?"

"Why!—don't you know! 'E'd croaked,—popped off the 'ooks—very moment you saw 'im."

For a moment Bealby's voice failed him.

Then he said quite faintly, "You mean—he'd—was dead?"

"Didn't you know?" said the tramp. "Gaw! What a kid you are!"

In that manner it was Bealby first saw a dead man. Never before had he seen any one dead. And after that for all the night the old white man pursued him, with strange slowly opening eyes, and a head on one side and his mouth suddenly and absurdly agape. . . .

All night long that white figure presided over seas of dark dismay. It seemed always to be there, and

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yet Bealby thought of a score of other painful things. For the first time in his life he asked himself, "Where am I going? What am I drifting to?" The world beneath the old man's dominance was a world of prisons.

Bealby believed he was a burglar, and behind the darkness he imagined the outraged law already seeking him. And the terrors of his associate reinforced his own.

He tried to think what he should do in the morning. He dreaded the dawn profoundly. But he could not collect his thoughts because of the tramp's incessant lapses into grumbling lamentation. Bealby knew he had to get away from the tramp, but now he was too weary and alarmed to think of running away as a possible expedient. And besides there was the matter of his money. And beyond the range of the tramp's voice there were darkneses which to-night at least might hold inconceivable forms of lurking evil. But could he not appeal to the law to save him? Repent? Was there not something called turning King's Evidence?

The moon was no comfort that night. Across it there passed with incredible slowness a number of jagged little black clouds, blacker than any clouds Bealby had ever seen before. They were like velvet palls, lined with snowy fur. There was no end to them. And one at last most horribly gaped slowly and opened a mouth. . . .

§ 7

At intervals there would be uncomfortable movements and the voice of the tramp came out of the

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darkness beside Bealby lamenting his approaching fate and discoursing—sometimes with violent expressions—on watch-dogs.

“I know I shall ’ave ’idrophobia,” said the tramp. “I’ve always ’ad a disposition to ’idrophobia. Always a dread of water—and now it’s got me.

“Think of it!—keeping a beast to set at a ’uman being. Where’s the brotherhood of it? Where’s the law and the humanity? Getting a animal to set at a brother man. And a poisoned animal, a animal with death in his teeth. And a ’orrible death too. Where’s the sense and brotherhood?

“Gaw! when I felt ’is teeth coming through my träsers——!

“Dogs oughtn’t to be allowed. They’re a noosance in the towns and a danger in the country. They oughtn’t to be allowed anywhere—not till every blessed ’uman being ’as got three square meals a day. Then if you like, keep a dog. And see ’e’s a clean dog. . . .

“Gaw! if I’d been a bit quicker up that ’en roost——!

“I ought to ’ave landed ’im a kick.

“It’s a man’s duty to ’urt a dog. When ’e sees a dog ’e ought to ’urt ’im. It’s a natural ’atred. If dogs were what they ought to be, if dogs understood ’ow they’re situated, there wouldn’t be a dog go for a man ever.

“And if one did they’d shoot ’im. . . .

“After this if ever I get a chance to land a dog a oner with a stone I’ll land ’im one. I been too sorft with dogs. . . .”

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Towards dawn Bealby slept uneasily, to be awakened by the loud snorting curiosity of three lively young horses. He sat up in a blinding sunshine and saw the tramp looking very filthy and contorted, sleeping with his mouth wide open and an expression of dismay and despair on his face.

§ 8

Bealby took his chance to steal away next morning while the tramp was engaged in artificial epilepsy.

"I feel like fits this morning," said the tramp. "I could do it well. I want a bit of human kindness again. After that brasted dog.

"I expect soon I'll 'ave the foam all right withat any soap."

They marked down a little cottage before which a benevolent-looking spectacled old gentleman in a large straw hat and a thin alpaca jacket was engaged in budding roses. Then they retired to prepare. The tramp handed over to Bealby various compromising possessions which might embarrass an afflicted person under the searching hands of charity. There was for example the piece of soap after he had taken sufficient for his immediate needs, there was ninepence in money, there were the pack of cards with which they had played Euchre, a key or so and some wires, much assorted string, three tins, a large piece of bread, the end of a composite candle, a box of sulphur matches, list slippers, a pair of gloves, a clasp knife, sundry grey rags. They all seemed to have the distinctive flavour of the tramp. . . .

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“If you do a bunk with these,” said the tramp. “By Gawd——”

He drew his finger across his throat.

(King’s Evidence.)

Bealby from a safe distance watched the beginnings of the fit, and it impressed him as a thoroughly nasty kind of fit. He saw the elderly gentleman hurry out of the cottage and stand for a moment looking over his little green garden gate, surveying the sufferings of the tramp with an expression of intense yet discreet commiseration. Then suddenly he was struck by an idea, he darted in among his rose bushes and reappeared with a big watering-can and an enormous syringe. Still keeping the gate between himself and the sufferer he loaded his syringe very carefully and deliberately. . . .

Bealby would have liked to see more but he felt his moment had come. Another instant and it might be gone again. Very softly he dropped from the gate on which he was sitting and made off like a running partridge along the hedge of the field.

Just for a moment did he halt—at a strange sharp yelp that came from the direction of the little cottage. Then his purpose of flight resumed its control of him.

He would strike across country for two or three miles, then make for the nearest police station and give himself up. (Loud voices. Was that the tramp murdering the benevolent old gentleman in the straw hat, or was it the benevolent old gentleman in the straw hat murdering the tramp? No time to question. Onward, Onward!) The tramp’s cans rattled

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in his pocket. He drew one out, hesitated a moment and flung it away and then sent its two companions after it. . . .

He found his police station upon the road between Someport and Crayminster, a little peaceful rural station, a mere sunny cottage with a blue and white label and a notice board covered with belated bills about the stealing of pheasants' eggs. And another bill—

It was headed **MISSING**, and the next most conspicuous words were **£5 REWARD** and the next **ARTHUR BEALBY**.

He was fascinated. So swift, so terribly swift is the law. Already they knew of his burglary, of his callous participation in the robbing of a dead man. Already the sleuths were upon his trail. So surely did his conscience strike to this conclusion that even the carelessly worded offer of a reward that followed his description conveyed no different intimation to his mind. "To whomsoever will bring him back to Lady Laxton, at Shonts near Chelsmore," so it ran.

"And out of pocket expenses."

And even as Bealby read this terrible document, the door of the police station opened and a very big pink young policeman came out and stood regarding the world in a friendly, self-approving manner. He had innocent, happy, blue eyes; thus far he had had much to do with order and little with crime; and his rosebud mouth would have fallen open, had not discipline already closed it and set upon it the beginnings of a resolute expression that accorded ill with the rest of his open freshness. And when he had surveyed the sky and the distant hills and the little rose bushes that

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occupied the leisure of the force, his eyes fell upon Bealby. . . .

Indecision has ruined more men than wickedness. And when one has slept rough and eaten nothing and one is conscious of a marred unclean appearance, it is hard to face one's situations. What Bealby had intended to do was to go right up to a policeman and say to him, simply and frankly: "I want to turn King's Evidence, please. I was in that burglary where there was a dead old man and a workbox and a woman and a dog. I was led astray by a bad character and I did not mean to do it. And really it was him that did it and not me."

But now his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, he felt he could not speak, could not go through with it. His heart had gone down into his feet. Perhaps he had caught the tramp's constitutional aversion to the police. He affected not to see the observant figure in the doorway. He assumed a slack careless bearing like one who reads by chance idly. He lifted his eyebrows to express unconcern. He pursed his mouth to whistle but no whistle came. He stuck his hands into his pockets, pulled up his feet as one pulls up plants by the roots and strolled away.

He quickened his stroll as he supposed by imperceptible degrees. He glanced back and saw that the young policeman had come out of the station and was reading the notice. And as the young policeman read he looked ever and again at Bealby like one who checks off items.

Bealby quickened his pace and then, doing his best to suggest by the movements of his back a mere

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boyish levity quite unconnected with the law, he broke into a trot.

Then presently he dropped back into a walking pace, pretended to see something in the hedge, stopped and took a sidelong look at the young policeman.

He was coming along with earnest strides, every movement of his suggested a stealthy hurry!

Bealby trotted and then becoming almost frank about it, ran. He took to his heels.

From the first it was not really an urgent chase; it was a stalking rather than a hunt, because the young policeman was too young and shy and lacking in confidence really to run after a boy without any definite warrant for doing so. When any one came along he would drop into a smart walk and pretend not to be looking at Bealby but just going somewhere briskly. And after two miles of it he desisted, and stood for a time watching a heap of mangold wurzel directly and the disappearance of Bealby obliquely, and then when Bealby was quite out of sight he turned back thoughtfully towards his proper place.

On the whole he considered he was well out of it. He might have made a fool of himself. . . .

And yet,—five pounds reward!

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

THE BATTLE OF CRAYMINSTER

§ 1

BEALBY was beginning to realise that running away from one's situation and setting up for oneself is not so easy and simple a thing as it had appeared during those first days with the caravan. Three things he perceived had arisen to pursue him, two that followed in the daylight, the law and the tramp, and a third that came back at twilight, the terror of the darkness. And within there was a hollow faintness, for the afternoon was far advanced and he was extremely hungry. He had dozed away the early afternoon in the weedy corner of a wood. But for his hunger I think he would have avoided Crayminster.

Within a mile of that place he had come upon the "Missing" notice again stuck to the end of a barn. He had passed it askance, and then with a sudden inspiration returned and torn it down. Somehow with the daylight his idea of turning King's Evidence against the tramp had weakened. He no longer felt sure.

Mustn't one wait and be asked first to turn King's Evidence?

Suppose they said he had merely confessed. . . .

The Crayminster street had a picturesque nutritious look. Half-way down it was the White Hart with cyclist club signs on its walls and geraniums over

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a white porch, and beyond a house being built and already at the roofing pitch. To the right was a baker's shop diffusing a delicious suggestion of buns and cake, and to the left a little comfortable sweetstuff window and a glimpse of tables and a board: "Teas." Tea! He resolved to break into his ninepence boldly and generously. Very likely they would boil him an egg for a penny or so. Yet on the other hand if he just had three or four buns, soft new buns. He hovered towards the baker's shop and stopped short. That bill was in the window!

He wheeled about sharply and went into the sweetstuff shop and found a table with a white cloth and a motherly little woman in a large cap. Tea? He could have an egg and some thick bread-and-butter and a cup of tea for fivepence. He sat down respectfully to await her preparations.

But he was uneasy.

He knew quite well that she would ask him questions. For that he was prepared. He said he was walking from his home in London to Someport to save the fare. "But you're so dirty!" said the motherly little woman. "I sent my luggage by post, ma'am, and I lost my way and didn't get it. And I don't much mind, ma'am, if you don't. Not washing. . . ."

All that he thought he did quite neatly. But he wished there was not that bill in the baker's window opposite and he wished he hadn't quite such a hunted feeling. A faint claustrophobia affected him. He felt the shop might be a trap. He would be glad to get into the open again. Was there a way out behind if, for example, a policeman blocked the door? He hov-

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ered to the entrance while his egg was boiling, and then when he saw a large fat baker surveying the world with an afternoon placidity upon his face, he went back and sat by the table. He wondered if the baker had noted him.

He had finished his egg; he was drinking his tea with appreciative noises, when he discovered that the baker *had* noted him. Bealby's eyes, at first inanely open above the tilting teacup, were suddenly riveted on something that was going on in the baker's window. From where he sat he could see that detestable bill, and then slowly, feeling about for it, he beheld a hand and a floury sleeve. The bill was drawn up and vanished, and then behind a glass shelf of fancy bread and a glass shelf of buns something pink and indistinct began to move jerkily. . . . It was a human face and it was trying to peer into the little refreshment shop that sheltered Bealby. . . .

Bealby's soul went faint.

He had one inadequate idea. "Might I go out," he said, "by your back way?"

"There isn't a back way," said the motherly little woman. "There's a yard——"

"If I might," said Bealby and was out in it.

No way at all! High walls on every side. He was back like a shot in the shop, and now the baker was half-way across the road. "Fivepence," said Bealby, and gave the little old woman sixpence. "Here," she cried, "take your penny!"

He did not wait. He darted out of the door.

The baker was all over the way of escape. He extended arms that seemed abnormally long and with a

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weak cry Bealby found himself trapped. Trapped, but not hopelessly. He knew how to do it. He had done it in milder forms before, but now he did it with all his being. Under the diaphragm of the baker smote Bealby's hard little head, and instantly he was away running up the quiet sunny street. Man when he assumed the erect attitude made a hostage of his belly. It is a proverb among the pastoral Berbers of the Atlas mountains that the man who extends his arms in front of an angry ram is a fool.

It seemed probable to Bealby that he would get away up the street. The baker was engaged in elaborately falling backward, making the most of sitting down in the road, and the wind had been knocked out of him so that he could not shout. He emitted "Stop him!" in large whispers. Away ahead there were only three builder's men sitting under the wall beyond the White Hart, consuming tea out of their tea-cans. But the boy who was trimming the top of the tall privet hedge outside the doctor's saw the assault of the baker and incontinently uttered the shout that the baker could not. Also he fell off his steps with great alacrity and started in pursuit of Bealby. A young man from anywhere—perhaps the grocer's shop—also started for Bealby. But the workmen were slow to rise to the occasion. Bealby could have got past them. And then, abruptly at the foot of the street ahead, the tramp came into view, a battered disconcerting figure. His straw-coloured hat which had recently been wetted and dried in the sun was a swaying mop. The sight of Bealby seemed to rouse him from some disagreeable meditations. He grasped the situation with a terrible quickness. Regardless of the wisdom

THE BATTLE OF CRAYMINSTER

of the pastoral Berbers he extended his arms and stood prepared to intercept.

Bealby thought at the rate of a hundred thoughts to the minute. He darted sideways and was up the ladder and among the beams and rafters of the unfinished roof before the pursuit had more than begun. "Here, come off that," cried the foreman builder, only now joining in the hunt with any sincerity. He came across the road while Bealby regarded him wickedly from the rafters above. Then as the good man made to ascend Bealby got him neatly on the hat—it was a bowler hat—with a tile. This checked the advance. There was a disposition to draw a little off and look up at Bealby. One of the younger builders from the opposite sidewalk got him very neatly in the ribs with a stone. But two other shots went wide, and Bealby shifted to a more covered position behind the chimney-stack.

From here however he had a much less effective command of the ladder, and he perceived that his tenure of the new house was not likely to be a long one.

Below men parleyed. "Who *is* 'e?" asked the foreman builder. "Where'd 'e come from?"

"'E's a brasted little thief," said the tramp. "'E's one of the wust characters on the road."

The baker was recovering his voice now. "There's a reward out for 'im," he said, "and 'e butted me in the stummick."

"'Ow much reward?" asked the foreman builder.

"Five pound for the man who catches him."

"'Ere!" cried the foreman builder in an arresting voice to the tramp. "Just stand away from that ladder. . . ."

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Whatever else Bealby might or might not be, one thing was very clear about him and that was that he was a fugitive. And the instinct of humanity is to pursue fugitives. Man is a hunting animal, inquiry into the justice of a case is an altogether later accretion to his complex nature, and that is why, whatever you are or whatever you do you should never let people get you on the run. There is a joy in the mere fact of hunting, the sight of a scarlet coat and a hound will brighten a whole village, and now Crayminster was rousing itself like a sleeper who wakes to sunshine and gay music. People were looking out of windows and coming out of shops, a policeman appeared and heard the baker's simple story, a brisk hatless young man in a white apron and with a pencil behind his ear became prominent. Bealby, peeping over the ridge of the roof, looked a thoroughly dirty and unpleasant little creature to all these people. The only spark of human sympathy for him below was in the heart of the little old woman in the cap who had given him his breakfast. She surveyed the roof of the new house from the door of her shop, she hoped Bealby wouldn't hurt himself up there, and she held his penny change clutched in her hand in her apron pocket with a vague idea that perhaps presently if he ran past she could very quickly give it him.

§ 2

Considerable delay in delivering the assault on the house was caused by the foreman's insistence that he alone should ascend the ladder to capture Bealby. He

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was one of those regular-featured men with large heads who seem to have inflexible backbones, he was large and fair and full with a sweetish chest voice, and in all his movements authoritative and deliberate. Whenever he made to ascend he discovered that people were straying into his building, and he had to stop and direct his men how to order them off. Inside his large head he was trying to arrange everybody to cut off Bealby's line of retreat without risking that anybody but himself should capture the fugitive. It was none too easy and it knitted his brows. Meanwhile Bealby was able to reconnoitre the adjacent properties and to conceive plans for a possible line of escape. He also got a few tiles handy against when the rush up the ladder came. At the same time two of the younger workmen were investigating the possibility of getting at him from inside the house. There was still no staircase, but there were ways of clambering. They had heard about the reward and they knew that they must do this before the foreman realised their purpose, and this a little retarded them. In their pockets they had a number of stones, ammunition in reserve, if it came again to throwing.

Bealby was no longer fatigued nor depressed; anxiety for the future was lost in the excitement of the present, and his heart told him that, come what might, getting on to the roof was an extraordinarily good dodge.

And if only he could bring off a certain jump he had in mind, there were other dodges. . . .

In the village street an informal assembly of leading citizens, a little recovered now from their first ner-

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vousness about flying tiles, discussed the problem of Bealby. There was Mumby, the draper and vegetarian, with the bass voice and the big black beard. He advocated the fire engine. He was one of the volunteer fire brigade and never so happy as when he was wearing his helmet. He had come out of his shop, at the shouting. Schocks the butcher and his boy were also in the street; Schocks's yard with its heap of manure and fodder bounded the new house on the left. Rymell the vet emerged from the billiard-room of the White Hart, and with his head a little on one side was watching Bealby and replying inattentively to the baker, who was asking him a number of questions that struck him as irrelevant. All the White Hart people were in the street.

"I suppose, Mr. Rymell," said the baker, "there's a mort of dangerous things in a man's belly round about 'is Stummick?"

"Tiles," said Mr. Rymell. "Loose bricks. It wouldn't do if he started dropping those."

"I was saying, Mr. Rymell," said the baker after a pause for digestion, "is a man likely to be injured badly by a Blaw in his stummick?"

Mr. Rymell stared at him for a moment with unresponsive eyes. "More likely to get you in the head," he said, and then, "Here! What's that fool of a carpenter going to do?"

The tramp was hovering on the outskirts of the group of besiegers, vindictive but dispirited. He had been brought to from his fit and given a shilling by the old gentleman, but he was dreadfully wet between his shirt—he wore a shirt, under three waistcoats and a

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coat—and his skin, because the old gentleman's method of revival had been to syringe him suddenly with cold water. It had made him weep with astonishment and misery. Now he saw no advantage in claiming Bealby publicly. His part, he felt, was rather a waiting one. What he had to say to Bealby could be best said without the assistance of a third person. And he wanted to understand more of this talk about a reward. If there was a reward out for Bealby——

“That's not a bad dodge!” said Rymell, changing his opinion of the foreman suddenly as that individual began his ascent of the ladder with a bricklayer's hod carried shield-wise above his head. He went up with difficulty and slowly because of the extreme care he took to keep his head protected. But no tiles came. Bealby had discovered a more dangerous attack developing inside the house and was already in retreat down the other side of the building.

He did a leap that might have hurt him badly, taking off from the corner of the house and jumping a good twelve feet on to a big heap of straw in the butcher's yard. He came down on all fours and felt a little jarred for an instant, and then he was up again and had scrambled up by a heap of manure to the top of the butcher's wall. He was over that and into Mac-cullum's yard next door before any one in the front of the new house had realised that he was in flight. Then one of the two workmen who had been coming up inside the house saw him from the oblong opening that was some day to be the upstairs bedroom window, and gave tongue.

It was thirty seconds later and after Bealby had

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vanished from the butcher's wall that the foreman, still clinging to his hod, appeared over the ridge of the roof. At the workman's shout the policeman who, with the preventive disposition of his profession, had hitherto been stopping anyone from coming into the unfinished house, turned about and ran out into its brick and plaster and timber-littered backyard, whereupon the crowd in the street realising that the quarry had gone away and no longer restrained, came pouring partly through the house and partly round through the butcher's gate into his yard.

Bealby had had a check.

He had relied upon the tarred felt roof of the mushroom shed of Maccullum the tailor and breeches-maker to get him to the wall that gave upon Mr. Benshaw's strawberry fields, and he had not seen from his roof above the ramshackle glazed outhouse which Maccullum called his workroom and in which four industrious tailors were working in an easy deshabelle. The roof of the shed was the merest tarred touchwood, it had perished as felt long ago, it collapsed under Bealby, he went down into a confusion of mushrooms and mushroom-bed, he blundered out trailing mushrooms and spawn and rich matter, he had a nine-foot wall to negotiate and only escaped by a hair's-breadth from the clutch of a little red-slippered man who came dashing out from the workroom. But by a happy use of the top of the dust-bin he did just get away over the wall in time, and the red-slippered tailor who was not good at walls was left struggling to imitate an ascent that had looked easy enough until he came to try it.

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For a moment the little tailor struggled alone, and then both Maccullum's domain and the butcher's yard next door and the narrow patch of space behind the new house, were violently injected with a crowd of active people, all confusedly on the Bealby trail. Some one, he never knew who, gave the little tailor a leg-up and then his red slippers twinkled over the wall and he was leading the hunt into the market gardens of Mr. Benshaw. A collarless colleague in list slippers and conspicuous braces followed. The policeman, after he had completed the wreck of Mr. Maccullum's mushroom shed, came next, and then Mr. Maccullum, with no sense of times and seasons, anxious to have a discussion at once upon the question of this damage. Mr. Maccullum was out of breath and he never got farther with this projected conversation than "Here!" This was repeated several times as opportunity seemed to offer. The remaining tailors got to the top of the wall more sedately with the help of the Maccullum kitchen steps and dropped; Mr. Schocks followed breathing hard, and then a fresh jet of humanity came squirting into the gardens through a gap in the fence at the back of the building site. This was led by the young workman who had first seen Bealby go away. Hard behind him came Rymell, the vet, the grocer's assistant, the doctor's page-boy and, less briskly, the baker. Then the tramp. Then Mumby and Schocks's boy. Then a number of other people. The seeking of Bealby had assumed the dimensions of a Hue and Cry.

The foreman with the large head and the upright back was still on the new roof; he was greatly dis-

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tressed at the turn things had taken and shouted his claims to a major share in the capture of Bealby, mixed with his opinions of Bealby and a good deal of mere swearing, to a sunny but unsympathetic sky....

§ 3

Mr. Benshaw was a small holder, a sturdy English yeoman of the new school. He was an Anti-Socialist, a self-helper, an independent-spirited man. He had a steadily growing banking account and a plain but sterile wife, and he was dark in complexion and so erect in his bearing as to seem a little to lean backward. Usually he wore a sort of grey gamekeeper's suit with brown gaiters (except on Sundays when the coat was black), he was addicted to bowler hats that accorded ill with his large grave grey-coloured face, and he was altogether a very sound strong man. His bowler hats did but accentuate that. He had no time for vanities, even the vanity of dressing consistently. He went into the nearest shop and just bought the cheapest hat he could, and so he got hats designed for the youthful and giddy, hats with flighty crowns and flippant bows and amorous brims that undulated attractively to set off flushed and foolish young faces. It made his unrelenting mask look rather like the Puritans under the Stuart monarchy.

He was a horticulturist rather than a farmer. He had begun his career in cheap lodgings with a field of early potatoes and cabbages, supplemented by employment, but with increased prosperity his area of cultivation had extended and his methods intensified.

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He now grew considerable quantities of strawberries, raspberries, celery, seakale, asparagus, early peas, late peas and onions, and consumed more stable manure than any other cultivator within ten miles of Crayminster. He was beginning to send cut flowers to London. He had half an acre of glass and he was rapidly extending it. He had built himself a cottage on lines of austere economy, and a bony-looking dwelling-house for some of his men. He also owned a number of useful sheds of which tar and corrugated iron were conspicuous features. His home was furnished with the utmost respectability, and notably joyless even in a countryside where gaiety is regarded as an impossible quality in furniture. He was already in a small local way a mortgagee. Good fortune had not turned the head of Mr. Benshaw nor robbed him of the feeling that he was a particularly deserving person, entitled to a preferential treatment from a country which in his plain unsparing way he felt that he enriched.

In many ways he thought that the country was careless of his needs. And in none more careless than in the laws relating to trespass. Across his dominions ran three footpaths, and one of these led to the public elementary school. That he should have to maintain this latter—and if he did not keep it in good order the children spread out and made parallel tracks among his cultivations—seemed to him a thing almost intolerably unjust. He mended it with cinders, acetylene refuse, which he believed and hoped to be thoroughly bad for boots, and a peculiarly slimy chalky clay, and he put on a board at each end “Keep to the

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footpaths, Trespassers will be prosecuted, by Order," which he painted himself to save expense when he was confined indoors by the influenza. Still more unjust it would be, he felt, for him to spend money upon effective fencing, and he could find no fencing cheap enough and ugly enough and painful enough and impossible enough to express his feelings in the matter. Every day the children streamed to and fro, marking how his fruits ripened and his produce became more esculent. And other people pursued these tracks, many Mr. Benshaw was convinced went to and fro through his orderly crops who had no business whatever, no honest business, to pass that way. Either, he concluded, they did it to annoy him, or they did it to injure him. This continual invasion aroused in Mr. Benshaw all that stern anger against unrighteousness latent in our race which more than any other single force has made America and the Empire what they are to-day. Once already he had been robbed—a raid upon his raspberries—and he felt convinced that at any time he might be robbed again. He had made representations to the local authority to get the footpaths closed, but in vain. They defended themselves with the paltry excuse that the children would then have to go nearly a mile round to the school.

It was not only the tyranny of these footpaths that offended Mr. Benshaw's highly developed sense of Individual Liberty. All round his rather straggling dominions his neighbours displayed an ungenerous indisposition to maintain their fences to his satisfaction. In one or two places, in abandonment of his clear rights in the matter, he had at his own expense

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supplemented these lax defences with barbed wire. But it was not a very satisfactory sort of barbed wire. He wanted barbed wire with extra spurs like a fighting cock; he wanted barbed wire that would start out after nightfall and attack passers-by. This boundary trouble was universal; in a way it was worse than the footpaths, which after all only affected the Cage Fields where his strawberries grew. Except for the yard and garden walls of Maccullum and Schocks and that side, there was not really a satisfactory foot of enclosure all round Mr. Benshaw. On the one side rats and people's dogs and scratching cats came in, on the other side rabbits. The rabbits were intolerable, and recently there had been a rise of nearly thirty per cent. in the price of wire netting.

Mr. Benshaw wanted to hurt rabbits; he did not want simply to kill them, he wanted so to kill them as to put the fear of death into the burrows. He wanted to kill them so that scared little furry survivors with their tails as white as ghosts would go lolloping home and say, "I say, you chaps, we'd better shift out of this. We're up against a Strong Determined Man. . . ."

I have made this lengthy statement of Mr. Benshaw's economic and moral difficulties in order that the reader should understand the peculiar tension that already existed upon this side of Crayminster. It has been necessary to do so now because in a few seconds there will be no further opportunity for such preparations. There had been trouble, I may add very hastily, about the shooting of Mr. Benshaw's gun; a shower of small shot had fallen out of the twi-

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light upon the umbrella and basket of old Mrs. Frobisher. And only a week ago an unsympathetic bench after a hearing of over an hour and in the face of overwhelming evidence had refused to convict little Lucy Mumby, aged eleven, of stealing fruit from Mr. Benshaw's fields. She had been caught red-handed. . . .

At the very moment that Bealby was butting the baker in the stomach, Mr. Benshaw was just emerging from his austere cottage after a wholesome but inexpensive high tea in which he had finished up two left-over cold sausages, and he was considering very deeply the financial side of a furious black fence that he had at last decided should pen in the school children from further depredations. It should be of splintery tarred deal, and high, with well-pointed tops studded with sharp nails, and he believed that by making the path only two feet wide, a real saving of ground for cultivation might be made and a very considerable discomfort for the public arranged, to compensate for his initial expense. The thought of a narrow lane which would in winter be characterised by an excessive sliminess and from which there would be no lateral escape was pleasing to a mind by no means absolutely restricted to considerations of pounds, shillings and pence. In his hand after his custom he carried a hoe, on the handle of which feet were marked so that it was available not only for destroying the casual weed but also for purposes of measurement. With this he now checked his estimate, and found that here he would reclaim as much as three feet of trodden waste, here a full two.

Absorbed in these calculations, he heeded little the

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growth of a certain clamour from the backs of the houses bordering on the High Street. It did not appear to concern him, and Mr. Benshaw made it almost ostentatiously his rule to mind his own business. His eyes remained fixed on the lumpy, dusty sun-baked track, that with an intelligent foresight he saw already transformed into a deterrent slough of despond for the young. . . .

Then quite suddenly the shouting took on a new note. He glanced over his shoulder almost involuntarily and discovered that after all this uproar was his business. Amazingly his business. His mouth assumed a Cromwellian fierceness. His grip tightened on his hoe. That any one should dare! But it was impossible!

His dominions were being invaded with a peculiar boldness and violence.

Ahead of every one else and running with wild wavings of the arms across his strawberries was a small and very dirty little boy. He impressed Mr. Benshaw merely as a pioneer. Some thirty yards behind him was a collarless, short-sleeved man in red slippers running with great effrontery, and behind him another still more denuded lunatic, also in list slippers and with braces—braces of inconceivable levity. And then Wiggs, the policeman, hotly followed by Mr. Maccullum. Then more distraught tailors and Schocks the butcher. But a louder shout heralded the main attack and Mr. Benshaw turned his eyes—already they were slightly blood-shot eyes—to the right and saw, pouring through the broken hedge, a disorderly crowd, Rymell whom he had counted his

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friend, the grocer's assistant, the doctor's boy, some strangers—Mumby!

At the sight of Mumby, Mr. Benshaw leaped at a conclusion. He saw it all. The whole place was rising against him; they were asserting some infernal new right-of-way. Mumby—Mumby had got them to do it. All the fruits of fifteen years of toil, all the care and accumulation of Mr. Benshaw's prime, were to be trampled and torn to please a draper's spite! . . .

Sturdy yeoman as Mr. Benshaw was he resolved instantly to fight for his liberties. One moment he paused to blow the powerful police whistle he carried in his pocket, and then rushed forward in the direction of the hated Mumby, the leader of trespassers, the parent and abetter and defender of the criminal Lucy. He took the hurrying panting man almost unawares, and with one wild sweep of the hoe felled him to the earth. Then he staggered about and smote again, but not quite in time to get the head of Mr. Rymell.

This whistle he carried was part of a systematic campaign he had developed against trespassers and fruit stealers. He and each of his assistants carried one, and at the first shrill note—it was his rule—every one seized on any weapon that was handy and ran to pursue and capture. All his assistants were extraordinarily prompt in responding to these alarms, which were often the only break in long days of strenuous and strenuously directed toil. So now with an astonishing promptitude and animated faces men appeared from sheds and greenhouses and distant patches of culture hastening to the assistance of their dour employer.

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It says much for the amiable relations that existed between employers and employed in those days before Syndicalism became the creed of the younger workers that they did hurry to his assistance.

But many rapid things were to happen before they came into action. For first a strange excitement seized upon the tramp. A fantastic delusive sense of social rehabilitation took possession of his soul. Here he was pitted against a formidable hoe-wielding man, who for some inscrutable reason was resolved to cover the retreat of Bealby. And all the world, it seemed, was with the tramp and against this hoe-wielder. All the tremendous forces of human society against which the tramp had struggled for so many years, whose power he knew and feared as only the outlaw can, had suddenly come into line with him. Across the strawberries to the right there was even a policeman hastening to join the majority, a policeman closely followed by a tradesman of the blackest, most respectable quality. The tramp had a vision of himself as a respectable man heroically leading respectable people against outcasts. He dashed the lank hair from his eyes, waved his arms laterally and then with a loud strange cry flung himself towards Mr. Benshaw. Two pairs of super-imposed coat-tails flapped behind him. And then the hoe whistled through the air and the tramp fell to the ground like a sack.

But now Schocks's boy had grasped his opportunity. He had been working discreetly round behind Mr. Benshaw and as the hoe smote he leaped upon that hero's back and seized him about the neck with both arms and bore him staggering to the ground, and

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Rymell, equally quick, and used to the tackling of formidable creatures, had snatched and twisted away the hoe and grappled Mr. Benshaw almost before he was down. The first of Mr. Benshaw's helpers to reach the fray found the issue decided, his master held down conclusively and a growing circle trampling down a wide area of strawberry plants about the panting group. . . .

Mr. Mumby more frightened than hurt was already sitting up, but the tramp with a glowing wound upon his cheekbone and an expression of astonishment in his face, lay low and pawed the earth.

"What d'you mean," gasped Mr. Rymell, "hitting people about with that hoe?"

"What d'you mean," groaned Mr. Benshaw, "running across my strawberries?"

"We were going after that boy."

"Pounds and pounds worth of damage. Mischief and wickedness. . . . Mumby!"

Mr. Rymell, suddenly realising the true values of the situation, released Mr. Benshaw's hands and knelt up. "Look here, Mr. Benshaw," he said, "you seem to be under the impression we are trespassing."

Mr. Benshaw struggling into a sitting position was understood to inquire with some heat what Mr. Rymell called it. Schocks's boy picked up the hat with the erotic brim and handed it to the horticulturist silently and respectfully.

"We were not trespassing," said Mr. Rymell. "We were following up that boy. *He* was trespassing if you like. . . . By the bye,—where is the boy? Has anyone caught him?"

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At the question attention which had been focused upon Mr. Benshaw and his hoe, came round. Across the field in the direction of the sunlit half-acre of glass the little tailor was visible standing gingerly and picking up his red slippers for the third time—they would come off in that loose good soil,—everybody else had left the trail to concentrate on Mr. Benshaw—and Bealby— Bealby was out of sight. He had escaped, clean got away.

“What boy?” asked Mr. Benshaw.

“Ferocious little beast who’s fought us like a rat. Been committing all sorts of crimes about the country. Five pounds reward for him.”

“Fruit stealing?” asked Mr. Benshaw.

“Yes,” said Mr. Rymell, chancing it.

Mr. Benshaw reflected slowly. His eyes surveyed his trampled crops. “Gooooooooooooooooo *Lord!*” he cried. “Look at those strawberries!” His voice gathered violence. “And that lout there!” he said. “Why!—he’s lying on them! That’s the brute who went for me!”

“You got him a pretty tidy one aside the head!” said Maccullum.

The tramp rolled over on some fresh strawberries and groaned pitifully.

“He’s hurt,” said Mr. Mumby.

The tramp flopped and lay still.

“Get some water!” said Rymell, standing up.

At the word water, the tramp started convulsively, rolled over and sat up with a dazed expression.

“No water,” he said weakly. “No more water,” and then catching Mr. Benshaw’s eye he got rather quickly to his feet.

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Everybody who wasn't already standing was getting up, and every one now was rather carefully getting himself off any strawberry plant he had chanced to find himself smashing in the excitement of the occasion.

"That's the man that started in on me," said Mr. Benshaw. "What's he doing here? Who is he?"

"Who are *you*, my man? What business have you to be careering over this field?" asked Mr. Rymell.

"I was only 'elping," said the tramp.

"Nice help," said Mr. Benshaw.

"I thought that boy was a thief or something."

"And so you made a rush at me."

"I didn't exactly—sir— I thought you was 'elping 'im."

"You be off anyhow," said Mr. Benshaw. "Whatever you thought."

"Yes, you be off!" said Mr. Rymell.

"That's the way, my man," said Mr. Benshaw. "We haven't any jobs for you. The sooner we have you out of it the better for every one. Get right on to the path and keep it." And with a desolating sense of exclusion the tramp withdrew. "There's pounds and pounds worth of damage here," said Mr. Benshaw. "This job'll cost me a pretty penny. Look at them berries there. Why they ain't fit for jam! And all done by one confounded boy." An evil light came into Mr. Benshaw's eyes. "You leave him to me and my chaps. If he's gone up among those sheds there—we'll settle with him. Anyhow there's no reason why my fruit should be trampled worse than it has been. Fruit stealer, you say, he is?"

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“They live on the country this time of year,” said Mr. Mumby.

“And catch them doing a day’s work picking!” said Mr. Benshaw. “I know the sort.”

“There’s a reward of five pounds for ’im already,” said the baker. . . .

§ 4

You perceive how humanitarian motives may sometimes defeat their own end, and how little Lady Laxton’s well-intentioned handbills were serving to rescue Bealby. Instead they were turning him into a scared and hunted animal. In spite of its manifest impossibility he was convinced that the reward and this pursuit had to do with his burglary of the poultry farm, and that his capture would be but the preliminary to prison, trial, and sentence. His one remaining idea was to get away. But his escape across the market gardens had left him so blown and spent that he was obliged to hide up for a time in this perilous neighbourhood, before going on. He saw a disused-looking shed in the lowest corner of the gardens behind the greenhouses and by doubling sharply along a hedge he got to it unseen. It was not disused—nothing in Mr. Benshaw’s possession ever was absolutely disused, but it was filled with horticultural lumber, with old calcium carbide tins, with broken wheelbarrows and damaged ladders awaiting repair, with some ragged wheeling planks and surplus rolls of roofing felt. At the back were some unhinged shed doors leaning against the wall, and between them Bealby

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tucked himself neatly and became still, glad of any respite from the chase.

He would wait for twilight and then get away across the meadows at the back and then go— He didn't know whither. And now he had no confidence in the wild world any more. A qualm of home-sickness for the compact little gardener's cottage at Shonts came to Bealby. Why, as a matter of fact, wasn't he there now?

He ought to have tried more at Shonts.

He ought to have minded what they told him and not have taken up a toasting-fork against Thomas. Then he wouldn't now have been a hunted burglar with a reward of five pounds on his head and nothing in his pocket but threepence and a pack of greasy playing cards, a box of sulphur matches and various objectionable sundries, none of which were properly his own.

If only he could have his time over again!

Such wholesome reflections occupied his thoughts until the onset of the dusk stirred him to departure. He crept out of his hiding-place and stretched his limbs which had got very stiff, and was on the point of reconnoitring from the door of the shed when he became aware of stealthy footsteps outside.

With the quickness of an animal he shot back into his hiding-place. The footsteps had halted. For a long time it seemed the unseen waited listening. Had he heard Bealby?

Then some one fumbled with the door of the shed, it opened and there was a long pause of cautious inspection.

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Then the unknown had shuffled into the shed and sat down on a heap of matting.

“*Gaw!*” said a voice.

The tramp’s!

“If ever I struck a left-handed Mascot it was that boy,” said the tramp. “The little *swine!*”

For the better part of two minutes he went on from this mild beginning to a descriptive elaboration of Bealby. For the first time in his life Bealby learned how unfavourable was the impression he might leave on a fellow-creature’s mind.

“Took even my matches!” cried the tramp, and tried this statement over with variations.

“First that old fool with his syringe!” The tramp’s voice rose in angry protest. “Here’s a chap dying epilepsy on your doorstep and all you can do is to squirt cold water at him! Cold water! Why you might *kill* a man doing that! And then say you’d thought’d bring ’im ränd! Bring ’im ränd! You be jolly glad I didn’t stash your silly face in. You [misbegotten] old fool! What’s a shilling for wetting a man to ’is skin? Wet through I was. Running inside my shirt,—dripping. . . . And then the blooming boy clears!

“I don’t know what boys are coming to!” cried the tramp. “These board schools it is. Gets ’old of everything ’e can and bunks! *Gaw!* if I get my ’ands on ’im, I’ll show ’im. I’ll——”

For some time the tramp revelled in the details, for the most part crudely surgical, of his vengeance upon Bealby. . . .

“Then there’s that dog bite. ’Ow do I know ’ow

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that's going to turn ät? If I get 'idrophobia, blowed if I don't *bite* some of 'em. 'Idrophobia. Screaming and foaming. Nice death for a man—my time o' life! Bark I shall. Bark and bite.

“And this is your world,” said the tramp. “This is the world you put people into and expect 'em to be 'appy. . . .

“I'd like to bite that dough-faced fool with the silly 'at. I'd enjoy biting 'im. I'd spit it out, but I'd bite it right enough. Wiping abät with 'is 'O. *Gaw!* Get off my ground! Be orf with you. Slash. 'E ought to be shut up.

“Where's the justice of it?” shouted the tramp. “Where's the right and the sense of it? What 'ave I done that I should always get the under side? Why should *I* be stuck on the under side of everything? There's worse men than me in all sorts of positions. . . . Judges there are. 'Orrible Kerectors. Ministers and people. I've read abät 'em in the papers. . . .

“It's we tramps are the scapegoats. Somebody's got to suffer so as the police can show a face. *Gaw!* Some of these days I'll do something. . . . I'll do something. You'll drive me too far with it. I tell you——”

He stopped suddenly and listened. Bealby had creaked.

“*Gaw!* What can one do?” said the tramp after a long interval.

And then complaining more gently, the tramp began to feel about to make his simple preparations for the night.

“'Unt me out of this I expect,” said the tramp.

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“And many sleeping in feather beds that ain’t fit to ’old a candle to me. Not a hordinary farthing candle. . . .”

§ 5

The subsequent hour or so was an interval of tedious tension for Bealby.

After vast spaces of time he was suddenly aware of three vertical threads of light. He stared at them with mysterious awe, until he realised that they were just the moonshine streaming through the cracks of the shed.

The tramp tossed and muttered in his sleep.

Footsteps?

Yes—Footsteps.

Then voices.

They were coming along by the edge of the field, and coming and talking very discreetly.

“Ugh!” said the tramp and then softly, “What’s that?” Then he too became noiselessly attentive.

Bealby could hear his own heart beating.

The men were now close outside the shed. “He wouldn’t go in there,” said Mr. Benshaw’s voice. “He wouldn’t dare. Anyhow we’ll go up by the glass first. I’ll let him have the whole barrel-full of oats if I get a glimpse of him. If he’s gone away they’d have caught him in the road. . . .”

The footsteps receded. There came a cautious rustling on the part of the tramp and then his feet padded softly to the door of the shed. He struggled to open it, and then with a jerk got it open a few inches; a great bar of moonlight leaped and lay still across the

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floor of the shed. Bealby advanced his head cautiously until he could see the black obscure indications of the tramp's back as he peeped out.

"*Now,*" whispered the tramp, and opened the door wider. Then he ducked his head down and had darted out of sight, leaving the door open behind him.

Bealby questioned whether he should follow. He came out a few steps and then went back at a shout from away up the garden. "There he goes," shouted a voice, "in the shadow of the hedge."

"Look out, Jim!"—*Bang*—and a yelp.

"Stand away! I've got another barrel!" *Bang.*

Then silence for a time, and then the footsteps coming back.

"That ought to teach him," said Mr. Benshaw. "First time I got him fair, and I think I peppered him a bit the second. Couldn't see very well, but I heard him yell. He won't forget that in a hurry. Not him. There's nothing like oats for fruit-stealers. Jim, just shut that door, will you? That's where he was hiding. . . ."

It seemed a vast time to Bealby before he ventured out into the summer moonlight, and a very pitiful and outcast little Bealby he felt himself to be.

He was beginning to realise what it means to go beyond the narrow securities of human society. He had no friends, no friends at all. . . .

He caught at and arrested a sob of self-pity.

Perhaps after all it was not so late as Bealby had supposed. There were still lights in some of the houses and he had the privilege of seeing Mr. Benshaw going to bed with pensive deliberation. Mr. Benshaw wore

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a flannel nightshirt and said quite a lengthy prayer before extinguishing his candle. Then suddenly Bealby turned nervously and made off through the hedge. A dog had barked.

At first there were nearly a dozen lighted windows in Crayminster. They went out one by one. He hung for a long time with a passionate earnestness on the sole surviving one, but that too went at last. He could have wept when at last it winked out. He came down into the marshy flats by the river, but he did not like the way in which the water sucked and swirled in the vague moonlight; also he suddenly discovered a great white horse standing quite still in the misty grass not thirty yards away; so he went up to and crossed the high road and wandered up the hillside towards the allotments, which attracted him by reason of the sociability of the numerous tool sheds. In a hedge near at hand a young rabbit squealed sharply and was stilled. Why?

Then something like a short snake scrabbled by very fast through the grass.

Then he thought he saw the tramp stalking him noiselessly behind some currant bushes. That went on for some time, but came to nothing.

Then nothing pursued him, nothing at all. The gap, the void, came after him. The bodiless, the faceless, the formless; these are evil hunters in the night. . . .

What a cold still *watching* thing moonlight can be! . . .

He thought he would like to get his back against something solid and found near one of the sheds a little heap of litter. He sat down against good tarred

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boards, assured at least that whatever came must come in front. Whatever he did, he was resolved, he would not shut his eyes.

That would be fatal. . . .

He awoke in broad daylight amidst a cheerful uproar of birds.

§ 6

And then again flight and pursuit were resumed.

As Bealby went up the hill away from Crayminster he saw a man standing over a spade and watching his retreat, and when he looked back again presently this man was following. It was Lady Laxton's five pound reward had done the thing for him.

He was half minded to surrender and have done with it, but jail he knew was a dreadful thing of stone and darkness. He would make one last effort. So he beat along the edge of a plantation and then crossed it and forced his way through some gorse and came upon a sunken road, that crossed the hill in a gorse-lined cutting. He struggled down the steep bank. At its foot, regardless of him, unaware of him, a man sat beside a motor bicycle with his fists gripped tight and his head downcast, swearing. A county map was crumpled in his hand. "Damn!" he cried and flung the map to the ground and kicked it and put his foot on it.

Bealby slipped, came down the bank with a run and found himself in the road within a couple of yards of the blonde features and angry eyes of Captain Douglas. When he saw the Captain and perceived himself

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recognised, he flopped down—a done and finished Bealby. . . .

§ 7

He had arrived just in time to interrupt the Captain in a wild and reprehensible fit of passion.

The Captain imagined it was a secret fit of passion. He thought he was quite alone and that no one could hear him or see him. So he had let himself shout and stamp, to work off the nervous tensions that tormented him beyond endurance.

In the direct sense of the words the Captain was in love with Madeleine. He was in love quite beyond the bounds set by refined and decorous people to this dangerous passion. The primordial savage that lurks in so many of us was uppermost in him. He was not in love with her prettily or delicately, he was in love with her violently and vehemently. He wanted to be with her, he wanted to be close to her, he wanted to possess her and nobody else to approach her. He was so inflamed now that no other interest in life had any importance except as it aided or interfered with this desire. He had forced himself in spite of this fever in his blood to leave her in order to pursue Bealby, and now he was furiously regretting this firmness. He had expected to catch Bealby overnight and bring him back to the hotel in triumph. But Bealby had been elusive. There she was, away there, hurt and indignant—neglected!

“A laggard in love,” cried the Captain, “a dastard in war! God!—I run away from everything. First I leave the manœuvres, then her. Unstable as water

BEALBY

thou shalt not prevail. Water! What does the confounded boy matter? What does he matter?

“And there she is. Alone! She’ll flirt—naturally she’ll flirt. Don’t I deserve it? Haven’t I asked for it? Just the one little time we might have had together! I fling it in her face. You fool, you laggard, you dastard! And here’s this map!”

A breathing moment.

“How the *devil*,” cried the Captain, “am I to find the little beast on this map?”

“And twice he’s been within reach of my hand!

“No decision!” cried the Captain. “No instant grip! What good is a soldier without it? What good is any man who will not leap at opportunity? I ought to have chased out last night after that fool and his oats. Then I might have had a chance!

“Chuck it! Chuck the whole thing! Go back to her. Kneel to her, kiss her, compel her!

“And what sort of reception am I likely to get?”

He crumpled the flapping map in his fist.

And then suddenly out of nowhere Bealby came rolling down to his feet, a dishevelled and earthy Bealby. But Bealby.

“Good Lord!” cried the Captain, starting to his feet and holding the map like a sword sheath. “What do you want?”

For a second Bealby was a silent spectacle of misery.

“Oooh! I want my *breckfuss*,” he burst out at last, reduced to tears.

“Are you young Bealby?” asked the Captain, seizing him by the shoulder.

“They’re after me,” cried Bealby. “If they catch

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me they'll put me in prison. Where they don't give you anything. It wasn't me did it—and I 'aven't had anything to eat—not since yesterday.”

The Captain came rapidly to a decision. There should be no more faltering. He saw his way clear before him. He would act—like a whistling sword. “Here! jump up behind,” he said . . . “hold on tight to me. . . .”

§ 8

For a time there was a more than Napoleonic swiftness in the Captain's movements. When Bealby's pursuer came up to the hedge that looks down into the sunken road, there was no Bealby, no Captain, nothing but a torn and dishevelled county map, an almost imperceptible odour of petrol and a faint sound—like a distant mowing machine,—and the motor bicycle was a mile away on the road to Beckinstone. Eight miles, eight rather sickening miles, Bealby did to Beckinstone in eleven minutes, and there in a little coffee-house he was given breakfast with eggs and bacon and marmalade (Prime!) and his spirit was restored to him while the Captain raided a bicycle and repairing shop and negotiated the hire of an experienced but fairly comfortable wicker-work trailer. And so to London through the morning sunshine, leaving tramps, pursuers, policemen, handbills, bakers, market gardeners, terrors of the darkness and everything upon the road behind—and farther behind and remote and insignificant—and so to the vanishing point.

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Some few words of explanation the Captain had vouchsafed and that was all.

“Don’t be afraid about it,” he said. “Don’t be in the least bit afraid. You tell them about it, just simply and truthfully, exactly what you did, exactly how you got into it and out of it and all about it.”

“You’re going to take me up to a Magistrate, sir?”

“I’m going to take you up to the Lord Chancellor himself.”

“And then they won’t do anything?”

“Nothing at all, Bealby; you trust me. All you’ve got to do is to tell the simple truth. . . .”

It was pretty rough going in the trailer but very exciting. If you gripped the sides hard and sat quite tight nothing very much happened, and also there was a strap across your chest. And you went past everything. There wasn’t a thing on the road the Captain didn’t pass, lowing deeply with his great horn when they seemed likely to block his passage. And as for the burglary and everything, it would all be settled. . . .

The Captain also found that ride to London exhilarating. At least he was no longer hanging about; he was getting to something. He would be able to go back to her—and all his being now yearned to go back to her—with things achieved, with successes to show. He’d found the boy. He would go straight to dear old Uncle Chickney, and Uncle Chickney would put things right with Moggeridge, the boy would bear his testimony, Moggeridge would be convinced and all would be well again. He might be back with Madeleine that evening. He would go back to her, and she

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would see the wisdom and energy of all he had done, and she would lift that dear chin of hers and smile that dear smile of hers and hold out her hand to be kissed, and the lights and reflections would play on that strong soft neck of hers. . . .

They buzzed along stretches of common and stretches of straight-edged meadowland, by woods and orchards, by pleasant inns and slumbering villages and the gates and lodges of country houses.

These latter grew more numerous and presently they skirted a town, and then more road, more villages and at last signs of a nearness to London, more frequent houses, more frequent inns, hoardings, and advertisements, an asphalted side-walk, lamps, a gas-works, laundries, a stretch of suburban villadom, a suburban railway station, a suburbanised old town, an omnibus, the head of a tramline, a stretch of public common thick with notice-boards, a broad pavement, something-or-other parade, with a row of shops. . . .

London.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

HOW BEALBY EXPLAINED

§ 1

LORD CHICKNEY was only slightly older than Lord Moggeridge, but he had not worn nearly so well. His hearing was not good, though he would never admit it, and the loss of several teeth greatly affected his articulation. One might generalise and say that neither physically nor mentally do soldiers wear so well as lawyers. The army ages men sooner than the law and philosophy; it exposes them more freely to germs, which undermine and destroy, and it shelters them more completely from thought, which stimulates and preserves. A lawyer must keep his law highly polished and up-to-date or he hears of it within a fortnight, a general never realises he is out of training and behind the times until disaster is accomplished. Since the magnificent retreat from Bondy-Satina in eighty-seven and his five weeks' defence of Barrowgast (with the subsequent operations) the abilities of Lord Chickney had never been exercised seriously at all. But there was a certain simplicity of manner and a very tall, very drooping, grizzled old-veteran picturesqueness about him that kept him distinguished, he was easy to recognise on public occasions on account of his vast height and his vast blonde white moustaches, and so he got pointed out when greater men were ignored. The autograph collectors

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adored him. Every morning he would spend half an hour writing autographs and patriotic sentiments, and the habit was so strong in him that on Sundays, when there was no London post, and autograph writing would have been wrong anyhow, he filled the time in copying out the epistle and gospel for the day. And he liked to be well in the foreground of public affairs—if possible wearing his decorations. After the autographs he would work, sometimes for hours, for various patriotic and morally aggressive societies, and more particularly for those which opposed Socialism in every shape and form and those which sought to deprive working people, and particularly working girls, of the temptations that arise from unassigned leisure. He had a peculiar vague horror of Socialism, which he regarded as a compound of atheism, republicanism, blight, mildew, measles, and all the worst characteristics of a Continental sabbath. He wrote and toiled for these societies, but he could not speak for them on account of his teeth. For he had one peculiar weakness: he had faced death in many forms but he had never faced a dentist. The thought of dentists gave him just the same sick horror as the thought of Socialism. But it was a great grief to him that he could not speak his mind.

He was a man of blameless private life, a widower and childless. In later years he had come to believe that he had once been very deeply in love with his cousin Susan, who had married a rather careless husband named Douglas; both she and Douglas were dead now, but he maintained a touching affection for her two lively rather than satisfying sons. He called

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them his nephews, and by the continuous attrition of affection he had become their recognised uncle. He was glad when they came to him in their scrapes, and he liked to be seen about with them in public places. They regarded him with considerable confidence and respect, and an affection that they sometimes blamed themselves for as not quite warm enough for his merits. But there is a kind of injustice about affection.

He was really gratified when he got a wire from the less discreditable of these two bright young relations, saying, "Sorely in need of your advice. Hope to bring difficulties to you to-day at twelve."

He concluded very naturally that the boy had come to some crisis in his unfortunate entanglement with Madeleine Philips, and he was flattered by the trustfulness that brought the matter to him. He resolved to be delicate but wily, honourable, strictly honourable, but steadily, patiently separative. He paced his spacious study with his usual morning's work neglected, and rehearsed little sentences in his mind that might be effective in the approaching interview. There would probably be emotion. He would pat the lad on his shoulder and be himself a little emotional. "I understand, my boy," he would say, "I understand.

"Don't forget, my boy, that I've been a young man too."

He would be emotional, he would be sympathetic, but also he must be a man of the world. "Sort of thing that won't do, you know, my boy; sort of thing that people will *not* stand. . . . A soldier's wife has to be a soldier's wife and nothing else. . . . Your business is to serve the King, not—not some celebrity. Lovely,

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no doubt, I don't deny the charm of her—but on the hoardings, my boy. . . . Now don't you think—don't you *think?*—there's some nice pure girl somewhere, sweet as violets, new as the dawn, and ready to be *yours*; a girl I mean, a maiden fancy free, not—how shall I put it?—a woman of the world. Wonderful I admit—but seasoned. Public. My dear, dear boy, I knew your mother when she was a girl, a sweet, pure girl—a thing of dewy freshness. Ah! Well I remember her! All these years, my boy— Nothing. It's difficult. . . .”

Tears stood in his brave old blue eyes as he elaborated such phrases. He went up and down mumbling them through the defective teeth and the long moustache and waving an eloquent hand.

§ 2

When Lord Chickney's thoughts had once started in any direction it was difficult to turn them aside. No doubt that concealed and repudiated deafness helped his natural perplexity of mind. Truth comes to some of us as a still small voice, but Lord Chickney needed shouting and prods. And Douglas did not get to him until he was finishing lunch. Moreover it was the weakness of Captain Douglas to talk in jerky fragments and undertones, rather than clearly and fully in the American fashion. “Tell me all about it, my boy,” said Lord Chickney. “Tell me all about it. Don't apologise for your clothes. I understand. Motor bicycle and just come up. But have you had any lunch, Eric?”

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“Alan, uncle,—not Eric. My brother is Eric.”

“Well, I called him Alan. Tell me all about it. Tell me what has happened. What are you thinking of doing? Just put the position before me. To tell you the truth I’ve been worrying over this business for some time.”

“Didn’t know you’d heard of it, uncle. He can’t have talked about it already. Anyhow,—you see all the awkwardness of the situation. They say the old chap’s a thundering spiteful old devil when he’s roused—and there’s no doubt he was roused. . . . Tremendously. . . .”

Lord Chickney was not listening very attentively. Indeed he was also talking. “Not clear to me there was another man in it,” he was saying. “That makes it more complicated, my boy, makes the row acuter. Old fellow, eh? Who?”

They came to a pause at the same moment.

“You speak so indistinctly,” complained Lord Chickney. “*Who* did you say?”

“I thought you understood. Lord Moggeridge.”

“Lord—! Lord Moggeridge! My dear Boy! But how?”

“I thought you understood, uncle.”

“He doesn’t want to marry her! Tut! Never! Why the man must be sixty if he’s a day. . . .”

Captain Douglas regarded his distinguished uncle for a moment with distressed eyes. Then he came nearer, raised his voice and spoke more deliberately.

“I don’t know whether you quite understand, uncle. I am talking about this affair at Shonts last weekend.”

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“My dear Boy, there’s no need for you to shout. If only you don’t mumble and clip your words—and turn head over heels with your ideas. Just tell me about it plainly. Who is Shonts? One of those Liberal peers? I seem to have heard the name. . . .”

“Shonts, uncle, is the house the Laxtons have; you know,—Lucy.”

“Little Lucy! I remember her. Curls all down her back. Married the milkman. But how does *she* come in, Alan? The story’s getting complicated. But that’s the worst of these infernal affairs,—they always do get complicated. Tangled skeins—

“Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive.”

And now, like a sensible man, you want to get out of it.”

Captain Douglas was bright pink with the effort to control himself and keep perfectly plain and straightforward. His hair had become like tow and little beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead.

“I spent last week-end at Shonts,” he said. “Lord Moggeridge, also there, week-ending. Got it into his head that I was pulling his leg.”

“Naturally, my boy, if he goes philandering. At his time of life. What else can he expect?”

“It wasn’t philandering.”

“Fine distinctions. Fine distinctions. Go on—anyhow.”

“He got it into his head that I was playing practical jokes upon him. Confused me with Eric. It led to a rather first-class row. I had to get out of the

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house. Nothing else to do. He brought all sorts of accusations——”

Captain Douglas stopped short. His uncle was no longer attending to him. They had drifted to the window of the study and the General was staring with an excitement and intelligence that grew visibly at the spectacle of Bealby and the trailer outside. For Bealby had been left in the trailer and he was sitting as good as gold waiting for the next step in his vindication from the dark charge of burglary. He was very travel-worn and the trailer was time-worn as well as travel-worn, and both contrasted with the efficient neatness and newness of the motor bicycle in front. The contrast had attracted the attention of a tall policeman who was standing in a state of elucidatory meditation regarding Bealby. Bealby was not regarding the policeman. He had the utmost confidence in Captain Douglas, he felt sure that he would presently be purged of all the horror of that dead old man and of the brief unpremeditated plunge into crime, but still for the present at any rate he did not feel equal to staring a policeman out of countenance. . . .

From the window the policeman very largely obscured Bealby. . . .

Whenever hearts are simple there lurks romance. Age cannot wither nor custom stale her infinite diversity. Suddenly out of your kindly diplomacies, your sane man-of-the-world intentions, leaps the imagination like a rocket, flying from such safe securities bang into the sky. So it happened to the old General. He became deaf to everything but the appearances before him. The world was jewelled with dazzling and

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delightful possibilities. His face was lit by a glow of genuine romantic excitement. He grasped his nephew's arm. He pointed. His grizzled cheeks flushed.

"That isn't," he asked with something verging upon admiration in his voice and manner, "a Certain Lady in disguise?"

§ 3

It became clear to Captain Douglas that if ever he was to get to Lord Moggeridge that day he must take his uncle firmly in hand. Without even attempting not to appear to shout he cried, "That is a little Boy. That is my Witness. It is Most Important that I should get him to Lord Moggeridge to tell his Story."

"What story?" cried the old commander pulling at his moustache and still eyeing Bealby suspiciously. . . .

It took exactly half an hour to get Lord Chickney from that inquiry to the telephone and even then he was still far from clear about the matter in hand. Captain Douglas got in most of the facts, but he could not eliminate an idea that it all had to do with Madeleine. Whenever he tried to say clearly that she was entirely outside the question, the General patted his shoulder and looked very wise and kind and said, "My dear Boy, I quite understand; I *quite* understand. Never mention a lady. *No.*"

So they started at last rather foggily—so far as things of the mind went, though the sun that day was brilliant—and because of engine trouble in Port Street the General's hansom reached Little Tenby Street first and he got in a good five minutes preparing the

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Lord Chancellor tactfully and carefully before the bicycle and its trailer came upon the scene. . . .

§ 4

Candler had been packing that morning with unusual solicitude for a week-end at Tulliver Abbey. His master had returned from the catastrophe of Shonts, fatigued, visibly aged and extraordinarily cross, and Candler looked to Tulliver Abbey to restore him to his former self. Nothing must be forgotten; there must be no little hitches, everything from first to last must go on oiled wheels, or it was clear his lordship might develop a desperate hostility to these excursions, excursions which Candler found singularly refreshing and entertaining during the stresses of the session. Tulliver Abbey was as good a house as Shonts was bad; Lady Checksammington ruled with the softness of velvet and the strength of steel over a household of admirably efficient domestics, and there would be the best of people there, Mr. Evesham perhaps, the Loopers, Lady Privet, Andreas Doria and Mr. Pernambuco, great silken mellow personages and diamond-like individualities, amidst whom Lord Moggeridge's mind would be restfully active and his comfort quite secure. And as far as possible Candler wanted to get the books and papers his master needed into the trunk or the small valise. That habit of catching up everything at the last moment and putting it under his arm and the consequent need for alert picking up, meant friction and nervous wear and tear for both master and man.

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Lord Moggeridge rose at half-past ten—he had been kept late overnight by a heated discussion at the Aristotelian—and breakfasted lightly upon a chop and coffee. Then something ruffled him; something that came with the letters. Candler could not quite make out what it was, but he suspected another pamphlet by Dr. Schiller. It could not be the chop because Lord Moggeridge was always wonderfully successful with chops. Candler looked through the envelopes and letters afterwards and found nothing diagnostic, and then he observed a copy of *Mind* torn across and lying in the waste-paper basket.

“When I went out of the room,” said Candler discreetly examining this. “Very likely it’s that there Schiller after all.”

But in this Candler was mistaken. What had disturbed the Lord Chancellor was a coarsely disrespectful article on the Absolute by a Cambridge Rhodes scholar written in that flighty facetious strain that spreads now like a pestilence over modern philosophical discussion. “Does the Absolute, on Lord Moggeridge’s own showing, mean anything more than an eloquent oiliness uniformly distributed through space?” and so on.

Pretty bad!

Lord Moggeridge early in life had deliberately acquired a quite exceptional power of mental self-control. He took his perturbed mind now and threw it forcibly into the consideration of a case upon which he had reserved judgment. He was to catch the 3.35 at Paddington, and at two he was smoking a cigar after a temperate lunch and reading over the notes of this

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judgment. It was then that the telephone bell became audible, and Candler came in to inform him that Lord Chickney was anxious to see him at once upon a matter of some slight importance.

"Slight importance?" asked Lord Moggeridge.

"Some slight importance, my lord."

"Some? Slight?"

"'Is lordship, my lord, mumbles rather now 'is back teeth 'ave gone," said Candler, "but so I understand 'im."

"These apologetic assertive phrases annoy me, Candler," said Lord Moggeridge over his shoulder. "You see," he turned round and spoke very clearly, "either the matter is of importance or it is not of importance. A thing must either be or not be. I wish you would manage—when you get messages on the telephone—. . . . But I suppose that is asking too much. . . . Will you explain to him, Candler, when we start, and—ask him, Candler—ask him what sort of matter it is."

Candler returned after some parleying.

"So far as I can make 'is lordship out, my lord, 'e says 'e wants to set you right about something, my lord. He says something about a *little* misapprehension."

"These diminutives, Candler, kill sense. Does he say what sort—what sort—of *little* misapprehension?"

"He says something—I'm sorry, my lord, but it's about Shonts, my lord."

"Then I don't want to hear about it," said Lord Moggeridge.

There was a pause. The Lord Chancellor resumed

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his reading with a deliberate obviousness; the butler hovered.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but I can't think exactly what I ought to say to 'is lordship, my lord."

"Tell him—tell him that I do not wish to hear anything more about Shonts for ever. Simple."

Candler hesitated and went out, shutting the door carefully lest any fragment of his halting rendering of this message to Lord Chickney should reach his master's ears.

Lord Moggeridge's powers of mental control were, I say, very great. He could dismiss subjects from his mind absolutely. In a few instants he had completely forgotten Shonts and was making notes with a silver-cased pencil on the margins of his draft judgment.

§ 5

He became aware that Candler had returned.

"'Is lordship, Lord Chickney, my lord, is very persistent, my lord. 'E's rung up twice. 'E says now that 'e makes a personal matter of it. Come what may, 'e says, 'e wishes to speak for two minutes to your lordship. Over the telephone, my lord, 'e vouchsafes no further information."

Lord Moggeridge meditated over the end of his third after-lunch cigar. His man watched the end of his left eyebrow as an engineer might watch a steam gauge. There were no signs of an explosion. "He must come, Candler," his lordship said at last. . . .

"Oh, Candler!"

BEALBY

“My lord?”

“Put the bags and things in a conspicuous position in the hall, Candler. Change yourself, and see that you look thoroughly like trains. And in fact have everything ready, *prominently* ready, Candler.”

Then once more Lord Moggeridge concentrated his mind.

§ 6

To him there presently entered Lord Chickney.

Lord Chickney had been twice round the world and he had seen many strange and dusky peoples and many remarkable customs and peculiar prejudices, which he had never failed to despise, but he had never completely shaken off the county family ideas in which he had been brought up. He believed that there was an incurable difference in spirit between quite good people like himself and men from down below like Moggeridge, who was the son of an Exeter chorister. He believed that these men from nowhere always cherished the profoundest respect for the real thing like himself, that they were greedy for association and gratified by notice, and so for the life of him he could not approach Lord Moggeridge without a faint sense of condescension. He saluted him as “my *dear* Lord Moggeridge,” wrung his hand with effusion, and asked him kind, almost district-visiting questions about his younger brother and the aspect of his house. “And you are just off, I see, for a week-end.”

These amenities the Lord Chancellor acknowledged by faint gruntings and an almost imperceptible movement of his eyebrows. “There was a matter,” he said,

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“some *little* matter, on which you want to consult me?”

“Well,” said Lord Chickney and rubbed his chin. “*Yes. Yes, there was a little matter, a little trouble——*”

“Of an urgent nature.”

“Yes. Yes. Exactly. Just a little complicated, you know, not quite simple.” The dear old soldier’s manner became almost seductive. “One of these difficult little affairs, where one has to remember that one is a man of the world, you know. A little complication about a lady, known to you both. But one must make concessions, one must understand. The boy has a witness. Things are not as you supposed them to be.”

Lord Moggeridge had a clean conscience about ladies; he drew out his watch and looked at it—aggressively. He kept it in his hand during his subsequent remarks.

“I must confess,” he declared, “I have not the remotest idea. . . . If you will be so good as to be—elementary. What *is* it all about?”

“You see I knew the lad’s mother,” said Lord Chickney. “In fact—” He became insanely confidential—“Under happier circumstances—don’t misunderstand me, Moggeridge; I mean no evil—but he might have been my son. I feel for him like a son. . . .”

§ 7

When presently Captain Douglas, a little heated from his engine trouble, came into the room—he had left Bealby with Candler in the hall—it was instantly

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manifest to him that the work of preparation had been inadequately performed.

“One minute more, my dear Alan,” cried Lord Chickney.

Lord Moggeridge with eyebrows waving and watch in hand was of a different opinion. He addressed himself to Captain Douglas.

“There *isn't* a minute more,” he said. “What is all this—this philoprogenitive rigmarole about? Why have you come to me? My cab is outside *now*. All this about ladies and witnesses;—what *is* it?”

“Perfectly simple, my lord! You imagine that I played practical jokes upon you at Shonts. I didn't. I have a witness. The attack upon you downstairs, the noise in your room——”

“Have I any guarantee——?”

“It's the steward's boy from Shonts. Your man outside knows him. Saw him in the steward's room. He made the trouble for you—and me, and then he ran away. Just caught him. Not exchanged thirty words with him. Half a dozen questions. Settle everything. Then you'll know—nothing for you but the utmost respect.”

Lord Moggeridge pressed his lips together and resisted conviction.

“In consideration,” interpolated Lord Chickney, “feelings of an old fellow. Old soldier. Boy means no harm.”

With the rudeness of one sorely tried the Lord Chancellor thrust the General aside. “Oh!” he said, “Oh!” and then to Captain Douglas. “One minute. Where's your witness? . . .”

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The Captain opened a door. Bealby found himself bundled into the presence of two celebrated men.

"Tell him," said Captain Douglas. "And look sharp about it."

"Tell me plainly," cried the Lord Chancellor. "And be—*quick*."

He put such a point on "quick" that it made Bealby jump.

"Tell him," said the General more gently. "Don't be afraid."

"Well," began Bealby after one accumulating pause, "it was 'im told me to do it. 'E said you go in there——"

The Captain would have interrupted but the Lord Chancellor restrained him by a magnificent gesture of the hand holding the watch.

"He told you to do it!" he said. "I knew he did. Now listen! He told you practically to go in and do anything you could."

"Yessir." Woe took possession of Bealby. "I didn't do any 'arm to the ole gentleman."

"But *who* told you?" cried the Captain. "*Who* told you?"

Lord Moggeridge annihilated him with arm and eyebrows. He held Bealby fascinated by a pointing finger.

"Don't do more than answer the questions. I have thirty seconds more. He told you to go in. He *made* you go in. At the earliest possible opportunity you got away?"

"I jest nipped out——"

"Enough! And now, sir, how dare you come here

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without even a plausible lie? How dare you after your intolerable tomfoolery at Shonts confront me again with fresh tomfoolery? How dare you drag in your gallant and venerable uncle in this last preposterous—I suppose you would call it—*lark*? I suppose you had prepared that little wretch with some fine story. Little you know of False Witness! At the first question, he breaks down! He does not even begin his lie. He at least knows the difference between my standards and yours. Candler! Candler!”

Candler appeared.

“These—these *gentlemen* are going. Is everything ready?”

“The cab is at the door, m’lord. The usual cab.”

Captain Douglas made one last desperate effort. “Sir!” he said. “My lord——”

The Lord Chancellor turned upon him with a face that he sought to keep calm, though the eyebrows waved and streamed like black smoke in a gale. “Captain Douglas,” he said, “you are probably not aware of the demands upon the time and patience of a public servant in such a position as mine. You see the world no doubt as a vastly entertaining fabric upon which you can embroider your—your facetious arrangements. Well, it is not so. It is real. It is earnest. You may sneer at the simplicity of an old man, but what I tell you of life is true. Comic effect is not, believe me, its goal. And you, sir, you, sir, you impress me as an intolerably foolish, flippant and unnecessary young man. Flippant. Unnecessary. Foolish.”

As he said these words Candler approached him with a dust coat of a peculiar fineness and dignity, and

HOW BEALBY EXPLAINED

he uttered the last words over his protruded chest while Candler assisted his arms into his sleeves.

“My lord,” said Captain Douglas again, but his resolution was deserting him.

“No,” said the Lord Chancellor, leaning forward in a minatory manner while Candler pulled down the tail of his jacket and adjusted the collar of his overcoat.

“Uncle,” said Captain Douglas.

“No,” said the General, with the curt decision of a soldier and turned exactly ninety degrees away from him. “You little know how you have hurt me, Alan! You little know. I couldn’t have imagined it. The Douglas strain! False Witness—and insult. I am sorry, my dear Moggeridge, beyond measure.”

“I quite understand—you are as much a victim as myself. Quite. A more foolish attempt— I am sorry to be in this hurry——”

“Oh! You damned little fool,” said the Captain and advanced a step towards the perplexed and shrinking Bealby. “You imbecile little trickster! What do you mean by it?”

“I didn’t mean anything——!”

Then suddenly the thought of Madeleine, sweet and overpowering, came into the head of this distraught young man. He had risked losing her, he had slighted and insulted her and here he was—entangled. Here he was in a position of nearly inconceivable foolishness, about to assault a dirty and silly little boy in the presence of the Lord Chancellor and Uncle Chickney. The world, he felt, was lost, and not well lost. And she was lost too. Even now while he pursued these follies she might be consoling her wounded pride. . . .

BEALBY

He perceived that love is the supreme thing in life. He perceived that he who divides his purposes scatters his life to the four winds of Heaven. A vehement resolve to cut the whole of this Bealby business pounced upon him. In that moment he ceased to care for reputation, for appearances, for the resentment of Lord Moggeridge or the good intentions of Uncle Chickney.

He turned, he rushed out of the room. He escaped by unparalleled gymnastics the worst consequences of an encounter with the Lord Chancellor's bag which the under-butler had placed rather tactlessly between the doors, crossed the wide and dignified hall, and in another moment had his engine going and was struggling to mount his machine in the street without. His face expressed an almost apoplectic concentration. He narrowly missed the noses of a pair of horses in the carriage of Lady Beach Mandarin, made an extraordinary curve to spare a fishmonger's tricycle, shaved the front and completely destroyed the gesture of that eminent actor manager, Mr. Pomegranate, who was crossing the road in his usual inadvertent fashion, and then he was popping and throbbing and banging round the corner and on his way back to the lovely and irresistible woman who was exerting so disastrous an influence upon his career. . . .

§ 8

The Captain fled from London in the utmost fury and to the general danger of the public. His heart

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was full of wicked blasphemies, shoutings and self-reproaches, but outwardly he seemed only pinkly intent. And as he crossed an open breezy common and passed by a milestone bearing this inscription, "To London Thirteen Miles," his hind tire burst conclusively with a massive report. . . .

§ 9

In every life there are crucial moments, turning points, and not infrequently it is just such a thing as this, a report, a sudden waking in the night, a flash upon the road to Damascus that marks and precipitates the accumulating new. Vehemence is not concentration. The headlong violence of the Captain had been no expression of a single-minded purpose, of a soul all gathered together to an end. Far less a pursuit had it been than a flight, a flight from his own dissensions. And now—now he was held.

After he had attempted a few plausible repairs and found the tire obdurate, after he had addressed ill-chosen remonstrances to some unnamed hearer, after he had walked some way along the road and back in an indecision about repair shops in some neighbouring town, the last dregs of his resistance were spent. He perceived that he was in the presence of a Lesson. He sat down by the roadside some twenty feet from the disabled motor bicycle, and, impotent for further effort, frankly admitted himself overtaken. He had not reckoned with punctures.

The pursuing questions came clambering upon him and would no longer be denied: who he was and what

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he was and how he was, and the meaning of this Rare Bate he had been in, and all those deep questions that are so systematically neglected in the haste and excitement of modern life.

In short, for the first time in many headlong days he asked himself simply and plainly what he thought he was up to?

Certain things became clear, and so minutely and exactly clear that it was incredible that they had ever for a moment been obscure. Of course Bealby had been a perfectly honest little boy, under some sort of misconception, and of course he ought to have been carefully coached and prepared and rehearsed before he was put before the Lord Chancellor. This was so manifest now that the Captain stared aghast at his own inconceivable negligence. But the mischief was done. Nothing now would ever propitiate Moggeridge, nothing now would ever reconcile Uncle Chickney. That was—settled. But what was not settled was the amazing disorder of his own mind. Why had he been so negligent, what had come over his mind in the last few weeks?

And this sudden strange illumination of the Captain's mind went so far as perceiving that the really important concern for him was not the accidents of Shonts but this epilepsy of his own will. Why now was he rushing back to Madeleine? Why? He did not love her. He knew he did not love her. On the whole, more than anything else he resented her.

But he was excited about her, he was so excited that these other muddles, fluctuations, follies, came as a natural consequence from that. Out of this excite-

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ment came those wild floods of angry energy that made him career about——

“Like some damned Cracker,” said the Captain.

“For instance,” he asked himself, “*now!* what am I going for?”

“If I go back she’ll probably behave like an offended Queen. Doesn’t seem to understand anything that does not focus on herself. Wants a sort of Limelight Lover. . . .

“She *relies* upon exciting me!

“She relies upon exciting every one!—she’s just a woman specialised for excitement.”

And after meditating through a profound minute upon this judgment, the Captain pronounced these two epoch-making words: “*I won’t!*”

§ 10

The Captain’s mind was now in a state of almost violent lucidity.

“This sex stuff,” he said, “first I kept it under too tight and now I’ve let it rip too loose.

“I’ve been just a distracted fool, with my head swimming with meetings and embraces and—frills.”

He produced some long impending generalisations.

“Not a man’s work, this Lover business. Dancing about in a world of petticoats and powder puffs and attentions and jealousies. Rotten game. . . . Played off against some other man. . . .

“I’ll be hanged if I am. . . .

“Have to put women in their places. . . .

“Make a hash of everything if we don’t. . . .”

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Then for a time the Captain meditated in silence and chewed his knuckle. His face darkened to a scowl. He swore as though some thought twisted and tormented him. "Let some other man get her! Think of her with some other man.

"I don't care," he said, when obviously he did. "There's other women in the world.

"A man—a man mustn't care for *that*. . . .

"It's this or that," said the Captain, "anyhow. . . ."

§ 11

Suddenly the Captain's mind was made up and done.

He arose to his feet and his face was firm and tranquil and now nearer pallor than pink. He left his bicycle and trailer by the wayside even as Christian left his burden. He asked a passing nurse-girl the way to the nearest railway station and thither he went. Incidentally and because the opportunity offered he called in upon a cyclist's repair shop and committed his abandoned machinery to its keeping. He went straight to London, changed at his flat, dined at his club and caught the night train for France—for France and whatever was left of the grand manœuvres.

He wrote a letter to Madeleine from the Est train next day, using their customary endearments, avoiding any discussion of their relations and describing the scenery of the Seine valley and the characteristics of Rouen in a few vivid and masterly phrases.

"If she's worth having she'll understand," said the

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Captain, but he knew perfectly well she would not understand.

Mrs. Geedge noted this letter among the others, and afterwards she was much exercised by Madeleine's behaviour. For suddenly that lady became extraordinarily gay and joyous in her bearing, singing snatches of song and bubbling over with suggestions for larks and picnics and wild excursions. She patted Mr. Geedge on the shoulder and ran her arm through the arm of Professor Bowles. Both gentlemen received these familiarities with a gawky coyness that Mrs. Geedge found contemptible. And moreover Madeleine drew several shy strangers into their circle. She invited the management to a happy participation.

Her great idea was a moonlight picnic. "We'll have a great camp-fire and afterwards we'll dance—this very night."

"But wouldn't it be better to-morrow?"

"To-night!"

"To-morrow perhaps Captain Douglas may be back again. And he's so good at all these things."

Mrs. Geedge knew better because she had seen the French stamp on the letter, but she meant to get to the bottom of the business, and thus it was she said this.

"I've sent him back to his soldiering," said Madeleine serenely. "He has better things to do."

§ 12

For some moments after the unceremonious departure of Captain Douglas from the presence of Lord

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Moggeridge, it did not occur to anyone, it did not occur even to Bealby, that the Captain had left his witness behind him. The General and the Lord Chancellor moved into the hall, and Bealby, under the sway of a swift compelling gesture from Candler, followed modestly. The same current swept them all out into the portico, and while the under-butler whistled up a hansom for the General, the Lord Chancellor with a dignity that was at once polite and rapid, and with Candler gravely protective and a little reproofing, departed. Bealby, slowly apprehending their desertion, regarded the world of London with perplexity and dismay. Candler had gone. The last of the gentlemen was going. The under-butler, Bealby felt, was no friend. Under-butlers never are.

Lord Chickney in the very act of entering his cab had his coat-tail tugged. He looked inquiringly.

“Please, sir, there’s me,” said Bealby.

Lord Chickney reflected. “Well?” he said.

The spirit of Bealby was now greatly abased. His face and voice betrayed him on the verge of tears. “I want to go ’ome to Shonts, sir.”

“Well, my boy, go ’ome—go home I mean to Shonts.”

“’E’s gone, sir,” said Bealby. . . .

Lord Chickney was a good-hearted man, and he knew that a certain public kindness and disregard of appearances looks far better and is infinitely more popular than a punctilious dignity. He took Bealby to Waterloo in his hansom, got him a third-class ticket to Chelsome, tipped a porter to see him safely into his train and dismissed him in the most fatherly manner.

HOW BEALBY EXPLAINED

§ 13

It was well after tea-time, Bealby felt, as he came once more within the boundaries of the Shonts estate.

It was a wiser and a graver Bealby who returned from this week of miscellaneous adventure. He did not clearly understand all that had happened to him; in particular he was puzzled by the extreme annoyance and sudden departure of Captain Douglas from the presence of Lord Moggeridge; but his general impression was that he had been in great peril of dire punishment and that he had been rather hastily and ignominiously reprieved. The nice old gentleman with the long grey moustaches had dismissed him to the train at last with a quality of benediction. But Bealby understood now better than he had done before that adventures do not always turn out well for the boy hero, and that the social system has a number of dangerous and disagreeable holes at the bottom. He had reached the beginnings of wisdom. He was glad he had got away from the tramp and still gladder that he had got away from Crayminster; he was sorry that he would never see the beautiful lady again, and perplexed and perplexed. And also he was interested in the probability of his mother having toast for tea. . . .

It must, he felt, be a long time after tea-time,—quite late. . . .

He had weighed the advisability of returning quietly to his windowless bedroom under the stairs, putting on his little green apron and emerging with a dutiful sang-froid as if nothing had happened, on the

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one hand, or of going to the gardens on the other. But tea—with eatables—seemed more probable at the gardens. . . .

He was deflected from the direct route across the park by a long deep trench, that some one had made and abandoned since the previous Sunday morning. He wondered what it was for. It was certainly very ugly. And as he came out by the trees and got the full effect of the façade, he detected a strangely bandaged quality about Shonts. It was as if Shonts had recently been in a fight and got a black eye. Then he saw the reason for this; one tower was swathed in scaffolding. He wondered what could have happened to the tower. Then his own troubles resumed their sway.

He was so fortunate as not to meet his father in the gardens, and he entered the house so meekly that his mother did not look up from the cashmere she was sewing. She was sitting at the table sewing some newly dyed black cashmere.

He was astonished at her extreme pallor and the drooping resignation of her pose.

“Mother!” he said and she looked up convulsively and stared, stared with bright round astonished eyes.

“I’m sorry, mother, I ’aven’t been quite a good steward’s-room boy, mother. If I could ’ave another go, mother. . . .”

He halted for a moment, astonished that she said nothing, but only sat with that strange expression and opened and shut her mouth.

“Reely—I’d *try*, mother. . . .”

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