

## Chapter the Second

### The Dismissal of Parsons

I

Suddenly Parsons got himself dismissed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bleak!" echoed Mr. Polly.

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

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

"A window ought to be exciting," said Parsons; "it ought to make you

say: El-lo! when you see it."

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

"Rockcockyo," said Mr. Polly.

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

And as a matter of fact he did both.

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

"Over," gulped Polly.

"Over for good and all, O' Man."

II

Platt came to Polly, who was sorting up collar boxes. "O' Man's doing

his Blooming Window."

"What window?"

"What he said."

Polly remembered.

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

So soon as Mr. Polly got into the silk department and met Platt he

knew he had not lingered nearly long enough outside. "Did you see the boards at the back?" said Platt.

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

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

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

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

"Where are you going?" asked Mansfield.

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

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

Parsons had made a huge symmetrical pile of thick white and red blankets twisted and rolled to accentuate their woolly richness,

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

It was wonderful, but--

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

"Allittritions Artful Aid."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Garvace had to repeat his question.

"Dressing it, Sir--on new lines."

"Come out of it," said Mr. Garvace.

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

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

Mr. Garvace turned about. "Where's Morrison? Morrison!"

Morrison appeared.

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

Morrison advanced and hesitated.

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

"Take it all out," said Mr. Garvace, turning away.

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

"Come out of that window," he said. "You can't dress it. If you want



to play the fool with a window----"

"This window's All Right," said the genius in window dressing, and there was a little pause.

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

"You leave that door alone, Morrison," said Parsons.

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

"Get him out," said Mr. Garvace.

Morrison seemed to be thinking out the ethics of his position. The idea of loyalty to his employer prevailed with him. He laid his hand on the door to open it; Parsons tried to disengage his hand. Mr. Garvace joined his effort to Morrison's. Then the heart of Polly leapt and the world blazed up to wonder and splendour. Parsons disappeared behind the partition for a moment and reappeared instantly, gripping a thin cylinder of rolled huckaback. With this he smote at Morrison's head. Morrison's head ducked under the resounding impact, but he clung on and so did Mr. Garvace. The door came open, and then Mr. Garvace was staggering back, hand to head; his autocratic, his sacred baldness, smitten. Parsons was beyond all control--a strangeness, a

marvel. Heaven knows how the artistic struggle had strained that richly endowed temperament. "Say I can't dress a window, you thundering old Humbug," he said, and hurled the huckaback at his master. He followed this up by hurling first a blanket, then an armful of silesia, then a window support out of the window into the shop. It leapt into Polly's mind that Parsons hated his own effort and was glad to demolish it. For a crowded second Polly's mind was concentrated upon Parsons, infuriated, active, like a figure of earthquake with its coat off, shying things headlong.

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

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

Then people had arrived from all parts of the Bazaar. Luck, the ledger clerk, blundered against Polly and said, "Help him!" Somerville from the silks vaulted the counter, and seized a chair by the back. Polly lost his head. He clawed at the Bolton sheeting before him, and if he could have detached a piece he would certainly have hit somebody with it. As it was he simply upset the pile. It fell away from Polly, and he had an impression of somebody squeaking as it went down. It was the

sort of impression one disregards. The collapse of the pile of goods just sufficed to end his subconscious efforts to get something to hit somebody with, and his whole attention focussed itself upon the struggle in the window. For a splendid instant Parsons towered up over the active backs that clustered about the shop window door, an active whirl of gesture, tearing things down and throwing them, and then he went under. There was an instant's furious struggle, a crash, a second crash and the crack of broken plate glass. Then a stillness and heavy breathing.

Parsons was overpowered....

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

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

### III

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

Life was not altogether a lark.

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

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

Polly was to go to the police court in the morning as a witness. The terror of that ordeal almost overshadowed the tragic fact that Parsons was not only summoned for assault, but "swapped," and packing his box. Polly knew himself well enough to know he would make a bad witness. He felt sure of one fact only, namely, that "'E then 'It 'Im on the 'Ed and--" All the rest danced about in his mind now, and how it would dance about on the morrow Heaven only knew. Would there be a cross-examination? Is it perjocery to make a slip? People 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 trying his best; ten-forty--Ruined! Ruined!" He lifted his voice to a shout. "Ruined!" and dropped it to "Like an earthquake."

"Heated altaclation," said Polly.

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

wind.

He meditated gloomily upon his future and a colder chill invaded Polly's mind. "Likely to get another crib, ain't I--with assaulted the guv'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 trouser pockets. He was inventing names for the four magistrates on the bench, and had got to "the Grave and Reverend Signor with the palatial Boko," when his thoughts were recalled to gravity by the sound of his name. He rose with alacrity and was fielded by an expert policeman from a brisk attempt to get into the vacant dock. The clerk to the Justices repeated the oath with incredible rapidity.

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

His evidence was simple and quite audible after one warning from the

superintendent of police to "speak up." He tried to put in a good word for Parsons by saying he was "naturally of a choleraic disposition," but the start and the slow grin of enjoyment upon the face of the grave and Reverend Signor with the palatial Boko suggested that the word was not so good as he had thought it. The rest of the bench was frankly puzzled and there were hasty consultations.

"You mean 'E 'As a 'Ot temper," said the presiding magistrate.

"I mean 'E 'As a 'Ot temper," replied Polly, magically incapable of aspirates for the moment.

"You don't mean 'E ketches cholera."

"I mean--he's easily put out."

"Then why can't you say so?" said the presiding magistrate.

Parsons was bound over.

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

his life Polly had a sense of irreparable loss.

A minute or so after Platt dashed in.

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

"He's gone already," said Platt. "Might have stopped to say 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 doing a blooming Pipe, by the look of me."