Chapter the Fifth

Mr. Polly Takes a Vacation

I

Mr. Polly returned to Clapham from the funeral celebration prepared for trouble, and took his dismissal in a manly spirit.

"You've merely anti-separated 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, that 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 someone 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 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.

Mr. 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 for 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 weekday, and he went down to Easewood with his bag and portmanteau in a solitary 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 little hunted 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 high roads. 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 curtseys, 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 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 weekdays 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.

II

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 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 bookshop, the plays of William Shakespeare, a second-hand copy of Belloc's "Road 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 was now advancing with great strides to make up for lost time. Sunshine and a stirring wind were poured out over the land, fleets of towering clouds sailed upon urgent tremendous missions across the blue seas 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 vanished 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 populous suburb; and as his bicycle legs grew strong his wheel with a sort of inevitableness carried him towards the 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 work, above the 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.

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 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 reproved.

"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 do 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 in at things now and then. 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 doorstep.

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 the narrow, empty passage, and everyone 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. 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 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 learnt 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 wastepaper basket sort of hat--starts to cross the road--going to the oil shop--prodic refreshment of oil can--"

"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.

"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 tablecloth 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 workbox and an untidy work-basket, there was an ailing musk

plant in the window, and the tattered and blotched wallpaper 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 oilcloth. The Windsor chair he sat in was unstable--which presently afforded material for humour. "Steady, old nag," he said; "whoa, my friskiacious palfry!"

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

III

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

"Supper at eight."

"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 Wreckeryation 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, and so to the new cemetery and a distant view of the Surrey hills, and round by the gasworks 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 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 afternoon. Besides, I've got something to say to him."

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.

IV

It was past ten when Mr. Polly found himself riding back towards Easewood in a broad moonlight with a little Japanese lantern dangling from his handle bar and making a fiery circle of pinkish light on and round about his front wheel. He was mightily pleased with himself and

the day. There had been four-ale to drink at supper mixed with gingerbeer, 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 the Tartar carts.

"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 have 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 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 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,--"oscoolatory exercise."

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.

V

And now Mr. Polly began to lead a divided 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 strategetical 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 familiarity. 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 cut-throat 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 life, and intoxicated and gladdened him with sweetly beautiful suggestions--and left him. She came and left him as that dear 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, stitchwork, 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 grey bird his stillness presently encouraged to approach him. "This is All Right," said Mr. Polly softly to the little brown and grey bird. "Business--later."

He reflected that he might go on 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, then as a voice murmuring, then as a falling of little fragments on the hither side and as ten pink finger tips, scarcely apprehended before Romance became startling 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 anyone here," she added.

"Sorry," said Mr. Polly, "if I am intrudaceous. 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.

"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 eyes that presently joined dancing in 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 table 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 melancholy rectrospectatiousness," 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.

VI

"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.

"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 absquatulate 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 everyday.

"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 medevial 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."

"Well, Polly."

"It's a girl's name!"

For a moment he was 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, sunburnt by his holiday and now warmly flushed. He had an inspiration to simple speech that no practised trifler 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.

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.

VII

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 vivisecting point of encouragement into him--with that strange passive cruelty which is natural to 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 desolate hopeless wildernesses of desiring and of wild valleys of unreasonable ecstasies, 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 heaven, 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 broke like a wave and foamed up at that 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 dim 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 for 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 a 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.

"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 someone--" 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 wrist of a schoolfellow who shrieked with pain and cried: "Mercy! mercy! Ooo! 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 its 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.