Chapter the Seventh

The Little Shop at Fishbourne

I

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 wrinklings round his eyes. He sat on the stile above Fishbourne and cried to the Heavens above him: "Oh! Roo-o-o-tten Be-e-astly 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 must 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 aspects 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 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, 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 extremely cross at breakfast, and it didn't 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 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 had 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 good 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 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....

II

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 of the consequences. The 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 unwrinkle the kink in her brow at his presence, giving herself up to mental states that had a quality of secret preoccupation. And she developed an idea for which perhaps there was legitimate excuse, that he was lazy. He seemed to stand about in the shop 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 charms 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 least 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 or importunity to buy flannel trousers. Additional sources of income for a tradesman are not always easy to find. Wintershed at the bicycle and gramaphone 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 a string, and hide them from Miriam under the counter in the shop. That is a heartbreaking 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 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 horridest fact to beauty!

And another book which had no beginning for him was the second volume of the Travels of the Abbés Hue 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 Lhassa, and 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 livid jerks, and had forever 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 birds that he invented, birds with peculiarities that made him chuckle when they occurred to him. He tried to make Rusper, 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 Shakespeare, 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 everyday!...

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.

Meanwhile he got little exercise, indigestion grew with him until it ruled all his moods, he fattened and deteriorated physically, 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 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.

III

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 beautiful room, the library of the Reform 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 everyone 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, 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.

"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 suchlike 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 that comes from inadequate training and sheer aimlessness, or 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 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 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 I so returning 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 the 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, nettled 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.

IV

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, and including many 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 expression, 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 it. But you cannot satirise a hack, 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 invert it?"

Rumbold shook his head with a helpless expression.

"Don't like so much Arreary Pensy."

Rumbold distressed in utter obscurity.

"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 marking his point 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 peaceable 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."

"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 pavemint."

"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 trowser 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 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 obtusely as ever.

V

Hinks, the saddler, two shops further 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 intimation of a 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 enquired.

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

"Don't recollect, be blowed! You flap your mouth a dam 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 and smell, turned it about this way and that and shaken 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....

VI

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 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 Berlin-wool 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 gramaphone dealer, a tobacconist, a sixpenny-halfpenny 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, preoccupied and dehumanised humanity. So the poison in his system poisoned the world without.

(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 kindliness.

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 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 a peculiar clicking 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 enquire: "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.

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 Zerxiacious 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.

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 casuality. 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 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 waggon 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.

"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 curb. 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 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 downward. Thereat Mr. Polly, emitting such words as everyone 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 bicycles and pails. There on the pavement these inexpert children of a pacific age, untrained in arms and uninured to violence, 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 toy shop, who was holding his hands in a complex and uncomfortable manner that he afterwards explained to Wintershed was a combination of something romantic called "Ju-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!"

"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 everyone 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?"

"Simply ran into his pails--as anyone might," said Mr. Polly, "and out he comes and scrags 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'ave better, both of 'em," said Mr. Chuffles, glad for once to find himself morally unassailable.

"Anyone 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 an unexpected 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 'usband injured. My husband went out and spoke to Mr. Polly, who was jumping off 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.

"(Kik) Me too," said Mr. Rusper.

Someone handed Mr. Polly a collar. "This yours?"

Mr. Polly investigated his neck. "I suppose it is. Anyone 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 enquiry to his two colleagues.

"Exactly, exactly," said the colleague to the right.

"Er--(kik)," said Mr. Rusper.

VII

But the disgust that overshadowed Mr. Polly's being as he sat upon the stile, had other and profounder justification than his quarrel with Rusper 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 bandling 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 learnt 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 further happiness to offer 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 anyone."

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

He found it 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 fishlike 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.

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 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....