

**GEORGE
GISSING**

THE TOWN
TRAVELLER

George Gissing
The Town Traveller

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CHAPTER I

MR. GAMMON BREAKFASTS IN BED

Moggie, the general, knocked at Mr. Gammon's door, and was answered by a sleepy "Hallo?"

"Mrs. Bubb wants to know if you know what time it is, sir? 'Cos it's half-past eight an' more."

"All right!" sounded cheerfully from within. "Any letters for me?"

"Yes, sir; a 'eap."

"Bring 'em up, and put 'em under the door. And tell Mrs. Bubb I'll have breakfast in bed; you can put it down outside and shout. And I say, Moggie, ask somebody to run across and get me a 'Police News' and 'Clippings' and 'The Kennel'—understand? Two eggs, Moggie, and three rashers, toasted crisp—understand?"

As the girl turned to descend a voice called to her from another room on the same floor, a voice very distinctly feminine, rather shrill, and a trifle imperative.

"Moggie, I want my hot water-sharp!"

"It ain't nine yet, miss," answered Moggie in a tone of remonstrance.

"I know that—none of your cheek! If you come up here hollering at people's doors, how can anyone sleep? Bring the hot water at once, and mind it *is* hot."

"You'll have to wait till it *gits* 'ot, miss."

"*Shall* I? If it wasn't too much trouble I'd come out and smack your face for you, you dirty little wretch!"

The servant—she was about sixteen, and no dirtier than became her position—scampered down the stairs, burst into the cellar kitchen, and in a high, tearful wail complained to her mistress of the indignity she had suffered. There was no living in the house with that Miss Sparkes, who treated everybody like dirt under her feet. Smack her face, would she? What next? And all because she said the water would have to be *'otted*. And Mr. Gammon wanted his breakfast in bed, and—and—why, there now, it had all been drove out of her mind by that Miss Sparkes.

Mrs. Bubb, the landlady, was frying some sausages for her first-floor lodgers; as usual at this hour she wore (presumably over some invisible clothing) a large shawl and a petticoat, her thin hair, black streaked with grey, knotted and pinned into a ball on the top of her head. Here and there about the kitchen ran four children, who were snatching a sort of picnic breakfast whilst they made ready for school. They looked healthy enough, and gabbled, laughed, sang, without heed to the elder folk. Their mother, healthy too, and with no ill-natured face—a slow, dull, sluggishly-mirthful woman of a common London type—heard Moggie out, and shook up the sausages before replying.

"Never you mind Miss Sparkes; I'll give her a talkin' to when she comes down. What was it as Mr. Gammon wanted? Breakfast in bed? And what else? I never see such a girl for forgetting!"

"Well, didn't I tell you as my 'ead had never closed the top!" urged Moggie in plaintive key. "How can I 'elp myself?"

"Here, take them letters up to him, and ask again; and if Miss Sparkes says anything don't give her no answer—see? Billy, fill the big kettle, and put it on before you go. Sally, you ain't a-goin' to school without brushin' your 'air? Do see after your sister, Janey, an' don't let her look such a slap-cabbage. Beetrice, stop that 'ollerin'; it fair mismerizes me!"

Having silently thrust five letters under Mr. Gammon's door, Moggie gave a very soft tap, and half whispered a request that the lodger would repeat his orders. Mr. Gammon did so with perfect

good humour. As soon as his voice had ceased that of Miss Sparkes sounded from the neighbouring bedroom.

"Is that the water?"

For the pleasure of the thing Moggie stood to listen, an angry grin on her flushed face.

"Moggie!—I'll give that little beast what for! Are you there?"

The girl made a quick motion with both her hands as if clawing an enemy's face, then coughed loudly, and went away with a sound of stamping on the thinly-carpeted stairs. One minute later Miss Sparkes' door opened and Miss Sparkes herself rushed forth—a startling vision of wild auburn hair about a warm complexion, and a small, brisk figure girded in a flowery dressing-gown. She called at the full pitch of her voice for Mrs. Bubb.

"Do you hear me? Mrs. Bubb, have the kindness to send me up my hot water immejately! This moment, if you please!"

There came an answer, but not from the landlady. It sounded so near to Miss Sparkes that she sprang back into her room.

"Patience, Polly! All in good time, my dear. Wrong foot out of bed this morning?"

Her door slammed, and there followed a lazy laugh from Mr. Gammon's chamber.

In due time the can of hot water was brought up, and soon after it came a tray for Mr. Gammon, on which, together with his breakfast, lay the three newspapers he had bespoken. Polly Sparkes throughout her leisurely toilet was moved to irritation and curiosity by the sound of frequent laughter on the other side of the party wall—uproarious peals, long chucklings in a falsetto key, staccato bursts of mirth.

"That is the comic stuff in 'Clippings,'" she said to herself with an involuntary grin. "What a fool he is! And why's he staying in bed this morning? Got his holiday, I suppose. I'd make better use of it than that."

She came forth presently in such light and easy costume as befitted a young lady of much leisure on a hot morning of June. Meaning to pass an hour or two in quarrelling with Mrs. Bubb she had arrayed herself thus early with more care than usual, that her colours and perfumes might throw contempt upon the draggle-tailed landlady, whom, by the by, she had known since her childhood. On the landing, where she paused for a moment, she hummed an air, with the foreseen result that Mr. Gammon called out to her.

"Polly!"

She vouchsafed no answer.

"Miss Sparkes!"

"Well?"

"Will you come with me to see my bow-wows this fine day?"

"No, Mr. Gammon, I certainly will not!"

"Thank you, Polly, I felt a bit afraid you might say yes."

The tone was not offensive, whatever the words might be, and the laugh that came after would have softened any repartee, with its undernote of good humour and harmless gaiety. Biting her lips to preserve the dignity of silence, Polly passed downstairs. Sunshine through a landing window illumined the dust floating thickly about the staircase and heated the familiar blend of lodging-house smells—the closeness of small rooms that are never cleansed, the dry rot of wall-paper, plaster, and old wood, the fustiness of clogged carpets trodden thin, the ever-rising vapours from a sluttish kitchen. As Moggie happened to be wiping down the front steps the door stood open, affording a glimpse of trams and omnibuses, cabs and carts, with pedestrians bobbing past in endless variety—the life of Kennington Road—all dust and sweat under a glaring summer sun. To Miss Sparkes a cheery and inviting spectacle—for the whole day was before her, to lounge or ramble until the hour which summoned her to the agreeable business of selling programmes at a fashionable theatre. The employment was precarious; even with luck in the way of tips it meant nothing very brilliant; but

something had happened lately which made Polly indifferent to this view of the matter. She had a secret, and enjoyed it all the more because it enabled her to excite not envy alone, but dark suspicions in the people who observed her.

Mrs. Bubb, for instance—who so far presumed upon old acquaintance as to ask blunt questions, and offer homely advice—plainly thought she was going astray. It amused Polly to encourage this misconception, and to take offence on every opportunity. As she went down into the kitchen she fingered a gold watch-chain that hung from her blouse to a little pocket at her waist. Mrs. Bubb would spy it at once, and in course of the quarrel about this morning's hot water would be sure to allude to it.

It turned out one of the finest frays Polly had ever enjoyed, and was still rich in possibilities when, at something past eleven, the kitchen door suddenly opened and there entered Mr. Gammon.

CHAPTER II

A MISSING UNCLE

He glanced at Mrs. Bubb, at the disorderly remnants of breakfast on the long deal table, then at Polly, whose face was crimson with the joy of combat.

"Don't let me interrupt you, ladies. Blaze away! if I may so express myself. It does a man good to see such energy on a warm morning."

"I've said all I'm a-goin' to say," exclaimed Mrs. Bubb, as she mopped her forehead with a greasy apron. "I've warned her, that's all, and I mean her well, little as she deserves it. Now, you, Moggie, don't stand gahpin' there git them breakfast things washed up, can't you? It'll be tea time agin before the beds is made. And what's come to *you* this morning?"

She addressed Mr. Gammon, who had seated himself on a corner of the table, as if to watch and listen. He was a short, thick-set man with dark, wiry hair roughened into innumerable curls, and similar whiskers ending in a clean razor-line halfway down the cheek. His eyes were blue and had a wondering innocence, which seemed partly the result of facetious affectation, as also was the peculiar curve of his lips, ever ready for joke or laughter. Yet the broad, mobile countenance had lines of shrewdness and of strength, plain enough whenever it relapsed into gravity, and the rude shaping of jaw and chin might have warned anyone disposed to take advantage of the man's good nature. He wore a suit of coarse tweed, a brown bowler hat, a blue cotton shirt with white stock and horseshoe pin, rough brown leggings, tan boots, and in his hand was a dog-whip. This costume signified that Mr. Gammon felt at leisure, contrasting as strongly as possible with the garb in which he was wont to go about his ordinary business—that of commercial traveller. He had a liking for dogs, and kept a number of them in the back premises of an inn at Dulwich, whither he usually repaired on Sundays. When at Dulwich, Mr. Gammon fancied himself in completely rural seclusion; it seemed to him that he had shaken off the dust of cities, that he was far from the clamour of the crowd, amid peace and simplicity; hence his rustic attire, in which he was fond of being photographed with dogs about him. A true-born child of town, he would have found the real country quite unendurable; in his doggy rambles about Dulwich he always preferred a northerly direction, and was never so happy as when sitting in the inn-parlour amid a group of friends whose voices rang the purest Cockney. Even in his business he disliked engagements which took him far from London; his "speciality" (as he would have said) was town travel, and few men had had more varied experience in that region of enterprise.

"I'm going to have a look at the bow-wows," he replied to Mrs. Bubb. "Polly won't come with me; unkind of her, ain't it?"

"Mr. Gammon," remarked the young lady with a severe glance, "I'll thank you not to be so familiar with my name. If you don't know any better, let me tell you it's very ungentlemanly."

He rose, doffed his hat, bowed profoundly, and begged her pardon, in acknowledgment of which Polly gave a toss of the head. Miss Sparkes was neither beautiful nor stately, but her appearance had the sort of distinction which corresponds to these qualities in the society of Kennington Road; she filled an appreciable space in the eyes of Mr. Gammon; her abundance of auburn hair, her high colour, her full lips and excellent teeth, her finely-developed bust, and the freedom of her poses (which always appeared to challenge admiration and anticipate impertinence) had their effectiveness against a kitchen background, and did not entirely lose it when she flitted about the stalls at the theatre selling programmes. She was but two-and-twenty. Mr. Gammon had reached his fortieth year. In general his tone of intimacy passed without rebuke; at moments it had seemed not unacceptable. But Polly's temper was notoriously uncertain, and her frankness never left people in doubt as to the prevailing mood.

"Would you like a little ball-pup. Miss Sparkes?" he pursued in a conciliatory tone. "A lovely little button-ear? There's a new litter say the word, and I'll bring you one."

"Thank you. I don't care for dogs."

"No? But I'm sure you would if you kept one. Now, I have a cobby little fox terrier—just the dog for a lady. No? Or a sweet little black-and-tan—just turning fifteen pounds, with a lovely neck and kissing spots on both cheeks. I wouldn't offer her to everybody."

"Very good of you," replied Miss Sparkes contemptuously.

"Why ain't you goin' to business?" asked the landlady.

"I'll tell you. We had a little difference of opinion yesterday. The governors have been disappointed about a new line in the fancy leather; it wouldn't go, and I told them the reason, but that wasn't good enough. They hinted that it was my fault. Of course, I said nothing; I never do in such cases. But—this morning I had breakfast in bed."

He spoke with eyes half closed and an odd vibration of the upper lip, then broke into a laugh.

"You're an independent party, you are," said Mrs. Bubb, eyeing him with admiration.

"It was always more than I could do to stand a hint of that kind. Not so long ago I used to lose my temper, but I've taken pattern by Polly—I mean Miss Sparkes—and now I do it quietly. That reminds me"—his look changed to seriousness—"do you know anyone of the name of Quodling?"

Polly—to whom he spoke—answered with a dry negative.

"Sure? Try and think if you ever heard your uncle speak of the name."

The girl's eyes fell as if, for some reason, she felt a momentary embarrassment. It passed, but in replying she looked away from Mr. Gammon.

"Quodling? Never heard it—why?"

"Why, there is a man called Quodling who might be your uncle's twin brother—he looks so like him. I caught sight of him in the City, and tracked him till I got to know his place of business and his name. For a minute or two I thought I'd found your uncle; I really did. Gosh! I said to myself, there's Clover at last! I wonder I didn't pin him like a bull terrier. But, as you know, I'm cautious—that's how I've made my fortune, Polly."

Miss Sparkes neither observed the joke nor resented the name; she was listening with a preoccupied air.

"You'll never find *him*," said Mrs. Bubb, shaking her head.

"Don't be so sure of that. I shan't lose sight of this man Quodling. It's the strangest likeness I ever saw, and I shan't be satisfied till I've got to know if he has any connexion with the name of Clover. It ain't easy to get at, but I'll manage it somehow. Now, if I had Polly to help me—I mean Miss Sparkes—"

With a muttering of impatience the girl rose; in the same moment she drew from her belt a gold watch, and deliberately consulted it. Observing this Mrs. Bubb looked towards Mr. Gammon, who, also observant, returned the glance.

"I shan't want dinner," Polly remarked in an off-hand way as she moved towards the door.

"Going to see Mrs. Clover?" Gammon inquired.

"I'm sick of going there. It's always the same talk."

"Wait till *your* 'usband runs away from you and stays away for five years," said Mrs. Bubb with a renewal of anger, "and then see what *you* find to talk about."

Polly laughed and went away humming.

"If it wasn't that I feel afraid for her," continued Mrs. Bubb in a lower voice, "I'd give that young woman notice to quit. Her cheek's getting past everything. Did you see her gold watch and chain?"

"Yes, I did; where does it come from?"

"That's more than *I* can tell you, Mr. Gammon. I don't want to think ill of the girl, but there's jolly queer goin's-on. And she's so brazen about it! I don't know what to think."

Gammon knitted his brows and gazed round the kitchen.

"I think Polly's straight," he observed at length. "I don't seem to notice anything wrong with her except her cheek and temper. She'll have to be taken down a peg one of these days, but I don't envy the man that'll have the job. It won't be me, for certain," he added with a laugh.

Moggie came into the room, bringing a telegram.

"For me?" said Gammon. "Just what I expected." Reading, he broadened his visage into a grin of infinite satisfaction. "'Please explain absence. Hope nothing wrong.' How kind of them, ain't it! Yesterday they chucked me; now they're polite. Reply-paid too; very considerate. They shall have their reply."

He laid the blank form on the table and wrote upon it in pencil, every letter beautifully shaped in a first-rate commercial hand:

"Go to Bath and get your heads shaved." "You ain't a-goin' to send that!" exclaimed Mrs. Bubbs, when he had held the message to her for perusal.

"It'll do them good. They're like Polly—want taking down a peg."

Moggie ran off with the paper to the waiting boy, and Mr. Gammon laughed for five minutes uproariously.

"Would you like a little bull-pup, Mrs. Bubbs? he asked at length.

"Not me, Mr. Gammon. I've enough pups of my own, thank you all the same."

CHAPTER III

THE CHINA SHOP

Mr. Gammon took his way down Kennington Road, walking at a leisurely pace, smiting his leg with his doubled dog-whip, and looking about him with his usual wideawake, contented air. He had in perfection the art of living for the moment, no art in his case, but a natural characteristic, for which it never occurred to him to be grateful. Indeed, it is a common characteristic in the world to which Mr. Gammon belonged. He and his like take what the heavens send them, grumbling or rejoicing, but never reflecting upon their place in the sum of things. To Mr. Gammon life was a wonderfully simple matter. He had his worries and his desires, but so long as he suffered neither from headache nor stomach-ache, these things interfered not at all with his enjoyment of a fine morning.

He was in no hurry to make for Dulwich; as he walked along his thoughts began to turn in a different direction, and on reaching the end of Upper Kennington Lane he settled the matter by striking towards Vauxhall Station. A short railway journey and another pleasant saunter brought him to a street off Battersea Park Road, and to a china shop, over which stood the name of Clover.

In the window hung a card with an inscription in bold letters: "Glass, china, and every kind of fashionable ornament for the table for hire on moderate terms." Mr. Gammon read this with an appreciative smile, which, accompanied by a nod, became a greeting to Mrs. Clover, who was aware of him from within the shop. He entered.

"How does it go?"

"Two teas and a supper yesterday. A wedding breakfast this morning."

"Bravo! What did I tell you? You'll want a bigger place before the end of the year."

The shop was well stocked, the window well laid out; everything indicated a flourishing, though as yet a small, business. Mrs. Clover, a neat, comely, and active woman, with a complexion as clear as that of her own best china, chatted vivaciously with the visitor, whilst she superintended the unpacking of a couple of crates by a muscular youth and a young lady (to use the technical term), her shop assistant.

"Why are you off to-day?" she inquired presently, after moving to the doorway for more private talk.

Mr. Gammon made his explanation with spirit and humour.

"You're a queer man, if ever there was one," Mrs. Clover remarked after watching him for a moment and averting her eyes as soon as they were met by his. "You know your own business best, but I should have thought—"

It was a habit of hers to imply a weighty opinion by suddenly breaking off, a form of speech known to the grammarians by a name which would have astonished Mrs. Clover. Few women of her class are prone to this kind of emphasis. Her friendly manner had a quietness, a reserve in its cordiality, which suited well with the frank, pleasant features of a matron not yet past her prime.

"It's all right," he replied, more submissively than he was wont to speak. "I shall do better next time; I'm looking out for a permanency."

"So you have been for ten years, to my knowledge."

They laughed together. At this point came an interruption in the shape of a customer who drove up in a hansom: a loudly-dressed woman, who, on entering the shop, conversed with Mrs. Clover in the lowest possible voice, and presently returned to her vehicle with uneasy glances left and right. Mr. Gammon, who had walked for some twenty yards, sauntered back to the shop, and his friend met him on the threshold.

"That's the sort," she whispered with a merry eye. "Eight-roomed 'ouse near Queen's Road Station. Wants things for an at 'ome—teaspoons as well—couldn't I make it ninepence the two dozen! That's the kind of place where there'll be breakages. But they pay well, the breakages do."

"Well, I won't keep you now," said Gammon. "I'm going to have a peep at the bow-wows. Could I look in after closing?"

Mrs. Clover turned her head away, pretending to observe the muscular youth within.

"Fact is," he pursued, "I want to speak to you about Polly."

"What about her?"

"Nothing much. I'll tell you this evening."

Without more words he nodded and went off. Mrs. Clover stood for a moment with an absent expression on her comely face, then turned into the shop and gave the young man in shirt-sleeves a bit of her mind about the time he was taking over his work.

She was anything but a bad-tempered woman. Her rating had no malice in it, and only signified that she could not endure laziness.

"Hot, is it? Of course it's hot. What do you expect in June? You don't mind the heat when you're playing cricket, I know."

"No, mum," replied the young giant with a grin.

"How many runs did you make last Saturday?"

"Fifty-three, mum, and caught out."

"Then don't go talking to me about the heat. Finish that job and run off with this filter to Mrs. Gubbins's."

Her life had not lacked variety. Married at eighteen, after a month's courtship, to a man of whom she knew next to nothing, she lived for a time in Liverpool, where her husband—older by ten years—pursued various callings in the neighbourhood of the docks. After the birth of her only child, a daughter, they migrated to Glasgow, and struggled with great poverty for several years. This period was closed by the sudden disappearance of Mr. Clover. He did not actually desert his wife and child; at regular intervals letters and money arrived from him addressed to the care of Mrs. Clover's parents, who kept a china shop at Islington; beyond the postmarks, which indicated constant travel in England and abroad, these letters (always very affectionate) gave no information as to the writer's circumstances. When Mrs. Clover had lived with her parents for about three years she was summoned by her husband to Dulwich, where the man had somehow established himself as a cab proprietor; he explained his wanderings as the result of mere restlessness, and with this cold comfort Mrs. Clover had to be content. By degrees they settled into a not unhappy life; the girl, Minnie, was growing up, the business might have been worse, everything seemed to promise unbroken domestic tranquillity, when one fine day Mr. Clover was again missing. Again he sent letters and money, the former written in a strangely mingled mood of grief and hopefulness, the remittance varying from half a sovereign to a ten-pound note. This time the letters were invariably posted in London, but in different districts. Clover declared that he was miserable away from home, and, without offering any reason for his behaviour, promised that he would soon return.

Six years had since elapsed. To afford herself occupation Mrs. Clover went into the glass and china business, assisted by her parents' experience, and by the lively interest of her friend Mr. Gammon. Minnie Clover, a pretty and interesting girl, was now employed at Doulton's potteries. All would have been well but for the harassing mystery that disturbed their lives. Clover's letters were still posted in London; money still came from him, sometimes in remittances of as much as twenty pounds. But handwriting and composition often suggested that the writer was either ill or intoxicated. The latter seemed not unlikely, for Clover had always inclined to the bottle. His wife no longer distressed herself. The first escapade she had forgiven; the second estranged her. She had resolved, indeed, that if her husband did again present himself his home should not be under her roof.

The shop closed at eight. At a quarter past the house-bell rang and a small servant admitted Mr. Gammon, who came along the passage and into the back parlour, where Mrs. Clover was wont to sit. As usual at this hour her daughter was present. Minnie sat reading; she rose for a moment to greet the visitor, spoke a word or two very modestly, even shyly, and let her eyes fall again upon the book. Considering the warmth of the day it was not unnatural that Mr. Gammon showed a very red face, shining with moisture; but his decided hilarity, his tendency to hum tunes and beat time with his feet, his noisy laughter and expansive talk, could hardly be attributed to the same cause. Having taken a seat near Minnie he kept his look steadily fixed upon her, and evidently discoursed with a view of affording her amusement; not altogether successfully it appeared, for the young girl—she was but seventeen—grew more and more timid, less and less able to murmur replies. She was prettier than her mother had ever been, and spoke with a better accent. Her features suggested a more delicate physical inheritance than Mrs. Clover's comeliness could account for. As a matter of fact she had her father's best traits, though Mrs. Glover frequently thanked goodness that in character she by no means resembled him.

Mr. Gammon was in the midst of a vivid description of a rat hunt, in which a young terrier had displayed astonishing mettle, when his hostess abruptly interposed.

"Minnie, I wish you'd put your hat on and run round to Mrs. Walker's for me. I'll give you a message when you're ready."

Very willingly the girl rose and left the room. Mr. Gammon, whose countenance had fallen, turned to the mother with jocose remonstrance.

"Now I call that too bad. What did you want to go sending her away for?"

"What does it matter?" was Mrs. Clover's reply, uttered good-humouredly, but with some impatience. "The child doesn't want to hear about rats and terriers."

"Child? I don't call her a child. Besides, you'd only to give me a hint to talk of something else." He leaned forward, and softened his voice to a note of earnest entreaty. "She won't be long, will she?"

"Oh, I dare say not!"

A light tap at the door called Mrs. Clover away. She whispered outside with Minnie and returned smiling.

"Have you told her to be quick?"

Mrs. Clover did not answer the question. Sitting with her arms on the round table she looked Mr. Gammon steadily in the face, and said with decision:

"Never you come here again after you've been to Dulwich!"

"Why not?"

"Never mind. I don't want to have to speak plainer. If ever I have to—"

Mrs. Clover made her great effect of the pregnant pause. The listener, who had sobered wonderfully, sat gazing at her, his blue eyes comically rueful.

"She isn't coming back at all?" fell from his lips.

"Of course she isn't."

"Well, I'm blest if I thought you could be so unkind, Mrs. Clover."

She was silent for three ticks of the clock, an odd hardness having come over her face, then, flushing just a little, as if after an effort, she smiled again, and spoke in her ordinary tone.

"What had you to say about Polly?"

"Polly?—Polly be hanged! I half believe Polly's no better than she should be."

The flush on Mrs. Clover's face deepened and she spoke severely.

"What do you mean by saying such things?"

"I didn't meant to," exclaimed Gammon, with hasty penitence. "Look here, I really didn't; but you put me out. She had some presents given her, that's all."

"I know it," said Mrs. Clover. "She's been here to-day—called this afternoon."

"Polly did?"

"Yes, and behaved very badly too. I don't know what's coming to the girl. If I had a temper like that I'd—"

What Mrs. Clover would do remained conjectural.

"It's a good thing," remarked the other, laughing. "Trust Polly to take care of herself. She cheeked you, did she?"

They discussed Miss Sparkes very thoroughly. There had been a battle royal in the afternoon, for the girl came only to "show off" and make herself generally offensive. Mrs. Clover desired to be friendly with her sister's daughter, but would stand no "cheek," and had said so.

"Polly's all right," remarked Mr. Gammon finally. "Don't you fret about her. She ain't that kind. I know 'em."

"Then why did you say just now—"

"Because you riled me, sending Minnie away."

Again Mrs. Clover reflected, and again she looked her friend steadily in the face.

"Why did you want her to stay?"

Mr. Gammon's heated visage glowed with incredible fervour. He shrugged his shoulders, shuffled his feet, and at length burst out with:

"Well, I should think you know. It isn't the first time I've showed it, I should think."

"Then I'm very sorry. I'm real sorry."

The words fell gently, and one might have thought that Mrs. Clover was softening the rejection of a tender proposal made to herself.

"You mean it's no good?" said the man.

"Not the least, not a bit. And never could be."

Mr. Gammon nodded several times, as if calculating the force of the blow, and nerving himself to bear it.

"Well, if you say it," he replied at length, "I suppose it's a fact—but I call it hard lines. Ever since I was old enough to think of marrying I've been looking out for the right girl—always looking out, and now I thought I'd found her. Hanged if it isn't hard lines! I could have married scores—scores; but do you suppose I'd have a girl that showed she was only waiting for me to say the word? Not me! That's what took me in Minnie. She's the first of that kind I ever knew—the only one. But, I say, do you mean you won't let me try? You surely don't mean that, Mrs. Clover?"

"Yes, I do. I mean just that, Mr. Gammon."

"Why? Because I haven't got a permanency?"

"Oh, no."

"Because I—because I go to Dulwich?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

"I can't tell you why, and I don't know why, but I mean it. And what's more"—her eyes sparkled—"if ever you say such word to Minnie you never pass my door again."

This seemed to take Mr. Gammon's breath away. After a rather long silence he looked about for his hat, then for his dog-whip.

"I'll say good night, Mrs. Clover. Hot, isn't it? Hottest day yet. I say, you're not riled with me? That's all right. See you again before long."

He did not make straight for home, but rambled in a circuit for the next hour. When darkness had fallen he found himself again near the china shop, and paused, for a moment only, by the door. On the opposite side of the street stood a man who had also paused in a slow walk, and who also looked towards the shop. But Mr. Gammon went his way without so much as a glance at that dim figure.

CHAPTER IV

POLLY AND MR. PARISH

Two first-rate quarrels in one day put Polly Sparkes into high good humour. On leaving her aunt's house in the afternoon she strolled into Battersea Park, and there treated herself to tea and cakes at a little round table in the open air. Mrs. Clover, though the quarrel was prolonged until four o'clock, had offered no refreshments, which seemed to Miss Sparkes a very gross instance of meanness and inhospitality.

At a table near to her sat two girls, for some reason taking a holiday, who conversed in a way which proved them to be "mantle hands," and Polly listened and smiled. Did she not well remember the day when the poverty of home sent her, a little girl, to be "trotter" in a workroom? But she soon found her way out of that. A sharp tongue, a bold eye, and a brilliant complexion helped her on, step by step, or jump by jump, till she had found much more agreeable ways of supporting herself. All unimpeachable, for Polly was fiercely virtuous, and put a very high value indeed upon such affections as she had to dispose of.

The girls were appraising her costume; she felt their eyes and enjoyed the envy in them. Her hat, with its immense bunch of poppies; her blouse of shot silk in green and violet; her gold watch, carelessly drawn out and returned to its pocket. "Now what do you think I am? A real lady, I'll bet!" She caught a whisper about her hair. Red, indeed! Didn't they wish they had anything like it! Polly could have told them that at a ball she graced with her presence not long ago her hair was done up with no less than seventy-two pins. Think of that! Seventy-two pins!

She munched a cream tart, and turned her back upon the envious pair.

Back to Kennington Road by omnibus, riding outside, her eyes and hair doing execution upon a young man in a very high collar, who was, she saw, terribly tempted to address her, but, happily for himself, could not pluck up courage. Polly liked to be addressed by strange young men; experience had made her so skilful in austere rebuke.

She rested in her bedroom, as stuffy and disorderly a room as could have been found in all Kennington Road. Moggie, the general, was only allowed to enter it in the occupant's presence, otherwise who knew what prying and filching might go on? She paid a very low rent, thanks to Mrs. Bubb's good nature, but the strained relations between them made it possible that she would have to leave, and she had been thinking to-day that she could very well afford a room in a better neighbourhood; not that, all things considered, she desired to quit this house, but Mrs. Bubb took too much upon herself. Mrs. Bubb was the widow of a police officer; one of her children was in the Police Orphanage at Twickenham, and for the support of each of the others she received half a crown a week. This, to be sure, justified the good woman in a certain spirit of pride; but when it came to calling names and making unpleasant insinuations—If a young lady cannot have a harmless and profitable secret, what is the use of being a young lady?

On the way to her duties at the theatre, about seven o'clock, she entered a little stationer's shop in an obscure street, and asked with a smile whether any letter had arrived for her. Yes, there was one addressed in a careless hand to "Miss Robinson." This, in another obscure street hard by she opened. On half a sheet of notepaper was printed with pen and ink the letters *W. S. T.*—that was all. Polly had no difficulty in interpreting this cipher. She tore up envelope and paper, and walked briskly on.

There was but a poor "house" this evening. Commission on programmes would amount to very little indeed; but the young gentleman with the weak eyes, who came evening after evening, and must have seen the present piece a hundred times or so, gave her half a crown, weeping copiously from nervousness as he touched her hand. He looked about seventeen, and Polly, who always greeted him

with a smile of sportive condescension, wondered how his parents or guardians could allow him to live so recklessly.

She left half an hour before the end of the performance with a girl who accompanied her a short way, talking and laughing noisily. Along the crowded pavement they were followed by a young man, of whose proximity Miss Sparkes was well aware, though she seemed not to have noticed him—a slim, narrow-shouldered, high-hatted figure, with the commonest of well-meaning faces set just now in a tremulously eager, pursuing look. When Polly's companion made a dart for an omnibus this young man, suddenly red with joy, took a quick step forward, and Polly saw him beside her in an attitude of respectful accost.

"Awfully jolly to meet you like this."

"Sure you haven't been waiting?" she asked with good humour.

"Well—I—you said you didn't mind, you know; didn't you?"

"Oh, I don't mind!" she laughed. "If you've nothing better to do. There's my bus."

"Oh, I say! Don't be in such a hurry. I was going to ask you"—he panted—"if you'd come and have just a little supper, if you wouldn't mind."

"Nonsense! You know you can't afford it."

"Oh, yes, I can—quite well. It would be awfully kind of you."

Polly laughed a careless acceptance, and they pressed through the roaring traffic of cross-ways towards an electric glare. In a few minutes they were seated amid plush and marble, mirrors and gilding, in a savoury and aromatic atmosphere. Nothing more delightful to Polly, who drew off her gloves and made herself thoroughly comfortable, whilst the young man—his name was Christopher Parish—nervously scanned a bill of fare. As his bearing proved, Mr. Parish was not quite at home amid these splendours. As his voice and costume indicated, he belonged to the great order of minor clerks, and would probably go dinnerless on the morrow to pay for this evening's festival. The waiter overawed him, and after a good deal of bungling, with anxious consultation of his companion's appetite, he ordered something, the nature of which was but dimly suggested to him by its name. Having accomplished this feat he at once became hilarious, and began to eat large quantities of dry bread.

Quite without false modesty in the matter of eating and drinking, Polly made a hearty supper. Christopher ate without consciousness of what was before him, and talked ceaselessly of his good fortune in getting a berth at Swettenham's, the great house of Swettenham Brothers, tea merchants.

"An enormous place—simply enormous! What do you think they pay in rent?—three thousand eight hundred pounds a year! Could you believe it? Three thousand eight hundred pounds! And how many people do you think they employ? Now just guess, do; just make a shot at it!"

"How do I know? Two or three hundred, I dessay."

Christopher's face shone with triumph.

"One thousand—three hundred—and forty-two! Could you believe it?"

"Oh, I dessay," Polly replied, with her mouth full.

"Enormous, isn't it? Why, it's like a town in itself!"

Had his own name been Swettenham he could hardly have shown more pride in these figures. When Polly inquired how much *they* made a year he was unable to reply with exactitude, but the mere thought of what such a total must be all but overcame him. Personally he profited by his connexion with the great firm to the extent of two pounds a week, an advance of ten shillings on what he had hitherto earned. And his prospects! Why, they were limitless. Once let a fellow get into Swettenham's —

"You're not doing so bad for a single man," remarked Polly, with facetious malice in her eye. "But it won't run to a supper like this very often."

"Oh—well—not often, of course." His voice quavered into sudden despondency. "Just now and then, you know. Have some cheese?"

"Don't mind—Gorgonzoler."

He paid the bill right bravely and added sixpence for the waiter, though it cost him as great a pang as the wrenching of a double tooth. A rapid calculation told him that he must dine at the Aerated Bread Shop for several days to come. Whilst he was thus computing Polly drew out her gold watch. It caught his eye, he stood transfixed, and his stare rose from the watch to Polly's face.

"Just after eleven," she remarked airily, and began to hum.

Christopher had but a silver watch, an heirloom of considerable antiquity, and the chain was jet. Sunk of a sudden in profoundest gloom he led the way to the exit, walking like a shamefaced plebeian who had got into the room by mistake. Polly's spirits were higher than ever. Just beyond the electric glare she thrust her arm under that of her mute companion.

"You don't want me to git run over, do you?"

Parish had a thrill of satisfaction, but with difficulty he spoke.

"Let's get out of this crowd—beastly, isn't it?"

"I don't mind a crowd. I like it when I've someone to hang on by."

"Oh, I don't mind it, I like just what you like. What time did you say it was, Miss Sparkes?"

"Just eleven. Time I was gettin' 'ome. There'll be a bus at the corner."

"I hoped you were going to walk," urged Christopher timidly.

"S'pose I might just as well—if you'll take care of me."

It was a long time since Polly had been so gracious, so mild. All the way down Whitehall, across the bridge, and into Kennington Road she chatted of a hundred things, but never glanced at the one which held complete possession of Christopher's mind. Many times he brought himself all but to the point of mentioning it, yet his courage invariably failed. The risk was too great; it needed such a trifling provocation to disturb Polly's good humour. He perspired under the warmth of the night and from the tumult of his feelings.

"You mustn't meet me again for a week," said Polly when her dwelling was within sight.

"Why not?"

"Because I say so—that's enough, ain't it?"

"I say—Polly—"

"I've told you you're not to say 'Polly,'" she interrupted archly.

"You're awfully good, you know—but I wish—"

"What? Never mind; tell me next time. Ta-ta!"

She ran off, and Christopher had no heart to detain her. For five minutes he hung over the parapet at Westminster, watching the black flood and asking what was the use of life. On the whole Mr. Parish found life decidedly agreeable, and after a night's rest, a little worry notwithstanding, he could go to the City in the great morning procession, one of myriads exactly like him, and would hopefully dip his pen in the inkpots of Swettenham Brothers.

Moggie, the general, was just coming from the public-house with two foaming jugs, one for Mrs. Bubb, the other for Mr. and Mrs. Cheeseman, her first-floor lodgers. Miss Sparkes passed her disdainfully, and entered with the aid of a latch-key. From upstairs sounded a banjo, preluding; then the sound of Mr. Cheeseman's voice chanting a popular refrain:

Come where the booze is cheaper,
Come where the pots 'old more,
Come where the boss is a bit of a joss,
Come to the pub next door!

Polly could not resist this invitation. She looked in at the Cheesemans' sitting-room and enjoyed half an hour of friendly gossip before going to bed.

CHAPTER V

A NONDESCRIPT

Scarcely had quiet fallen upon the house—it was half an hour after midnight—when at the front door sounded a discreet but resolute knocking. Mrs. Bubb, though she had retired to her chamber, was not yet wholly unpresentable; reluctantly, and with wonder, she went to answer the untimely visitor. After a short parley through the gap of the chained door she ascended several flights and sought to arouse Mr. Gammon—no easy task.

"What's up?" shouted her lodger in a voice of half-remembered conviviality. "House on fire?"

"I hope not indeed. There wouldn't have been much chance for you if it was. It's your friend Mr. Greenacre, as says he must see you for a minute."

"All right; send him up, please. What the dickens can he want at this time o' night!"

Mr. Gammon having promised to see his visitor out again, with due attention to the house door, the landlady showed a light whilst Mr. Greenacre mounted the stairs. The gas-jet in his friend's bedroom displayed him as a gaunt, ill-dressed man of about forty, with a long unwholesome face, lank hair, and prominent eyes. He began with elaborate apologies, phrased and uttered with more refinement than his appearance would have led one to expect. No; he would on no account be seated. Under the circumstances he could not dream of staying more than two, or at most three, minutes. He felt really ashamed of himself for such a flagrant breach of social custom; but if his friend would listen patiently for one minute—nay, for less.

"I know what you're driving at," broke in Gammon good-humouredly, as he sat in bed with his knees up. "You've nowhere to sleep—ain't that it?"

"No, no; I assure you no!" exclaimed the other, with unfailing politeness. "I have excellent lodgings in the parish of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields; besides, you don't imagine I should disturb you after midnight for such a trivial cause! You have heard of the death of Lord Bolsover?"

"Never knew he was living," cried Gammon.

"Nonsense, you are an incorrigible joker. The poor fellow died nearly a week ago. Of course I must attend his funeral to-morrow down at Hitchin; I really couldn't neglect to attend his funeral. And here comes my difficulty. At present I'm driving a 'Saponaria' van, and I shall have to provide a substitute, you see. I thought I had found one, a very decent fellow called Grosvenor, who declares, by the by, that he can trace his connexion with the aristocratic house—interesting, isn't it? But Grosvenor has got into trouble to-day—something about passing a bad half-crown—a mere mistake, I'm quite sure. Now I've been trying to find someone else—not an easy thing; and as I *must* have a substitute by nine to-morrow, I came in despair to you. I'm *sure* in your wide acquaintance, my dear Gammon—"

"Hold on, what's 'Saponaria'?"

"A new washing powder; only started a few days. Big vans, painted vermilion and indigo, going about town and suburbs distributing handbills and so on."

"I see. But look here, Greenacre, what's all this rot about Lord Bolsover?"

"My dear Gammon," protested the other. "I really can't allow you to speak in that way. I make all allowance for the hour and the circumstances, but when it comes to the death of a dear friend—"

"How the devil come you to be his friend, or he yours?" shouted Gammon in comical exasperation.

"Why, surely you have heard me speak of him. Yet, perhaps not. It was rather a painful subject. The fact is, I once gave the poor fellow a severe thrashing; it was before he succeeded to the title I was obliged to do it. Poor Bolsover confessed afterwards that he had behaved badly (there was a lady in the case), but it put an end to our intimacy. And now he's gone, and the least I can do is to attend his

funeral. That reminds me, Gammon, I fear I shall have to borrow a sovereign, if it's quite convenient to you. There's the hire of the black suit, you see, and the fare to Hitchin. Do you think you could?"

He paused delicately, whereupon Gammon burst into a roar of laughter which echoed through the still house.

"You're the queerest devil I know," was the remark that followed. "It's no use trying to make out what you're really up to."

"I have stated the case in very clear terms," replied Greenacre solemnly. "The chief thing is to find a substitute to drive the 'Saponaria' van."

"What sort of animal in the shafts?"

"Two—a pail of Welsh cobs—good little goers."

"By jingo!" shouted Gammon, "I'll tool 'em round myself. I'm off for to-morrow, and a job of that kind would just suit me."

Greenacre's face brightened with relief. He began to describe the route which the "Saponaria" van had to pursue.

"It's the south-east suburbs to-morrow, the main thoroughfares of Greenwich, Blackheath, Lewisham, and all round there. There are certain shops to call at to drop bills and samples; no order-taking. Here's the list. At likely places you throw out a shower of these little blue cards. Best is near a Board School when the children are about. I'm greatly obliged to you, Gammon; I never thought you'd be able to do it yourself. Could you be at the stable just before nine? I'd meet you and give you a send-off. Bait at—where is it?" He consulted the notebook. "Yes, Prince of Wales's Feathers, Catford Bridge; no money out of pocket; all settled in the plan of campaign. Rest the cobs for an hour or so. Get round to the stables again about five, and I'll be there. It's very Kind of you; I'm very greatly obliged. And if you *could*—without inconvenience—"

His eyes fell upon Gammon's clothing, which lay heaped on a chair. On the part of the man in bed there was a moment's hesitation, but Gammon had never refused a loan which it was in his power to grant. In a few minutes he fulfilled his promise to Mrs. Bubb, seeing Greenacre safely out of the house, and making fast the front door again; then he turned in and slept soundly till seven o'clock.

All went well in the morning. The sun shone and there was a pleasant north-west breeze; in high spirits Gammon mounted the big but light van, which seemed to shout in its brilliancy of red and blue paint.

It was some time since he had had the pleasure of driving a pair. Greenacre had not overpraised the cobs; their start promised an enjoyable day. He was not troubled by any sense of indignity unfailing humour and a vast variety of experience preserved him from such thoughts. As always, he threw himself into the business of the moment with conscientious gusto; he had "Saponaria" at heart, and was as anxious to advertise the new washing powder as if the profits were all his own. At one spot where a little crowd chanced to gather about the van he delivered an address, a fervid eulogy of "Saponaria," declaring his conviction (based on private correspondence) that in a week or two it would be exclusively used in all the laundries of the Royal Family.

At one shop where he was instructed to call he found a little trap waiting, and as he entered there came out a man whom he knew by sight, evidently a traveller, who mounted the trap and drove off. The shopkeeper was in a very disagreeable mood and returned Gammon's greeting roughly.

"Something wrong?" asked Gammon with his wonted cheeriness.

"Saw that chap in the white 'at? I've just told him str'ight that if he comes into this shop again I'll kick 'im. I told him str'ight—see?"

"Did you? I like to hear a man talk like that. It shows there's something in him. Who is the fellow? I seem to remember him somehow."

"Quodlings' traveller. And he's lost them my orders. And I shall write and tell 'em so. I never did like that chap; but when he comes in 'ere, with his white 'at, telling me how to manage my own business, and larfin', yis larfin', why, I've done with him. And I told him str'ight," etc.

"Quodlings', eh?" said Gammon reflectively. "They're likely to be wanting a new traveller, I should say."

"They will if they take my advice," replied the shopkeeper. "And that I shall give 'em, 'ot and strong."

As he drove on Gammon mused over this incident. The oil and colour business was not one of his "specialities," but he knew a good deal about it, and could easily learn what remained. The name of Quodling interested him, being that of the man in the City who so strikingly resembled Mr. Clover; who, moreover, was probably connected in some way with the oil and colour firm. It might be well to keep an eye on Quodlings'—a substantial concern, likely to give one a chance of the "permanency" which was, on the whole, desirable.

He had a boy with him to hold the horses, a sharp lad, whose talk gave him amusement when he was tired of thinking. They found a common interest in dogs. Gammon invited the youngster to come and see his "bows-wows" at Dulwich, and promised him his choice out of the litter of bull terriers. With animation he discoursed upon the points of this species of dog—the pure white coat; the long, lean, punishing head, flat above; the breadth behind the ears, the strength of back. He warned his young friend against the wiles of the "faker," who had been known to pipeclay a mottled animal and deceive the amateur. Altogether the day proved so refreshing that Gammon was sorry when its end drew near.

Greenacre was late for his appointment at the stables; he came in a suit of black, imperfectly fitting, and a chimney-pot hat some years old, looking very much like an undertaker's man. His appearance seemed to prove that he really had attended a funeral, which renewed Gammon's wonder. As a matter of course they repaired to the nearest eating-house to have a meal together—an eating-house of the old fashion, known also as a coffee-shop, which Gammon greatly preferred to any kind of restaurant. There, on the narrow seats with high wooden backs, as uncomfortable a sitting as could be desired, with food before him of worse quality and worse cooked than any but English-speaking mortals would endure, he always felt at home, and was pleasantly reminded of the days of his youth, when a supper of eggs and bacon at some such resort rewarded him for a long week's toil and pinching. Sweet to him were the rancid odours, delightfully familiar the dirty knives, the twisted forks, the battered teaspoons, not unwelcome the day's newspaper, splashed with brown coffee and spots of grease. He often lamented that this kind of establishment was growing rare, passing away with so many other features of old London.

More fastidious, Greenacre could have wished his egg some six months fresher, and his drink less obviously a concoction of rinsings. But he was a guest, and his breeding did not allow him to complain. Of the funeral he shrank from speaking; but the few words he dropped were such as would have befitted 'a genuine grief. Gammon even heard him murmur, unconsciously, "poor Bolsover."

Having eaten they wended their way to a little public-house, with a parlour known only to the favoured few, where Greenacre, after a glass or two of rum—a choice for which he thought it necessary to apologize—began to discourse upon a topic peculiarly his own.

"I couldn't help thinking to-day, Gammon, what a strange assembly there would be if all a man's relatives came to his funeral. Nearly all of us must have such lots of distant connexions that we know nothing about. Now a man like Bolsover—an aristocrat, with fifty or more acknowledged relatives in good position—think how many more there must be in out-of-the-way places, poor and unknown. Ay, and some of them not so very distant kinsfolk either. Think of the hosts of illegitimate children, for instance—some who know who they are, and some who don't."

This was said so significantly that Gammon wondered whether it had a personal application.

"It's a theory of mine," pursued the other, his prominent eyes fixed on some far vision, "that every one of us, however poor, has some wealthy relative, if he could only be found. I mean a relative within reasonable limits, not a cousin fifty times removed. That's one of the charms of London to me. A little old man used to cobble my boots for me a few years ago in Ball's Pond Road, He had

an idea that one of his brothers, who went out to New Zealand and was no more heard of, had made a great fortune; said he'd dreamt about it again and again, and couldn't get rid of the fancy. Well, now, the house in which he lived took fire, and the poor old chap was burnt in his bed, and so his name got into the newspapers. A day or two after I heard that his brother—the one he spoke of—had been living for some years scarcely a mile away at Stoke Newington—a man rolling in money, a director of the British and Colonial Bank."

"Rummy go!" remarked Gammon.

"When I was a lad," pursued the other, after sipping at his refilled glass, "I lived just by an old church in the City, and I knew the verger, and he used to let me look over the registers. I think that's what gave me my turn for genealogy. I believe there are fellows who get a living by hunting up pedigrees; that would just suit me, if I only knew how to start in the business."

Gammon looked up and asked abruptly.

"Know anybody called Quodling?"

"Quodling? No one personally. But there's a firm of Quodling, brushmakers or something."

"Oil and colourmen?"

"Yes, to be sure. Quodling? Now I come to think of it—why do you ask?"

"There's a man in the City called Quodling, a silk broker. For private reasons I should like to know something about him."

Greenacre gazed absently at his friend, like one who tries to piece together old memories.

"Lost it," he muttered at length in a discontented tone. "Something about a Mrs. Quodling and a lawsuit—big lawsuit that used to be talked about when I was a boy. My father was a lawyer, you know."

"Was he? It's the first time you ever told me," replied Gammon with a chuckle.

"Nonsense! I must have mentioned it many a time. I've often noticed, Gammon, how very defective your memory is. You should use a mnemonic system. I made a splendid one some years ago; it helped me immensely."

"I could have felt sure," said Gammon, "that you told me once your father was a coal merchant."

"Why, so he was—later on. Am I to understand, Gammon, that you accuse me of distorting facts?"

With the end of his third tumbler there had come upon Greenacre a tendency to maudlin dignity and sensitiveness; he laid a hand on his friend's arm and looked at him with pained reproach.

"Gammon! I was never inclined to mendacity, though I confess to mendacity I have occasionally fallen. To you, Gammon, I could not lie; I respect you, I admire you, in spite of the great distance between us in education and habits of mind. If I thought you accused me of falsehood, my dear Gammon, it would distress me deeply. Assure me that you don't. I am easily put out to-day. The death of poor Bolsover—my friend before he succeeded to the title. And that reminds me. But for a mere accident I might myself at this moment have borne a title. My mother, before her marriage, refused the offer of a man who rose to wealth and honours, and only a year or two ago died a baronet. Well, well, the chances of life the accidents of birth!"

He shook his head for some minutes, murmuring inarticulate regrets.

"I think I'll just have one more, Gammon."

"I think not, old boy. Where did you say you lived?"

"Oh, that's all right. Most comfortable lodgings in the parish of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields. If you have the slightest doubt of my veracity, leave me, Gammon; I beg you will leave me. I—in fact, I have an appointment with a gentleman I met at poor Bolsover's funeral."

With no little difficulty Gammon led him away, and by means of an omnibus landed him at length near St. Martin's Church. No entreaty could induce the man to give his address. He protested that a few minutes' walk would bring him home, and as he seemed to have sobered sufficiently,

Gammon left him sitting on the church steps—a strange object in his borrowed suit of mourning and his antiquated top hat.

CHAPTER VI

THE HEAD WAITER AT CHAFFEY'S

Polly Sparkes had a father. That Mr. Sparkes still lived was not known to the outer circles of Polly's acquaintance; she never spoke of her family, and it was not easy to think of Polly in the filial relation. For some years she had lived in complete independence, now and then exchanging a letter with her parent, but seeing him rarely. Not that they were on ill terms, unpleasantness of that kind had been avoided by their satisfaction in living apart. Polly sometimes wished she had a father "to be proud of"—a sufficiently intelligible phrase on Polly's lips; but for the rest she thought of him with tolerance as a good, silly sort of man, who "couldn't help himself"—that is to say, could not help being what he was.

And Mr. Sparkes was a waiter, had been a waiter for some thirty years, and would probably pursue the calling as long as he was fit for it. In this fact he saw nothing to be ashamed of. It had never occurred to him that anyone could or should be ashamed of the position; nevertheless, Mr. Sparkes was a disappointed, even an embittered, man; and that for a subtle reason, which did credit to his sensibility.

All his life he had been employed at Chaffey's. As a boy of ten he joined Chaffey's in the capacity of plate washer; zeal and conduct promoted him, and seniority made him at length head waiter. In those days Chaffey's was an eating-house of the old kind, one long room with "boxes"; beef its staple dish, its drink a sound porter at twopence a pint. How many thousand times had Mr. Sparkes shouted the order "One ally-mode!" The chief, almost the only, variant was "One 'ot!" which signified a cut from the boiled round, served of course with carrots and potatoes, remarkable for their excellence. Midday dinner was the only meal recognized at Chaffey's; from twelve to half-past two the press of business kept everyone breathless and perspiring. Before and after these hours little if anything was looked for, and at four o'clock the establishment closed its doors.

But it came to pass that the proprietor of Chaffey's died, and the business fell into the hands of a young man with new ideas. Within a few months Chaffey's underwent a transformation; it was pulled down, rebuilt, enlarged, beautified; nothing left of its old self but the name. In place of the homely eating-house there stood a large hall, painted and gilded and set about with mirrors, furnished with marble tables and cane-bottomed chairs—to all appearances a restaurant on the France-Italian pattern. Yet Chaffey's remained English, flagrantly English, in its viands and its waiters. The new proprietor aimed at combining foreign glitter with the prices and the entertainment acceptable to a public of small means. Moreover, he prospered. The doors were now open from nine o'clock in the morning to twelve at night. There was a bar for the supply of alcoholic drinks—the traditional porter had always been fetched from a neighbouring house—and frivolities such as tea and coffee were in constant demand.

This change told grievously upon Mr. Sparkes. At the first mention of it he determined to resign but the weakness in his character shrank from such a decided step, and he allowed himself to be drawn into a painfully false position. The proprietor did not wish to lose him. Mr. Sparkes was a slim, upright, grave-featured man, whose deportment had its market value; his side-whiskers and shaven lip gave him a decidedly clerical aspect, which, together with long experience and a certain austerity of command, well fitted him for superintending the younger waiters. His salary was increased, his "tips" represented a much larger income than heretofore. At the old Chaffey's every diner gave him a penny, whilst at the new he often received twopence, and customers were much more numerous. But every copper he pouched cost Mr. Sparkes a pang of humiliation; his "Thank you, sir," had the urbanity which had become mechanical, but more often than not he sneered inwardly, despising himself and those upon whom he waited.

To one person alone did he exhibit all the bitterness of his feelings, and that was Mrs. Clover, the sister of his deceased wife. With her he occasionally spent a Sunday evening in the parlour behind the china shop, and there would speak the thoughts that oppressed him.

"It isn't that I've any quarrel with the foreign rest'rants, Louisa. They're all right in their way. They suit a certain public, and they charge certain prices. But what I do think is mean and low—mean and low—is to be neither one thing nor the other; to make a sort of show as if you was 'igh-clawss, and then have it known as you're the cheapest of the cheap. Potatoes! That I should live to see Chaffey's 'anding out such potatoes! They're more like food for pigs, and I've known the day when Chaffey's 'ud have thrown 'em at the 'ead of anybody as delivered 'em such offal. It isn't a place for a self-respecting man, and I feel it more and more. If a shop-boy wants to take out his sweetheart and make a pretence of doing it grand, where does he go to? Why, to Chaffey's. He couldn't afford a real rest'rant; but Chaffey's looks the same, and Chaffey's is cheap. To hear 'em ordering roast fowl and Camumbeer cheese to follow—it fair sickens me. Roast fowl! a old 'en as wouldn't be good enough for a real rest'rant to make inter soup! And the Camumbeer! I've got my private idea, Louisa, about what that Camumbeer is made of. And when I think of the Cheshire and the Cheddar we used to top up with! It's 'art-breaking."

From a speaker with such a countenance all this was very impressive. Mrs. Clover shook her head and wondered what England was coming to. In return she would tell of the people who came to her shop to hire cups and saucers just to make a show when they had a friend to tea with them. There was much of the right spirit in both these persons, for they sincerely despised shams, though they were not above profiting by the snobberies of others. But Mrs. Clover found amusement in the state of things, whereas Mr. Sparkes grew more despondent the more he talked, and always added with a doleful self-reproach:

"If I'd been half a man I should have left. They'd have taken me on at Simpkin's, I know they would, or at the Old City Chop House, if I'd waited for a vacancy. Who'd take me on now? Why, they'd throw it in my face that I came from Chaffey's, and I shouldn't have half a word to say for myself."

It was very seldom that he received a written invitation from his sister-in-law, but he heard from her in these hot days of June that she particularly wished to see him as soon as possible. The message he thought, must have some reference to Mrs. Clover's husband, whose reappearance at any moment would have been no great surprise, even after an absence of six years. Mr. Sparkes had a strong objection to mysterious persons; he was all for peace and comfort in a familiar routine, and for his own part had often hoped that the man Clover was by this time dead and buried. Responding as soon as possible to Mrs. Clover's summons, he found that she wished to speak to him about his daughter. Mrs. Clover showed herself seriously disturbed by Polly's recent behaviour; she told of the newly-acquired jewellery, of the dresses in which Miss Sparkes went "flaunting," of the girl's scornful refusal to answer natural inquiries.

"The long and the short of it is, Ebenezer, you ought to see her, and find out what's going on. There may be nothing wrong, and I don't say there is; but that watch and chain of hers wasn't bought under twenty pounds—that I'll answer for, and it's a very queer thing, to say the least of it. What business was it of mine, she asked. I shouldn't wonder if she says the same to you; but it's your plain duty to have a talk with her, don't you think so now?"

To have a talk with Polly, especially on such a subject, was no easy or pleasant undertaking for Mr. Sparkes, who had so long resigned all semblance of parental authority. But as a conscientious man he could not stand aside when his only surviving daughter seemed in peril. After an exchange of post cards a meeting took place between them on the Embankment below Waterloo Bridge, for neither father nor child had anything in the nature of a home beyond the indispensable bedroom, and their only chance of privacy was in the open air. Having no desire to quarrel with her parent (it would have been so very one-sided and uninspiring) Polly began in a conciliatory tone.

"Aunt Louisa's been making a bother, has she? Just like her. Don't you listen to her fussicking, dad. What's all the row about? I've had a present given to me; well, what of that? You can look at it for yourself. I can't tell you who give it me, 'cos I've promised I wouldn't; but you'll know some day, and then you'll larff. It ain't nothing to fret your gizzard about; so there. I'm old enough to look after myself, and if I ain't I never shall be; so there."

This did not satisfy Mr. Sparkes. He saw that the watch and chain were certainly valuable, and he could not imagine how the girl had become honourably possessed of them, save as the gift of an admirer; but the mere fact of such an admirer's exacting secrecy implied a situation of danger.

"I don't like the look of it, Polly," he remarked; with a nervous attempt to be severe.

"All right, dad; then don't like the look of it. The watch is good enough for me."

It took Mr. Sparkes two or three minutes to understand this joke. Whilst he was reflecting upon it a thought suddenly passed through his mind, which startled him by its suggestiveness.

"Polly!"

"Well?"

"It ain't your Uncle Clover, is it?"

The girl laughed loudly as if at a preposterous question.

"Him? Why, I've as good as forgot there was such a man! What do you mean? Why, I shouldn't know him if I saw him. What made you think of that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Who knows when and where he may turn up, or what he'll do?"

"That's a good 'un! My Uncle Clover indeed! Whatever put that into your 'ead?"

Her ejaculations of wonder and disdain continued until the close of the interview, and Mr. Sparkes went his way, convinced that Polly was being pursued by some wealthy man, probably quite unprincipled—the kind of man who frequents "proper rest'rants" and sits in the stalls at "theaytres," where, doubtless, Polly had made his acquaintance. After brooding a day or two on this idea he procured a sheet of the cheapest note-paper and sat down in his bedroom, high up at Chaffey's, to compose a letter for his daughter's behoof.

"DEAR POLLY,

"I write you these few lines to say that the more I think about you and your way of carrying on the less I like the look of it, and the sooner I make that plain to you the better for both of us, and I'm sure you'll think the same. You are that strong-headed, my girl; but listen to the warnings of experience, who have seen a great deal of the wicked world, and cannot hope to see much more of it at my present age. There will come a day when you will wish that you could hear of me by a note to Chaffey's, but such will not be. Before it's too late I take up the pen to say these few words, which is this: I have always been a respectable and a saving man, which I hope to be until I am no more. What I mean to say is this, Chaffey's is not what it used to be. But I have laid by, and when it comes to the solemn hour then Mr. Walker has promised to make my will. All I want to say is that there may be more than you think for and if you are respectable I think it most likely all will be yours. But listen to this, if you disgrace yourself, my girl, not one halfpenny nor yet one sixpenny piece will you receive from

"Your affectionate father

"EBENEZER SPARKES

"P.S.—This is wrote in a very serious mind."

This epistle at once pleased and angered Polly. Though a greedy she was not a mercenary young woman; she had little cunning, and her vulgar ambitions were consistent with a good deal of honest feeling. To do her justice, she had never considered the possibility that her father might have money to bequeath; his disclosure surprised her, and caused her to reflect for the first time that Chaffey's head waiter had long held a tolerably lucrative position, whilst his expenses must have been trivial; so much the better for her. On the other hand, she strongly resented his suspicions and warnings. In the muddled obscurity of Polly's consciousness there was a something which stood for womanly pride. She knew very well what dangers perpetually surrounded her, and she contrasted herself with the girls who weakly, or recklessly, threw themselves away. Divided thus between injury and gratitude she speedily answered her father's letter, writing upon a sheet of scented grass-green note-paper, deeply ribbed, which made her pen blot, splutter, and sprawl far more than it would have done on a smooth surface.

"DEAR DAD,

"In reply to yours, what I have to say is, Aunt Louisa and Mrs. Bubb are nasty cats, and I don't think them for making a bother. It is very kind of you about your will, though I'm sure, if you believe me, I don't want not yet to see you in your grave; and what I do think is, you might have a better opinion of your daughter and not think all the bad things you can turn your mind to. And if it is me that dies first, you will be sorry for the wrong you done me. So I will say no more, dear dad

"From your loving

"POLLY"

CHAPTER VII

POLLY'S WRATH

Polly posted her letter on the way to the theatre. This evening she had a private engagement for ten o'clock, and on setting forth to the appointed place she looked carefully about her to make sure that no one watched or followed her. Christopher Parish was not the only young man who had a habit of standing to wait for her at the theatre door. Upon him she could lay her commands with some assurance that they would be observed, but others were less submissive, and at times had given her trouble. To be sure, she could always get rid of importunate persons by the use of her special gift, that primitive sarcasm which few cared to face for more than a minute or two; but with admirers Polly wished to be as far as possible gracious, never coming to extremities with one of them until she was quite certain that she thoroughly disliked him. Finding the coast clear (which after all slightly disappointed her) she walked sharply into another street, where she hailed a passing hansom, and was driven to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Here, on the quiet pavement shadowed by the College of Surgeons, she lingered in expectancy. Ten was striking, but she looked in vain for the figure she would recognize—that of a well-dressed, middle-aged man, with a white silk comforter about his neck, and drawn up so as to hide his mouth. Twice she had met him here, and on each occasion he was waiting for her when she arrived. Five minutes passed—ten minutes. She grew very impatient and, as a necessary consequence, very angry. To avoid unpleasant attention from the few people who walked by, she had to pace backwards and forwards as if going about her business. When the clocks chimed the first quarter Polly was in a turmoil of anger, blended with disappointment and apprehension. She could not have made a mistake. The message she had received was "W. S. T.," which meant "Wednesday same time." Some accident must have interfered. At twenty minutes past ten she had lost all hope. She must go home, and wait for a possible communication on the morrow.

Swinging her skirts, clenching her fists, and talking silently at a great rate, she walked in the direction of Chancery Lane. At a corner someone going in the opposite direction caught sight of her and stopped. Polly was so preoccupied that she would not have noticed the figure had it merely passed; by stopping it drew her attention, and she beheld Christopher Parish.

"Why, Miss Sparkes!"

He held out his hand, but to no purpose. Polly had her eyes fixed upon him, and they flashed with hostility.

"What do you mean by it?"

"Mean by what?"

The young man was astonished; his hand dropped, and he trembled before her.

"How dare you spy after me? Nasty little wretch!"

"Spy after you, Miss Sparkes? Why, I hadn't the least idea of anything of the kind; I swear I hadn't! I was just taking a walk—"

"Oh, yes! Of course! You're always taking a walk, aren't you? And you always come just this way 'cause it's nice and convenient for Lambeth Road, ain't it? I've a good mind to call a p'liceman and give you in charge for stopping me in the street!"

"Well, did ever anybody hear such a thing as this?" exclaimed Mr. Parish, faint in voice and utterly at a loss for protestations at all effective. "I tell you I was only taking a walk—that's to say, I've been with a friend."

"A friend? Oh, yes, of course. What friend?"

"It's somebody you don't know; his name—"

"Oh, of course, I don't know him! And I don't know you either after to-night, so just remember that, Mr. Parish. The idea! If I can't take two steps without being followed and spied upon! And you call yourself a gentleman. Get out of my way, please. If you want to follow and spy, you're quite at liberty to do so. P'r'aps it'll ease your nasty little mind. Don't talk to me! What business have you got to stop me in the street, I'd like to know? If you're not careful I shall send a complaint to your employers, and then you'll have plenty of time to go taking walks."

She turned from him and pursued her way, but not so quickly as before. Christopher, limp with misery, tried to move off in another direction, but in spite of himself he was drawn after her. By Chancery Lane and along the Strand he kept her in sight, often with difficulty, for he durst not draw nearer than some twenty yards. At Charing Cross she stopped, and by her movements showed that she was looking for an omnibus. Parish longed to approach, quivered with the ever-recurrent impulse, but his fear prevailed. In a more lucid state of mind he would probably have remarked that Polly allowed a great many omnibuses to go by, and that she was surely waiting much longer than she need have done. But at length she jumped in and disappeared, whereupon Mr. Parish spent all the money he had with him on a large brandy and soda, hoping it would make him drunk.

The door of the house in Kennington Road stood open; in the passage Mr. Gammon and Mr. Cheeseman were conversing genially. They nodded to Polly, but did not speak. Passing them to the head of the kitchen stairs she called to Mrs. Bubb, and that lady's voice summoned her to descend.

"Are you alone?" asked Miss Sparkes sharply.

"There's only Mrs. Cheeseman."

Polly went down into the kitchen, where Mrs. Cheeseman, a stout woman of slatternly appearance, was sitting with her legs crossed and a plate of shrimps in her lap.

"Have a srimp, Polly?" began Mrs. Bubb, anxious to dismiss the memory of recent discord.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bubb, if I have a fancy for srimps I can afford to buy them for myself."

"Well, you *are* nasty! Ain't she real obstropolous, Mrs. Cheeseman? I never knew a nastier-tempered girl in all my life, that I never did. There's actially no living with her."

"Now set down, Polly," urged the stout woman in an unctuous voice. "Set down, do, an' tike things easy. You'll worrit your sweet self to death before you're many years older if you go on like this."

"I'm much obliged to you, Mrs. Cheeseman," answered Polly, holding herself very stiff; "but I didn't come here to set down, nor to talk neither. But I'm glad you're here, because you'll be a witness to what I say. I've come to give Mrs. Bubb a week's notice. She's often enough told me that she wants to keep her house respectable, and I'm sure she'll be glad to get rid of people as don't suit her. It's the first time I was ever told that I disgraced a 'ouse, and I hope it'll be the last time too. When I pay my rent to-morrow morning you'll please to understand, Mrs. Bubb, that I've given a week's notice. I may be a disgrace, but I dare say there's people as won't be ashamed to let me a room. And that's what I came to say, and now I've said it, and Mrs. Cheeseman is a witness."

This was spoken so rapidly that it left Polly breathless and with a very high colour. The elder women looked at each other, and Mrs. Cheeseman, with a shrimp in her mouth, resumed the attempt at pacification.

"Now, see 'ere, Polly. You're a young gyell, my dear, and a 'andsome gyell, as we all know, and you've only one fault, which there ain't no need to mention it. And we're all fond of you, Polly, that's the fact. Ain't we all fond of her, Mrs. Bubb?"

"Oh, yes, she's very fond of me!" exclaimed the girl. "And so is my Aunt Louisa. And to show it they go telling everybody that I ain't respectable, that I'm a disgrace to a decent 'ouse. D'you think I'll stand it?" Of a sudden she changed from irony to fierceness. "What do you mean by it, Mrs. Bubb? Did you never hear of people being prosecuted for taking away people's characters? Just you mind what you're about, Mrs. Bubb. I give you fair warning, and that's all I have to say to you."

Having relieved her feelings with these and a few more verbal missiles, Polly ran up the kitchen steps. In the passage the two men were still conversing; at sight of Polly they stopped with an abruptness which did not escape her observation. No doubt, she said to herself, they had been talking about her. No doubt, too, they had their reasons for letting her go by as before without a word. Only when she was half-way up the first flight of stairs did Mr. Cheeseman call to her a "Goodnight, Miss Sparkes," to which she made no reply whatever.

On the morrow she called at the little stationer's shop, but no letter awaited her. She decided to be again at the rendezvous that evening, lest there should have been some mistake in her cipher message; but she lingered near the College of Surgeons in vain. Polly's heart sank as she went home, for to-night there was no one to quarrel with. Mrs. Bubb and all the lodgers had shown that they meant to hold aloof; not even Moggie would look at her or speak a word. It was quite an unprecedented state of things, and Polly found it disagreeable.

There was only one consolation, and that a poor one. She had received a letter from Christopher Parish, a letter of abject remonstrance and entreaty. He grovelled at her feet. He talked frantically of poison and the river. If she would but meet him and hear him in his own defence! And Polly quite meaning to do so, gave herself the pleasure of appearing obdurate for a couple of days.

At the theatre she examined every row of spectators in stalls and dress-circle, having her own reason for thinking that she might discover certain face. But no such fortune befell her, and still no letter came.

At home she suffered increasing discomfort. For one thing she had to seek her meals in the nearest coffee-shop instead of going down into Mrs. Bubb's kitchen and gossiping as she ate at the family deal table, amid the dirt and disorder which custom had made pleasant. When in the house she locked herself in her bedroom, reading the kind of print that interested her, or lying in sullen idleness on the bed. Numerous as were her acquaintances elsewhere, they did not compensate her for the loss of domestic habit. As the week drew on she bethought herself that she must look for new lodgings. In giving notice to Mrs. Bubb she had not believed for a moment that it would come to this she felt, sure that her old friend would make up the quarrel and persuade her to stay. Nothing of the kind; for once she was taken most literally at her word. There were moments when Polly felt disposed to cry.

It vexed her much more than she would have thought to miss the jocose greetings of her neighbor Mr. Gammon. As usual he sang in his bedroom of a morning, as usual he shouted orders and questions to Moggie, but for her he had never a word. She listened for him as he came out of the room, and once so far humbled herself as to affect a cough in his bearing. Mr. Gammon paid no attention.

Then she raged at him—of course, *sotto voce*. Many were the phrases of abuse softly hurled at him as he passed her door. The worst of it was that none of them seemed really applicable; her vision of the man defeated all such contumely. She had never disliked Mr. Gammon; oddly enough, she seemed to think of him with a more decided friendliness now that his conduct demanded her enmity. She asked herself whether he really believed any harm of her. It looked very much as if he did, and the thought sometimes kept her awake for fully a quarter of an hour.

It was the last day but one of her week. To-morrow she must either submit to the degradation of begging Mrs. Bubb's leave to remain, or pack her boxes and have them removed before nightfall. Worry had ended by giving her a slight headache, a very rare thing indeed. Moreover, it rained, and breakfast was only obtainable by walking some distance.

"Oh, the beasts!" Polly exclaimed to herself, as she pulled on her boots, meaning the inhabitants of the house all together.

Mr. Gammon opened his door and shouted down the staircase.

"Moggie! Fry me three eggs this morning with the bacon—do you hear?"

Three eggs! Fried with bacon! And all comfortably set out at the end of the kitchen table. And to think that she might be going down to breakfast at the same time, with Mr. Gammon's jokes for a relish!

"Oh, the wretches! The mean, selfish brutes!"

She stamped about the floor to ease her nerves as she put on a common hat and an old jacket. She unlocked her door with violence, banged it open, and slammed it to again. From the staircase window she saw that the rain was falling more heavily, and she could not wait, for she felt hungry—after hearing about those three eggs. If she met anyone down below!

And, as chance had it, she met Mrs. Cheeseman just coming up to her room from the kitchen with a dish of sausages. The woman grinned and turned her head away. Polly had never been so tempted to commit an assault; she thought with a burning brain how effective would be one smart stroke on the dish of sausages with the handle of her umbrella.

Still hot from this encounter in the passage she came face to face with Mrs. Bubb. The landlady seemed to hesitate, but before Polly had gone by she addressed her with exaggerated politeness.

"Good morning, Miss Sparkes. So I s'pose we're losing you to-morrow?"

"Yes, you are," Polly replied, from a parched throat, glaring at her enemy.

"Oh, then I'll put the card up!"

"Do! I wouldn't lose no time about it. And listen to this, Mrs. Bubb. Next time you see your friend Mrs. Clover, you may tell her that if she wants to know where her precious 'usband is she's not to ask *me*, 'cos I wouldn't let her know, not if she was on her death-bed!"

Having uttered this surprising message, with point and emphasis worthy of its significance, Polly hastened from the house. And Mrs. Bubb stood looking after her in bewilderment.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. GAMMON'S RESOLVE

Convinced that his life was blighted, Mr. Gammon sang and whistled with more than usual vivacity as he dressed each morning. It was not in his nature to despond; he had received many a knock-down blow, and always came up fresher after it. Mrs. Clover's veto upon his tender hopes with regard to Minnie had not only distressed, but greatly surprised him; for during the last few months he had often said to himself that, whether Minnie favoured his suit or not, her mother's goodwill was a certainty. His advances had been of the most delicate, no word of distinct wooing had passed his lips; but he thought of Minnie a great deal, and came to the decision that in her the hopes of his life were centred. It might be that Minnie had no inkling of his intentions; she was so modest, so unlike the everyday girls who tittered and ogled with every marriageable man; on that very account he had made her his ideal. And Mrs. Clover would help him as a mother best knows how. The shock of learning that Mrs. Clover would do no such thing utterly confused his mind. He still longed for Minnie, yet seemed of a sudden hopelessly remote from her. He could not determine whether he had given her up or not; he did not know whether to bow before Mrs. Clover or to protest and persevere. He liked Mrs. Clover far too much to be angry with her; he respected Minnie far too much to annoy her by an unwelcome courtship; he wished, in fact, that he had not made a fool of himself that evening, and wanted things to be as they were before.

In the meantime he occupied himself in looking out for a new engagement. Plenty were to be had, but he aimed at something better than had satisfied him hitherto. He must get a "permanency"; at his age it was time he settled into a life of respectable routine. But for his foolish habit of living from hand to mouth, now in this business, now in that, indulging his taste for variety, Mrs. Clover would never, he felt sure, have "put her foot down" in that astonishing way. The best thing he could do was to show himself in a new light.

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