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opening extract from

The History of Mr Polly

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CHAPTER I
BEGINNINGS AND THE BAZAAR

I

'Hole!' said Mr Polly, and then for a change, and with greatly increased emphasis: ''*Ole!*' He paused, and then broke out with one of his private and peculiar idioms. 'Oh! *Beastly* Silly Wheeze of a hole!'

He was sitting on a stile between two threadbare-looking fields, and suffering acutely from indigestion.

He suffered from indigestion now nearly every afternoon in his life, but as he lacked introspection he projected the associated discomfort upon the world. Every afternoon he discovered afresh that life as a whole, and every aspect of life that presented itself, was 'beastly'. And this afternoon, lured by the delusive blueness of a sky that was blue because the March wind was in the east, he had come out in the hope of snatching something of the joyousness of spring. The mysterious alchemy of mind and body refused, however, to permit any joyousness in the spring.

He had had a little difficulty in finding his cap before he came out. He wanted his cap – the new golf cap – and Mrs Polly must needs fish out his old soft brown felt hat. ''*Ere*'s your 'at,' she said, in a tone of insincere encouragement.

He had been routing among the piled newspapers under the kitchen dresser, and had turned quite hopefully and taken the thing. He put it on. But it didn't feel right. Nothing felt right. He put a trembling hand upon the crown and pressed it on his head, and tried it askew to the right, and then askew to the left.

Then the full sense of the offered indignity came home to

him. The hat masked the upper sinister quarter of his face, and he spoke with a wrathful eye regarding his wife from under the brim. In a voice thick with fury he said, 'I s'pose you'd like me to wear that silly Mud Pie[1] for ever, eh? I tell you I won't. I'm sick of it. I'm pretty near sick of everything, comes to that. . . . Hat!'

He clutched it with quivering fingers. 'Hat!' he repeated. Then he flung it to the ground, and kicked it with extraordinary fury across the kitchen. It flew up against the door and dropped to the ground with its ribbon band half off.

'Shan't go out!' he said, and sticking his hands into his jacket pockets, discovered the missing cap in the right one.

There was nothing for it but to go straight upstairs without a word, and out, slamming the shop door hard.

'Beauty!' said Mrs Polly at last to a tremendous silence, picking up and dusting the rejected headdress. 'Tantrums,' she added. 'I 'aven't patience.' And moving with the slow reluctance of a deeply offended woman, she began to pile together the simple apparatus of their recent meal, for transportation to the scullery sink.

The repast she had prepared for him did not seem to her to justify his ingratitude. There had been the cold pork from Sunday, and some nice cold potatoes, and Rashdall's Mixed Pickles,[2] of which he was inordinately fond. He had eaten three gherkins, two onions, a small cauliflower head and several capers, with every appearance of appetite, and indeed with avidity; and then there had been cold suet pudding to follow, with treacle, and then a nice bit of cheese. It was the pale, hard sort of cheese he liked; red cheese he declared was indigestible. He had also had three big slices of greyish baker's bread, and had drunk the best part of the jugful of beer. . . . But there seems to be no pleasing some people.

'Tantrums!' said Mrs Polly at the sink, struggling with the mustard on his plate, and expressing the only solution of the problem that occurred to her.

And Mr Polly sat on the stile and hated the whole scheme of life – which was at once excessive and inadequate of him. He hated Fishbourne, he hated Fishbourne High Street, he hated

his shop and his wife and his neighbours – every blessed neighbour – and with indescribable bitterness he hated himself.

'Why did I ever get in this silly Hole?' he said. 'Why did I ever?'

He sat on the stile, and looked with eyes that seemed blurred with impalpable flaws at a world in which even the spring buds were wilted, the sunlight metallic, and the shadows mixed with blue-black ink.

To the moralist I know he might have served as a figure of sinful discontent, but that is because it is the habit of moralists to ignore material circumstances – if, indeed, one may speak of a recent meal as a circumstance – seeing that Mr Polly was circum.[3] Drink, indeed, our teachers will criticize nowadays both as regards quantity and quality, but neither church nor state nor school will raise a warning finger between a man and his hunger and his wife's catering. So on nearly every day in his life Mr Polly fell into a violent rage and hatred against the outer world in the afternoon, and never suspected that it was this inner world to which I am with such masterly delicacy alluding, that was thus reflecting its sinister disorder upon the things without. It is a pity that some human beings are not more transparent. If Mr Polly, for example, had been transparent,[4] or even passably translucent, then perhaps he might have realized, from the Laocoon[5] struggle he would have glimpsed, that indeed he was not so much a human being as a civil war.

Wonderful things must have been going on inside Mr Polly. Oh! wonderful things. It must have been like a badly managed industrial city during a period of depression; agitators, acts of violence, strikes, the forces of law and order doing their best, rushings to and fro, upheavals, the 'Marseillaise', tumbrils, the rumble and the thunder of the tumbrils. . . .

I do not know why the east wind aggravates life to unhealthy people. It made Mr Polly's teeth seem loose in his head, and his skin feel like a misfit, and his hair a dry stringy exasperation. . . .

Why cannot doctors give us an antidote to the east wind?

'Never have the sense to get your hair cut till it's too long,' said Mr Polly, catching sight of his shadow, 'you blighted,

desgenerated[6] Paintbrush! Ugh!' and he flattened down the projecting tails with an urgent hand.

2

Mr Polly's age was exactly thirty-five years and a half. He was a short, compact figure, and a little inclined to a localized embonpoint. His face was not unpleasing; the features fine, but a trifle too large about the lower half of his face, and a trifle too pointed about the nose to be classically perfect. The corners of his sensitive mouth were depressed. His eyes were ruddy brown and troubled, and the left one was round with more of wonder in it than its fellow. His complexion was dull and yellowish. That, as I have explained, on account of those civil disturbances. He was, in the technical sense of the word, clean-shaved, with a small fallow patch under the right ear and a cut on the chin. His brow had the little puckerings of a thoroughly discontented man, little wrinklings and lumps, particularly over his right eye, and he sat with his hands in his pockets, a little askew on the stile, and swung one leg.

'Hole!' he repeated presently.

He broke into a quavering song: 'Roöötten Beëëastly Silly Hole!'

His voice thickened with rage, and the rest of his discourse was marred by an unfortunate choice of epithets.

He was dressed in a shabby black morning coat and vest; the braid that bound these garments was a little loose in places. His collar was chosen from stock and with projecting corners, what was called in those days a 'wing-poke'; that and his tie, which was new and loose and rich in colouring, had been selected to encourage and stimulate customers – for he dealt in gentlemen's outfitting. His golf cap, which was also from stock and aslant over his eye, gave his misery a desperate touch. He wore brown leather boots – because he hated the smell of blacking.

Perhaps after all it was not simply indigestion that troubled him.

Behind the superficialities of Mr Polly's being moved a larger and vaguer distress. The elementary education he had acquired[7]

had left him with the impression that arithmetic was a fluky science and best avoided in practical affairs, but even the absence of book-keeping and a total inability to distinguish between capital and interest, could not blind him for ever to the fact that the little shop in the High Street was not paying. An absence of returns, a constriction of credit, a depleted till – the most valiant resolves to keep smiling could not prevail for ever against these insistent phenomena. One might bustle about in the morning before dinner and in the afternoon after tea and forget that huge dark cloud of insolvency that gathered and spread in the background, but it was part of the desolation of these afternoon periods, those grey spaces of time after meals when all one's courage had descended to the unseen battles of the pit, that life seemed stripped to the bone and one saw with a hopeless clearness.

Let me tell the history of Mr Polly from the cradle to these present difficulties.

> First the infant, mewling and puking in its nurse's arms.[8]

There had been a time when two people had thought Mr Polly the most wonderful and adorable thing in the world, had kissed his toenails, saying myum, myum! and marvelled at the exquisite softness and delicacy of his hair, had called to one another to remark the peculiar distinction with which he bubbled, had disputed whether the sound he had made was just da, da, or truly and intentionally dadda, had washed him in the utmost detail, and wrapped him up in soft warm blankets, and smothered him with kisses. A regal time that was, and four-and-thirty years ago; and a merciful forgetfulness barred Mr Polly from ever bringing its careless luxury, its autocratic demands and instant obedience, into contrast with his present condition of life. These two people had worshipped him from the crown of his head to the soles of his exquisite feet. And also they had fed him rather unwisely, for no one had ever troubled to teach his mother anything about the mysteries of a child's upbringing – though, of course, the monthly nurse and the charwoman gave some valuable hints – and by his fifth birthday the perfect

rhythms of his nice new interior were already darkened with perplexity. . . .

His mother died when he was seven. He began only to have distinctive memories of himself in the time when his education had already begun.

I remember seeing a picture of Education – in some place. I think it was Education, but quite conceivably it represented the Empire teaching her Sons, and I have a strong impression that it was a wall painting upon some public building in Manchester or Birmingham or Glasgow, but very possibly I am mistaken about that. It represented a glorious woman, with a wise and fearless face, stooping over her children, and pointing them to far horizons. The sky displayed the pearly warmth of a summer dawn, and all the painting was marvellously bright as if with the youth and hope of the delicately beautiful children in the foreground. She was telling them, one felt, of the great prospect of life that opened before them, of the splendours of sea and mountain they might travel and see, the joys of skill they might acquire, of effort and the pride of effort, and the devotions and nobilities it was theirs to achieve. Perhaps even she whispered of the warm triumphant mystery of love that comes at last to those who have patience and unblemished hearts. . . . She was reminding them of their great heritage as English children, rulers of more than one-fifth of mankind, of the obligation to do and be the best that such a pride of empire entails, of their essential nobility and knighthood, and of the restraints and charities and disciplined strength that is becoming in knights and rulers. . . .

The education of Mr Polly did not follow this picture very closely. He went for some time to a National School, which was run on severely economical lines to keep down the rates, by a largely untrained staff; he was set sums to do that he did not understand, and that no one made him understand; he was made to read the Catechism and Bible with the utmost industry and an entire disregard of punctuation or significance; caused to imitate writing copies and drawing copies; given object lessons upon sealing wax and silkworms and potato bugs and ginger and iron and suchlike things; taught various other subjects his

mind refused to entertain; and afterwards, when he was about twelve, he was jerked by his parents to 'finish off' in a private school of dingy aspect and still dingier pretensions, where there were no object lessons, and the studies of book-keeping and French were pursued (but never effectually overtaken) under the guidance of an elderly gentleman, who wore a nondescript gown and took snuff, wrote copperplate, explained nothing, and used a cane with remarkable dexterity and gusto.

Mr Polly went into the National School at six, and he left the private school at fourteen, and by that time his mind was in much the same state that you would be in, dear reader, if you were operated upon for appendicitis by a well-meaning, boldly enterprising, but rather overworked and underpaid butcher boy, who was superseded towards the climax of the operation by a left-handed clerk of high principles but intemperate habits – that is to say, it was in a thorough mess. The nice little curiosities and willingness of a child were in a jumbled and thwarted condition, hacked and cut about – the operators had left, so to speak, all their sponges and ligatures in the mangled confusion – and Mr Polly had lost much of his natural confidence, so far as figures and sciences and languages and the possibilities of learning things were concerned. He thought of the present world no longer as a wonderland of experiences, but as geography and history, as the repeating of names that were hard to pronounce, and lists of products and populations and heights and lengths, and as lists and dates – oh! and Boredom indescribable. He thought of religion as the recital of more or less incomprehensible words that were hard to remember, and of the Divinity as of a limitless Being having the nature of a schoolmaster and making infinite rules, known and unknown, rules that were always ruthlessly enforced, and with an infinite capacity for punishment and – most horrible of all to think of – limitless powers of espial. (So to the best of his ability he did not think of that unrelenting eye.) He was uncertain about the spelling and pronunciation of most of the words in our beautiful but abundant and perplexing tongue – that especially was a pity, because words attracted him, and under happier conditions he might have used them well – he was always doubtful whether

it was eight sevens or nine eights that was sixty-three[9] (he knew no method for settling the difficulty), and he thought the merit of a drawing consisted in the care with which it was 'lined in'. 'Lining in' bored him beyond measure.

But the indigestions of mind and body that were to play so large a part in his subsequent career were still only beginning. His liver and his gastric juice, his wonder and imagination kept up a fight against the things that threatened to overwhelm soul and body together. Outside the regions devastated by the school curriculum he was still intensely curious. He had cheerful phases of enterprise, and about thirteen he suddenly discovered reading and its joys. He began to read stories voraciously, and books of travel, provided they were also adventurous. He got these chiefly from the local institute, and he also 'took in' irregularly, but thoroughly, one of those inspiring weeklies that dull people used to call 'penny dreadfuls',[10] admirable weeklies crammed with imagination that the cheap boys' 'comics' of today have replaced. At fourteen, when he emerged from the valley of the shadow[11] of education, there survived something – indeed it survived still, obscured and thwarted, at five-and-thirty – that pointed, not with a visible and prevailing finger like the finger of that beautiful woman in the picture, but pointed nevertheless, to the idea that there was interest and happiness in the world. Deep in the being of Mr Polly, deep in that darkness, like a creature which has been beaten about the head and left for dead but still lives, crawled a persuasion that over and above the things that are jolly and 'bits of all right', there was beauty, there was delight; that somewhere – magically inaccessible, perhaps, but still somewhere – were pure and easy and joyous states of body and mind.

He would sneak out on moonless winter nights and stare up at the stars, and afterwards find it difficult to tell his father where he had been.

He would read tales about hunters and explorers, and imagine himself riding mustangs as fleet as the wind across the prairies of Western America, or coming as a conquering and adored white man into the swarming villages of Central Africa. He shot bears with a revolver – a cigarette in the other

hand – and made a necklace of their teeth and claws for the chief's beautiful young daughter. Also he killed a lion with a pointed stake, stabbing through the beast's heart as it stood over him.

He thought it would be splendid to be a diver and go down into the dark green mysteries of the sea.

He led stormers against well-nigh impregnable forts, and died on the ramparts at the moment of victory. (His grave was watered by a nation's tears.)

He rammed and torpedoed ships, one against ten.

He was beloved by queens in barbaric lands, and reconciled whole nations to the Christian faith.

He was martyred, and took it very calmly and beautifully – but only once or twice after the Revivalist week. It did not become a habit with him.

He explored the Amazon, and found, newly exposed by the fall of a great tree, a rock of gold.

Engaged in these pursuits he would neglect the work immediately in hand, sitting somewhat slackly on the form and projecting himself in a manner tempting to a schoolmaster with a cane. . . . And twice he had books confiscated.

Recalled to the realities of life, he would rub himself or sigh as the occasion required, and resume his attempts to write as good as copperplate. He hated writing; the ink always crept up his fingers, and the smell of ink offended him. And he was filled with unexpressed doubts. *Why* should writing slope down from right to left? *Why* should downstrokes be thick and upstrokes thin? *Why* should the handle of one's pen point over one's right shoulder?

His copy books towards the end foreshadowed his destiny and took the form of commercial documents. *'Dear Sir,'* they ran, *'Referring to your esteemed order of the 26th ult.,*[12] *we beg to inform you,'* and so on.

The compression of Mr Polly's mind and soul in the educational institutions of his time was terminated abruptly by his father, between his fourteenth and fifteenth birthday. His father – who had long since forgotten the time when his son's little limbs seemed to have come straight from God's hand, and

when he had kissed five minute toenails in a rapture of loving tenderness – remarked—

'It's time that dratted boy did something for a living.'

And a month or so later Mr Polly began that career in business that led him at last to the sole proprietorship of a bankrupt outfitter's shop – and to the stile on which he was sitting.

3

Mr Polly was not naturally interested in hosiery and gentlemen's outfitting. At times, indeed, he urged himself to a spurious curiosity about that trade, but presently something more congenial came along and checked the effort. He was apprenticed in one of those large, rather low-class establishments which sell everything from pianos and furniture to books and millinery, a department store, in fact the Port Burdock Drapery Bazaar at Port Burdock, one of the three townships that are grouped round the Port Burdock naval dockyards. There he remained six years. He spent most of the time inattentive to business, in a sort of uncomfortable happiness, increasing his indigestion.

On the whole he preferred business to school; the hours were longer, but the tension was not nearly so great. The place was better aired, you were not kept in for no reason at all, and the cane was not employed. You watched the growth of your moustache with interest and impatience, and mastered the beginnings of social intercourse. You talked and found there were things amusing to say. Also you had regular pocket money, and a voice in the purchase of your clothes, and presently a small salary. And there were girls! And friendship! In the retrospect Port Burdock sparkled with the facets of quite a cluster of remembered jolly times.

('Didn't save much money, though,' said Mr Polly.)

The first apprentices' dormitory was a long, bleak room with six beds, six chests of drawers and looking glasses, and a number of boxes of wood or tin; it opened into a still longer and bleaker room of eight beds, and this into a third apartment with yellow-grained paper and American cloth tables,[13] which

was the dining room by day, and the men's sitting and smoking room after nine. Here Mr Polly, who had been an only child, first tasted the joys of social intercourse. To begin with, there were attempts to bully him on account of his refusal to consider face-washing a diurnal duty, but two fights with the apprentices next above him established a useful reputation for choler, and the presence of girl apprentices in the shop somehow raised his standard of cleanliness to a more acceptable level. He didn't, of course, have very much to do with the feminine staff in his department, but he spoke to them casually as he traversed foreign parts of the Bazaar, or got out of their way politely, or helped them to lift down heavy boxes, and on such occasions he felt their scrutiny. Except in the course of business or at meal times the men and women of the establishment had very little opportunity of meeting; the men were in their rooms and the girls in theirs. Yet these feminine creatures, at once so near and so remote, affected him profoundly. He would watch them going to and fro, and marvel secretly at the beauty of their hair, or the roundness of their necks, or the warm softness of their cheeks, or the delicacy of their hands. He would fall into passions for them at dinner time, and try to show devotions by his manner of passing the bread and margarine at tea. There was a very fair-haired, fair-skinned apprentice in the adjacent haberdashery to whom he said 'good morning' every morning, and for a period it seemed to him the most significant event in his day. When she said, 'I do hope it will be fine tomorrow,' he felt it marked an epoch. He had had no sisters, and was innately disposed to worship womankind. But he did not betray as much to Platt and Parsons.

To Platt and Parsons he affected an attitude of seasoned depravity towards the creatures. Platt and Parsons were his contemporary apprentices in departments of the drapery shop, and the three were drawn together into a close friendship by the fact that all their names began with P. They decided they were the three P's, and went about together of an evening with the bearing of desperate dogs. Sometimes when they had money they went into public houses and had drinks. Then they would become more desperate than ever, and walk along the pavement

under the gas lamps arm in arm singing. Platt had a good tenor voice and had been in a church choir, and so he led the singing. Parsons had a serviceable bellow, which roared and faded and roared again very wonderfully. Mr Polly's share was an extraordinary lowing noise, a sort of flat recitative which he called 'singing seconds'. They would have sung catches if they had known how to do it, but as it was they sang melancholy music hall songs about dying soldiers and the old folks far away.

They would sometimes go into the quieter residential quarters of Port Burdock, where policemen and other obstacles were infrequent, and really let their voices soar like hawks, and feel very happy. The dogs of the district would be stirred to hopeless emulation, and would keep it up for long after the three P's had been swallowed up by the night. One jealous brute of an Irish terrier made a gallant attempt to bite Parsons, but was beaten by numbers and solidarity.

The three P's took the utmost interest in each other, and found no other company so good. They talked about everything in the world; and would go on talking in their dormitory after the gas was out, until the other men were reduced to throwing boots. They skulked from their departments in the slack hours of the afternoon to gossip in the packing room of the warehouse. On Sundays and Bank Holidays they went for long walks together, talking.

Platt was white-faced and dark, and disposed to undertones and mystery, and a curiosity about society and the *demi-monde*. He kept himself *au courant* by reading a penny paper of infinite suggestion called *Modern Society*. Parsons was of an ampler build, already promising fatness, with curly hair and a lot of rolling, rollicking, curly features, and a large, blob-shaped nose. He had a great memory, and a real interest in literature. He knew great portions of Shakespeare and Milton by heart, and would recite them at the slightest provocation. He read everything he could get hold of, and if he liked it he read it aloud; it did not matter who else liked it. At first Mr Polly was disposed to be suspicious of this literature, but he was carried away by Parsons's enthusiasm. The three P's went to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Port Burdock Theatre Royal, and hung

over the gallery fascinated. After that they made a sort of password of, 'Do you bite your thumbs at Us, Sir?'[14] To which the countersign was, 'We bite our Thumbs.'

For weeks the glory of Shakespeare's Verona lit Mr Polly's life. He walked as though he carried a sword at his side and swung a mantle from his shoulders. He went through the grimy streets of Port Burdock with his eye on the first-floor windows – looking for balconies. A ladder in the yard flooded his mind with romantic ideas. Then Parsons discovered an Italian writer, whose name Mr Polly rendered as 'Bocashieu';[15] and after some excursions into that author's remains, the talk of Parsons became infested with the word 'amours', and Mr Polly would stand in front of his hosiery fixtures trifling with paper and string, and thinking of perennial picnics under dark olive trees in the everlasting sunshine of Italy.

And about that time it was that all three P's adopted turn-down collars and large, loose, artistic silk ties, which they tied very much on one side, and wore with an air of defiance; and a certain swashbuckling carriage.

And then came the glorious revelation of that great Frenchman whom Mr Polly called 'Rabooloose'.[16] The three P's thought the birth feast of Gargantua the most glorious piece of writing in the world – and I am not certain they were wrong; and on wet Sunday evenings, when there was danger of hymn-singing, they would get Parsons to read it aloud.

Towards the several members of the YMCA[17] who shared the dormitory, the three P's always maintained a sarcastic and defiant attitude.

'We have got a perfect right to do what we like in our corner,' Platt maintained. 'You do what you like in yours.'

'But the language,' objected Morrison, the white-faced, earnest-eyed improver,[18] who was leading a profoundly religious life under great difficulties.

'*Language*, man!' roared Parsons; 'why, it's *LITERATURE*!'

'Sunday isn't the time for Literature.'

'It's the only time we've got. And besides—'

The horrors of religious controversy would begin. . . .