

Smethurstses

Frances Hodgson Burnett

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SMETHURSTSES, mum -- yes, mum, on accounts of me bein' Smethurst an' the wax-works mine. Fifteen year I've been in the business, an' if I live fifteen year more I shall have been in it thirty; for wax-works is the kind of a business as a man gets used to and friendly with, after a manner. Lor' bless you! there's no tellin' how much company them there wax-works is. I've picked a companion or so out of the collection. Why, there's Lady Jane Grey, as is readin' her Greek Testyment; when her works is in order an' she's set a-goin', liftin' her eyes gentle-like from her book, I could fancy as she knew every trouble I'd had an' was glad as they was over. And there's the Royal Fam'ly on the dais an' a settin' together as free and home-like and smilin' as if they wasn't nothin' more than flesh an' blood like you an' me an' not a crown among 'em. Why, they've actually been a comfort to me. I've set an' took my tea on my knee on the step there many a time, because it seemed cheerfuller than in my own little place at the back. If I was a talkin' man I might object to the stillness an' a general fixedness in the gaze, as perhaps is an objection as wax-works is open to as a rule, though I can't say as it ever impressed me as a very affable gentleman once said it impressed him.

"Smethurst," says he, "you must have a blamed clear conscience (though, bein' rather free-spoken, `blamed' was not the precise word employed) -- you must have a blamed clear conscience or I'm blamed if you could stand so many blamed pair of staring eyes gimleting you year in an' year out. An' as to them with works," says he, "they're worse than the others, for even if they turn away a minute they always turn back again, as if they wouldn't trust you out of their sight."

But somehow, I never thought of it in that way, an' as to not liking the quiet, why shouldn't I? In a general way I haven't got no more to say than they have, and so it suits me well enough. I will own though, as I've never felt particular comfortable in the Chamber of Horrors, an' never wouldn't have had one, but even in a small collection like mine the public demands it, an' wouldn't hear of bein' satisfied without one, "for" says they, "what's the use of a wax-works without Manning an' them, an' the prisoners in the dock an' the knife as the young woman was cut up in pieces with?" So I was obliged to have the little back room hung with black, like Madame Tussaud's in a small way, and fitted up with murders and a model of the guillotine and two or three heads of parties as come to a untimely end in the French Revolution. But it aint my taste for all that, and there's always a heaviness in the air as makes me low-like an' I'm glad to turn the key on 'em at night an' leave 'em to have a rest from the stares an' talk an' stirrin' up of their sin, an' the shame an' agony of their dreadful deaths. Good Lord! it turns me sick to think of them havin' been real livin' creatures with mothers an' wives an' friends, some of 'em perhaps livin' to-day all crushed an' blasted with the horror they've went through.

But that aint the story as I've half-way promised to tell you. If you really want to hear it, mum, I don't mind tellin' it, though I don't know as it will be interestin' -- I've often wondered if it would be as interestin' to outsiders as it was to me, bein' as it's the story of a friend of mine as was something like me an' likewise had a wax-works. Would you mind settin' there, mum, next to the Japanese party? This lady's works was broke an' her bein' absent at the cleaner's leaves the chair vacant most convenient.

His name it was Joe -- this acquaintance of mine, an', as I said, he was somethin' of my build an' temper. He was a quiet chap an' a lonely chap, an' London was his native place -- leastways, I don't see as it could have been no nativer than it was, bein' as he was laid at the door of a London foundlin' when he wasn't no more than a few days old, and London fed him and clothed him until he was big enough to take care of hisself. He hadn't a easy life of it as you may be sure. He wasn't handsome nor yet sharp, he couldn't answer back nor yet give cheek; he could only take it, which he had to do frequent.

There was plenty of folks as give him the character of a nat'ral born fool, an' they may have been right. They said as no chap as had his right senses could be as good-natured an' ready to forgive a injury an' above all as slow to suspect as one was bein' done him. I think they thought his bein' slow to suspect harm a-goin' on was the best

proof of his bein' a fool, — an' he wasn't ready enough with his tongue to argy the point. He wasn't never good at a argyment — Joe wasn't.

Well, he growed up, an' he did first one thing an' then another, until at last he was picked up by a travelin' wax-works showman as had just such a collection as this here of mine — havin' in it just such a Lady Jane Grey, and likewise a sim'lar Royal Fam'ly.

"Well," says the wax-works man, when Joe first goes to ask for work, "what can you do?"

"Not much, perhaps," says Joe; "leastways, I've not been in the business before; but if you'll give me a job, Mister, I can do what I'm told."

The showman gives him a look from head to foot.

"Well," says he, "at all events, you're not one of them blarsted sharp uns as knows everything an' can't dust a figger without knockin' its head off. I've had enough of them sort" — savage like — "a-ruinin' my Richard Cure the Lion, an' a-settin' Mary Queen o' Scottses insides all wrong" (which was what his last young man had been adoin').

"No," answers Joe, slow an' serious, "I don't think as I'd do that."

The showman gives him another look, an' seems sort of satisfied.

"Go inside an' get your dinner," he says. "I'll try you just because you haven't got so much cheek."

And he did try him, an' pretty well they got on together, after a while. Slowness is not a objection in a wax-works as much as in a business as is less delicater. I've thought myself as p'r'aps wax-works has their feelin's, an' knows who means respec'ful by 'em an' who doesn't, an' this Joe meant respec'ful, an' never took no liberties as he could help. He dusted 'em reg'lar, an' wound 'em up an' set 'em goin' accordin' to rules; but he never tried no larks on 'em, an' that was why he gets along so well with his master.

"That other chap was too fond of his larks," says the showman, kind of gloomy whenever he mentions the first young man. He never forgave him to the day of his death for openin' the collection one day with Charles the Secondses helmet on Mrs. Hannah Mooreses head, an' Daniel in the Lions' Den in William Pennses spectacles, with some other party's umbrella under his arm.

But Joe weren't of a witty turn, an' not given to jokes, which is not suited to wax-works as a rule, collections bein' mostly serious. An', as I say, him an' his master got along so well that one day, after they had been together a year or so, the showman, he says to him, "Joe," says he, "I'm blessed if I'd mind takin' you in as a partner." An' that very mornin' he has the reg'lar papers made out, an' the thing was done without no more said about it. An' partners they was til he died, which happened very unexpected — him a sayin' sudden one night when they was a-shuttin' up together, "Joe, old chap, I'm blessed if my works aint a runnin' down," an' gives one look round at the figgers, an' then drops — which the medical man said as it was dropsy of the heart. When his things was looked over, it was found he'd left everythin' to Joe except one partic'lar ugly figger, as turned his eyes with a squint an' couldn't be done nothin' with, an' him he'd left to a old maid relation as had a spite agin him; "for," says the will, "she'd ought to have him, for he's the only chap I ever see yet as could match her — let alone stand her, an' it's time she was takin' a partner, if she's goin' to." They did say as it was nearly the party's death, for, though they'd quarreled reg'lar for twenty-five years an' hated each other deadly, she'd always believed as she'd come into his belongin's if she outlived him, thinkin' as he wouldn't make no will.

Well, havin' had company for so long, it was nat'ral as Joe should feel lonely-like after this, an' now an' then get a trifle down-hearted. He didn't find travelin' all alone as pleasant as it had been, so when he was makin' anything at all in a place, he'd stay in it as long as he could, an' kind of try to persuade hissself as it was kind of home to him, an' he had things to hold him to it. He had a good many feelin's in secret as might have been laughed at if people had knowed 'em. He knew well enough as he wasn't the kind of chap to have a home of his own — men as has homes has wives, an' who'd have wanted to marry him, bless you — he wasn't the build as young women take to. He weren't nothin' to look at, an' he couldn't chaff, nor yet lark, nor yet be ready with his tongue. In general, young women was apt to make game of him when their sweethearts brought em' into the collection, an' there was times when a pretty, light-hearted one would put him out so as he scarcely knew the Royal Fam'ly by name, an' mixed up the Empress of the French an' Lucrecher Borgiar in the description.

So he lived on, lonesome enough, for two or three year, an' then somethin' happened. He went up to London to stay while the races was goin' on, an' one day, when the collection was pretty full, there comes in a swell party with a girl on his arm. The swell, as was a tall, fine-lookin' chap, was in high sperits, an' had just come in for the

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lark of the thing, Joe sees plain, for he were makin' his jokes free an' easy about everythin', an' laughin' fit to kill hisself every now an' then. But the girl were different; she were a little rosy thing, with round, shinin' eyes, an' a soft, little timid way with her. She laughed too, but only shy an' low, an' more because she was happy an' because the swell laughed. She wasn't the kind of young woman as the swell ought to have been a-goin' with. She was dressed in her best, an' was as pretty as a pictur'; but her clothes was all cheap, an' Joe could see as she belonged to the workin' class, an' was out for a holiday. She held close to the gentleman's arm, an' seemed half frightened, an' yet so glad an' excited that she would have minded you of a six-year-old child. It were the first time she'd ever been into a wax-works, an' things looked wonderful to her. When they come to Lady Jane Grey she was quite took with her, an' begun to ask questions in the innocentest way.

"She's one of the nobility, sir, isn't she?" she says to her companion. "Did you ever see her? Isn't she beautiful, sir?"

He laughs delighted, an' squeezes her hand a bit with his arm.

"No, Polly," he says. "I never saw her until to-day. She didn't keep her head on her shoulders long enough. It was cut off some time ago, my dear." An' then he whispers: "An' it wasn't nearly as pretty a head as yours, Polly, either."

The little girl blushes like a rose, an' tries to laugh too; but Joe knew as she'd took the words more to her innocent heart than was good for her.

"Lor' me!" she says. "What a shame it was to cut her head off, -- an' her so sweet an' quiet!"

"Yes, Polly," says the young gentleman, a-laughin' more. "Very quiet. Wax-works are, as a rule. A nice time a proprietor would have, if they were not, with such a lot of queer customers, -- Bloody Mary, for instance, and Henry the Eighth, and Nana Sahib, and John Knox, and Lucretia Borgia, -- though you don't know much of their amiable characteristics, my dear."

They went on in that way through the whole room, -- him a-jokin' an', makin' light, an' her enjoyin' herself an' admirin' everythin' she set eyes on, an' Joe a-watchin' her. He couldn't help it. Somethin' queer seemed to have took hold of him the minute he first sees her. He kep' a-wishin' as the collection was ten times as big, so as it would take longer for her to go through. He couldn't bear the thought of seein' the last of her, an' when they comes to the Russian party, as stands near the door, dressed for the winter season, -- his nose bein' protected with fur, after the fashion of the country, -- his heart were in his mouth, an' when she passed out into the crowd, he seemed to swallow it with a gulp, as took it into the heels of his boots. "Lor'!" he says, all of a tremble in his insides. I shan't never see her again, -- never!" He hadn't no spirit in him all that day, nor the next either. It was as if somethin' altogether out of common had happened, an' he couldn't never be the same man again. He were miserable, an' down an' nervous, an' there wasn't a figger in the collection as didn't seem to know it. He took to standin' at the door whenever he could, a-lookin' at the people a-passin' by. An' yet he scarcely knowed what for. If he'd seen the face he wanted to, he wouldn't 'a' dared to say a word, nor yet to move a step; an' still he was a-hungerin' day an' night for a glimpse of what couldn't be no good to him.

Well, if you'll believe me, mum, instead of gettin' easier as time went on, he got uneasier. He was as lonesome again as he had been, an' he took his tea a-settin' with the Royal Fam'ly reg'lar, -- he couldn't have swallowed it by hisself. After shuttin' up, he'd go out wanderin' in the streets melancholy and wistful like, an' one night he stops short all at once, a-feelin' hisself turn pale in consequence of it comin' to him sudden what ailed him.

"I've fell in love," says he, fearful an' respect'ful, -- "that's it, -- an' there's no help for me. I'm not the man as should have done it, for I can't look for nothin' to come out of it."

He give hisself up to it, because he didn't see no way out of it. Nobody wasn't troubled but hisself, an' so it didn't matter. He got pale an' thin, an' didn't sleep well o' nights, but there wasn't no one to bother themselves about him, -- there weren't even a soul as he could 'a' left the collection to, if he'd 'a' died.

It went pretty hard with him to leave London, an' when he did leave it, he couldn't stay away; an' I'm blessed if he didn't come back in less than six months; for, says he to hisself:

"Here's a place as is somethin' more than the others, at least, though it is in a sorrowful way, an' I'd rather as the collection would earn me a bare livin' in a side-street in London, than make money away from it. I might see her again; an', Lor' bless me! what do I want of money a-layin' back?"

Well, the very first night after he came back, he did see her again. He'd set, out the collection in the room he'd hired, an' then he'd gone out in the old wanderin' way, an' he hadn't hardly stepped into the street before he comes

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on a crowd gathered around somethin' near a lamp-post; so he stops nat'ral, an, makes inquiries. "Anybody hurt?" says he.

"No, not exactly," answers the man he'd spoke to. "It's a young woman as has fainted, I think."

He makes his way a bit nearer, an' as soon as he claps his eyes on the deathly face under the lamp-light, he sees as it's the face he's been lookin' for an' thinkin' about so long.

"It's her!" he says, so shook as he didn't know what he was doin'. "It's Polly!"

"Polly!" says the woman as was holdin' her head. "Do you know her, young man? If you do, you'd better speak to her, for she's just comin' to, poor little thing!"

He knew he couldn't explain, an' he thinks, besides, as the feelin' he had for her might make his face look friendlier than a stranger's, so he kneels down as the woman tells him, just as she opens her eyes.

The crowd seemed to frighten her, an' she began to tremble an' cry; an' so Joe speaks to her, low, an' quiet, an' respec'ful:

"Don't be afraid, miss," he says, -- "don't. You'll be well directly."

She catches hold of his hand like a frightened baby.

"Send them away!" she says. "Please, don't let them stare at me. I can't bear it!"

"Miss," says Joe, "would you mind bein' took into a collection, if this good lady would go with you?"

"A collection!" she says, all bewildered. I haven't got any money. What is it for? Oh! please make them go away!"

"Not a hat took 'round, miss," says Joe. "Oh, dear, no! I was alludin' to a wax-works which is quite convenient, an' belongs to me, an' a fire an' a cup of tea ready immediate, an' a good lady to stay with you until you feel better, -- an' all quite private."

"Take me anywhere, please," she says. "Thank you, sir. Oh! take me away."

So between them, Joe an' the good woman helps her up an' leads her to the door as was but a few steps off, an' Joe takes them in an' on to the back room, where the fire was a burnin' an' the kettle singin' an' there he has them both to sit down.

The woman makes the girl lie down on the sofa by the fire, an' she bein' weak an' wanderin' yet did as she was told without askin' a question.

"A cup of tea'll set her up," says the woman, "an' then she can tell us where she lives an' we can take her home."

Joe went about like a man in a dream. His legs was unsteady under him an' he was obliged to ask the woman to pour the water on the tea, an' while she was doin' it he takes a candle and slips into the collection secret, to make sure the Royal Fam'ly was there an' he wasn't out of his head.

The woman, havin' girls of her own, was very motherly an' handy an' did all she could, but she couldn't stay long, and after she'd given Polly her tea, she says she must go.

"An' I dare say as the young man as is so kind-hearted'll come along with me an' we'll see you home together, my dear."

They both looks at Polly then a-waitin' to see what she would say, but she only looked frightened an' the next minute hides her face in her little hands on the sofa-arm an' begins to sob.

"I haven't got no home," she says, "nor nowhere to go. What shall I do -- what shall I do?"

Then the woman looks very serious an' a bit hard-like about the mouth -- though not as hard as some might have done.

"Where's your mother?" she says, just the least short.

"I haven't none," says Polly. "I lost her a month ago." "You aint in mournin'," says the woman.

"No, ma'am," says Polly, "I couldn't afford it." "An' your father?"

But this made the poor little thing cry harder than ever. She wrung her hands an' sobbed pitiful.

"Oh, father!" she says. "Good, kind, easy father, if you was alive I wouldn't be like this. You always loved me -- always. You never was hard, father."

"What have you been livin' on?" says the woman, lookin' as if she was a-relentin'.

"I was in a shop -- -- " But Joe couldn't stand no more.

"Ma'am," he says in a undertone, "if a pound or so, which not bein' a fam'ly man an' a good business at times, I have it to spare, would make matters straight, here it is." An' he pulls a handful of silver out of his pocket and

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holds it out quite eager an' yet fearful of givin' offense.

Well, then the woman looks sharp at him.

"What do you mean?" she asks. "Do you want me to take her home with me?"

"Ma'am," says Joe, "yes, if a pound or so --- "

But she stops him by turning to the girl.

"Are you a respectable young woman?" she asks.

The pretty face was hidden on the sofa-arm, an' the little figure looked so droopin' that Joe could stand that less than he could stand the other. "Ma'am," says he hurried, "if five pound --- "

It seemed like the woman's heart was touched, though she answered him rough.

"Young man," she says, "you're a fool --- but if you don't want me to speak out before her, take me into I the next room an' we'll talk it over."

So Joe took her into the collection an' the end of it was that they made an agreement, an' sharp as she seemed, the woman showed as she was fair and straight an' would take no advantage. She let Joe persuade her at last to take the girl with her an' ask no questions, an' he was to pay her a trifle to make it straight an' no burden to her.

"Though," says she, "if she had a different face an' one as wasn't so innocent an' young, I wouldn't take her at no price --- for I've girls of my own as I tell you, an' p'r'aps that's what makes me easier on her."

When they was gone away, Joe goes into the room they'd left an' sets hisself down by the fire an' stares at the sofa.

"She set there," he says, "an' she laid her head on the arm, and likewise drunk out of that there cup. I've seen her again as sure as I'm a man."

An' not a wink of sleep does he get that night, but sits, an' stares, an' thinks until the fire dies out into ashes, an' it's gray early mornin'.

Through a delicateness of feelin', he does not go anywheres near her for a day or so, an' then the woman --- whose name is Mrs. Bonny --- calls in to see him.

"Well," she says, "it seems all right so far. She's a nice little thing, an' she's got work in a millinery down town, an' I've kept my word an' asked no questions, an' will you come an' have a cup of tea with us this evening?"

Of course he went, glad enough, though awkward, an' he saw her again, an' she was prettier an' innocenter lookin' than ever, though pale an' timid. When she give her hand at partin' an' says, "Thank you for bein' so kind to me," he couldn't say a single word in answer, he were so bashful an' upshot.

He was always bashful enough, even after they knew each other better an' was good friends, which they came to be. She seemed to take a childish liking to him, an' always to be a rememberin' as she'd somethin' to be grateful for.

"What made you so kind to me that night, Joe?" she'd say. "You hadn't never seen me before, you know. Oh, how good you was, Joe!" An' he hadn't never the courage to tell her as he had.

Through one thing an' another, it was quite a while before she chanced to see the collection, but, at last, one afternoon, they all comes down --- Mrs. Bonny, the girls, an' Polly.

Polly was a-goin' 'round with Joe, an' he couldn't help wonderin' anxious if she would remember as she had seen the place an' him before. An' she did. Before she had been in the room three minutes, she begins to look round strange an' puzzled, an' when she comes to Lady Jane Grey, she catches Joe's arm an' gives a tremblin' start.

"I've been here before," she says. "I was here last races --- I --- oh, Joe, --- --- "an' she breaks off with a sob.

He sets her in a chair and stands before her, so as the Bonnys can't see.

"Don't cry, Polly," he says, but he says it with a sinkin' feelin', because he sees as she doesn't remember him at all, an' that she hasn't forgot her handsome sweetheart.

She doesn't cry much more for fear of the Bonnys, but she doesn't laugh nor talk no more all the rest of the day, an' her little downcast face was enough to make a man's heart ache. I dare say you'll think as Joe was a fool to hang on so in the face of all this, but it was his way to hang on to a thing quiet an' steady, and you remember what I've said about his simpleness. So he does hang on without a bit of hope until through Polly herself he speaks almost without knowing it, an' it happens in the collection just three months from the day as she recognized Lady Jane Grey.

"What made you so good to me that night, Joe?" she says again to him, mournful an' gentle. "I never shall forget it. No one else would have been so good."

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"Polly," he says, a-takin' out his bandanna an' wipin' his forehead, for, though a cool day, he had broke out in a free perspiration. "Polly, it was because I loved you." An' he went straight through an' told her the whole story.

"But," says he at the end. "Don't let that come between you an' me, Polly, for why should it? You have nothing to give me, Polly, an', consequently, I don't ask nothin'."

"No," says she, in a half whisper. "I haven't nothin' to give no one."

An' yet, it wasn't three weeks before — — ; but, I'll tell you how it happened.

He'd been invited to the Bonnys' to tea, an' when he went there, he found Polly ailin'. She was white an' nervous, an' her eyes looked big an' woeful.

"She had a fright last night," Mrs. Bonny told him. "Some scamp of a fellow followed her all the way home an' it's upsot her."

She hardly spoke all the evenin', but lay back in the big rockin'-chair a-lookin' at Joe every now an' then as if she was askin' him to help her, an' when he'd bid 'em all good-night an' was half-way down the street, he hears the door open again, an' who should come runnin' after him, but her, all out of breath, an' catches him by the arm cryin'.

"Joe," she says, do you — do you love me yet, Joe?"

"Polly," he says, "what is it, my dear?" an' hearin' her ask him such a question, turned him almost sick with joy an' pain together.

"Because," she sobs out, — "because, if you love me yet, — take me, Joe, an' keep me safe."

An' before he knows how it happens, he has her in his arms, with her face against his coat.

After they was both a bit quiet, he takes her back to Mrs. Bonny, an' says he:

"Mrs. Bonny, Polly an' me is goin' to be married." An' Mrs. Bonny says:

"Well, now, Polly, that's sensible; an' though I say it as shouldn't, I must own as I wouldn't care if it was Meliar."

An' she kisses Polly, an' the girls kisses her, an' they all shakes hands, an' it's a settled thing.

They was married almost immediate, an' Joe was as happy as a man could be under the circumstances; for mind you, he wasn't a-deceivin' hisself, an' knowed well enough as his wasn't the kind of a marriage where there's two hearts beatin' warm together, an' both is full of joy an' hope.

"But," says he, "I never expected this much, an' I'd be a queer sort of chap not to be grateful, as the woman I love could turn to me for comfort when she needed it; an' if love can bring love, mine'll be like to do it some day."

So he waited an' hoped, an' did his best, an' he sometimes thought as Polly drew a bit nearer to him as time went on. At any rate, she was a good, gentle little thing, an' always seemed tryin' to please him in a wistful, longin' way, as if she had somethin' to make up for. Once, when they was settin' together at night, she came an' knelt down before him, and hid her face on his knee.

"Joe," she says, "was you never afraid to marry me, — when — when you remember as I'd never told you nothin'?" "No," he answers. "No, Polly, — never."

"But I might have been a wicked girl," she whispers.

"No," says he, stout and tender. "You mightn't, Polly; "an' he stoops down an' kisses her pretty hair.

She burst out a-cryin', and creeps closer, so as to lay her cheek on his hand.

"I might have been," she says; "but I wasn't, Joe, — I wasn't, because God an' you helped me."

An' yet he knows as there's somethin' behind as keeps her from bein' happy, though she tries so hard an' faithful. He always sees the wistfulness in her eyes, an' hears it in her voice, an' time an' time again he knows she's lyin' awake at night a-grievin' quiet. One mornin', after she's been lower than common, a letter comes to her, an' he sees her turn white, an' after she holds it a minute, she walks up to the fire an' throws it in, an' before he goes back to the collection, she comes an' catches him 'round the neck, an' says:

"I want to be a good wife, Joe, — I want to be, an' I will," an' cries a bit again.

That very afternoon there comes a swell into the wax-works, an' as soon as Joe sets eyes on him, he knows it's the chap he first see Polly with in the race-week, and there he is a-saunterin' 'round an' pretendin' to be unconcerned, an' yet keepin' a sharp look-out around him. So Joe goes up to him, and speaks to him quite firm and low:

"Was you lookin' for any one, sir?" he asks. The swell looks at him cool enough.

"What's that you say, my good fellow?" he answers.

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"Well," says Joe, "nothing in a general way, perhaps; only sir, I was a--thinkin' as p'raps you might be lookin' for some one as was unprotected an' helpless, an' there aint no such a party here; an' if you'd like your money returned at the door, -- me bein' the proprietor of the collection, -- I shouldn't have no objection."

"D -- -- your collection!" says the swell; but he turns 'round an' goes out, half a--laughin'.

At tea that evenin', Polly was dreadful restless an' timid, an' seemed to be a--listenin' to somethin', an' after a bit Joe finds out what it is, -- it's footsteps a--passin' back'ard an' for'ard near the house, -- passin' back'ard an' for'ard reg'lar; an' they goes on that way for a good hour, an' then stops; an' all the time Polly sits close to Joe, as if she was afraid to leave him, her eyes shinin' an' her voice shakin' when she speaks. Only that somethin' tells him as she doesn't want him to go, he would have went out; an' in the middle of the night he was almost sorry he didn't, for she started out of her sleep, callin' out, frightened:

"Oh! the footsteps! -- the footsteps! Make them go away! -- save me from them, Joe, or I must go!"

She was quite ill an' weak for a month, an' then, queer enough, a change came over her. She got her color back gradual, an' went out oftener, an' was brighter when she was in the house. She went to see the Bonnys frequent, a--helpin' them get ready to take their trip to the sea--side, which they did reg'lar; for though workin'--people, they was comfortable off. There was such a alteration in her, that Joe began to feel hopeful, an' was as cheerful as the day is long; an' well he might be, for she actually lays her pretty head on his breast once, an' whispers:

Joe, I believe I'm goin' to be happy, -- an' it's all through you bein' so lovin' an' patient. You bore with me a long time, -- didn't you, Joe?"

They had been married near twelve months then, an' the week the Bonnys goes away, Joe has to go too, bein' called away by business; an' sorry enough he was to go. But he says to Polly when he kisses her good--bye at the door:

"If you get lonesome, pack up an' go to the Bonnys, my dear, an' let them take care of you; but I wont be no longer than I can help."

An' she gives his neck a little wistful squeeze, half laughin', with the tears in her eyes, an' says:

"No, you mustn't, because no one can take such care of me as you; -- an' I want you, Joe."

Well, it happened as his business was got over quicker than he'd looked for, an' he gets home within two weeks. But when he gets back he doesn't find Polly. Things are a bit upsot, as if she'd gone off in a hurry, an' he finds a little letter on the table as says, "I've gone to the Bonnys', dear Joe -- it was so lonesome without you."

An' when he reads it he sees tear--marks on it, an' he says to hisself, "Why, here a tear fell, Polly. You must have been a bit low, my dear." He had that there letter in his hand, an' was still a--lookin' at it, when there comes a knock at the door an' he answers it, an' in walks Mrs. Bonny herself.

"Well," she says, "you've come back, have you? How are you, an' how's Polly?" "Polly!" says he. "Polly!"

"Yes, to be sure," she answers him back, "Polly; for, to tell the truth, I've been a bit anxious about her, an' that's why I came here the minute I got back to town."

Well, they both stood still an' looked at each other -- her a bit impatient an' him cold an' dazed.

"Mrs. Bonny, ma'am," says he at last, "Polly went to you a week ago, for here's the letter as tells me so."

"Joe," says Mrs. Bonny, a fallin' back an' turnin' pale too, "Polly aint never been nigh us!" , "Then," says Joe, "she's dead."

He never thought of nothin' else but that some cruel thing had happened as had cut her off in her innocence an' youth. Think harm of Polly, as had laid her cheek against his breast an' begged him to come back to her? Lor' bless you, ma'am, he loved her far too tender!

It was Mrs. Bonny as first said the word, for even good women is sometimes hard on women, you know. She followed him into the room an' looked about her, an' she broke out a--cryin', angry an' yet sorrowful.

"Oh, Joe! Joe!" she says. "How could she have the heart to do it?" But Joe only answered her bewildered. "The heart ma'am!" he says. "Polly?"

"The heart to leave you," she says. "The heart to go to ruin when there was so much to hold her back -- the heart to shame a honest man as loved her, an' her knowin' what she did!"

"Ruin, ma'am?" says Joe. "Shame, ma'am? Polly?"

He rouses himself to understand what she meant, an' he sees it's what the other people will say, too, an' he cannot help it or save Polly from it.

"It isn't true," he cries, wild--like. "It isn't nat'ral as it should be. She's trusted me all along, an' we was

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beginnin' to be happy, an' — — "

"You've trusted her," says Mrs. Bonny. "An' so have I; but she's kept her own secrets, an' we knew she had 'em. An' there's my 'Meliar as heard of some fine gentleman a-follerin her on the street an' talkin' to her." But Joe stops her.

"If she doesn't come back," he says, "she's dead, an' she died innocent," an' wouldn't hear another word.

As soon as he could get his strength together, he gets up an' begins to set the place in order, a-makin' it look just as much as if she was there as he could. He folds away the two or three things as she's left about, an' puts 'em in the drawers an' shuts 'em up, an' Mrs. Bonny sets a-watchin' him. She couldn't understand the slow, quiet way as he does everything.

"Joe," she says, when he's done, "what do you mean?"

"Mrs. Bonny, ma'am," he says, I mean to trust her, an' I mean to be ready for her an' a-waitin', whenever she comes back, an' however." "However?" says Mrs. Bonny.

"Yes, mum," he says, "howsomever, for love isn't a thing as is easy killed; but, mind you, I'm not afraid as her soul has come to hurt, an' I've no thought of givin' her up."

Mrs. Bonny, she sees he's in earnest, an' she shakes her head. She meant kind enough, but it wasn't her as had been in love with Polly, an' had worked so hard to win her. When she went Joe followed her to the door.

"Ma'am," he says, "have you any objections as this here should be a secret betwixt you an' me?"

Well, I've no doubt as it was a bit hard on her as she shouldn't have the tellin' of it an' the talkin' of it over, an' she couldn't help showin' it in her looks; but she's a good soul, as I've said, an' she promises, an' Joe, he answers her, "Thank you, ma'am; an' would you mind givin' me your hand on it?" An' she does, an' so they part.

You may think what the next week or so was to Joe, when I tell you as, though he tried night an' day, he couldn't hear a word from Polly, or find no sign. An' still believin' in her, he wouldn't make no open stir an' talk. He had a fancy as perhaps somethin' of her old trouble had took her off, an' he stuck to it in his mind as she'd come back an' tell him all. An' I dare say you'll say, "Why should he, in the name of all that's simple?" Well, ma'am, he had a reason, an' that there reason held him up when nothin' else would. But it seemed as if all hope was to be tore from him. A-cleanin' up the room one afternoon, he comes across a piece of half-burnt paper as has lodged in a corner, an' in pickin' it up somethin' catches his eye as strikes him blind an' weak an' sick — a few words writ in a fine, flourishin' hand, an' these was them:

" — wasting your life, my sweet Polly, on a stupid fellow who has not even sense enough to see that you are making a sacrifice and breaking your innocent, foolish heart. Don't break mine, too — don't turn away from me as you did on that dreadful night. If you love me, trust me. Come to — — "

That was all, for the rest was burnt; but when he'd read it, Joe's hope was swept away complete. She'd been gettin' love-letters from another man, an' readin' them an' keepin' them secret, an' now she was gone!

He set down, an' let the paper drop on the floor.

"I — didn't know," he says, "as them — was women's — ways. Lord help you, Polly, an' me, — an' Lord be pitiful to It!"

There's no use of makin' the story longer than can be helped, an' besides, words wouldn't tell what sufferin' that there little back room saw in the three next weeks. There's no knowin' what kept the poor chap from staggerin' in from his work some night an' fallin' heart-broke in death on his lonely hearth. He suffered an' strove an' bore, an' yet kept his secret close. He neither eat nor slept, his face growed white an' haggard an' his eyes holler. He kept away from the Bonnys, an' kept away from all as knowed him. Even the sight of the collection was too much for him. He'd set there by the ashes of the fire hour after hour at night, a-lookin' at the grayness, an' not carin' to stir.

"I didn't know," he'd say again an' again over slow to hisself an' the emptiness an' quiet, — "I didn't know — as them — was women's ways."

Just five weeks from the time as he'd come home an' found his wife gone, he was a-settin' this very way over the grate one evenin' at dusk, when he hears a key a-turnin' in the door gentle-like, an' he lifts his head to listen. "Who's that," he says, "as is tryin' to come in?"

But the next minute he starts up, a-knockin' the chair over back'ard, his heart a-beatin' loud enough to be heard, for the one as turned the key was in, an' had light feet, an' come an' pushed the room door open an' stood there a second. An' it was Polly, with a bundle in her arms. She didn't look guilty, bless you, though she were a

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little pale an' excited. She was even a-laughin', in a shy, happy, timid way, an' her eyes was wide an' shinin'.

But Joe, he weren't strong enough to bear it. He breaks out into a cry.

"Polly," says he, "is it because you're dead that you've come back to me?" An' he makes a step, gropin' an' staggerin', an' would have fell if she hadn't run an' caught him, an' pushed him into a chair.

"Joe," she cries out, kneelin' down before him, — "Joe, dear Joe, what's the matter? It's Polly, an' — " an' she puts her face against his vest in the old way — "an' you mustn't frighten me."

That, an' the touch of her hand brings him back, an' he knows in a second as he has her safe, an' then he catches her an' begins to hug her tight, too shook to say a word.

But she pulls back a bit, half frightened an' half joyful.

"Joe," she says, "didn't you think I was at the Bonnys'? Have you been anxious?" An' then, a-laughin' nervous-like, "You mustn't squeeze so, Joe — don't you see?"

An' she lays the bundle on his knee an' opens the shawl an' shows him what's in it.

"He's — he's only a little one," she says, a-laughin' an' cryin' true woman fashion, but he grows every day, an' he's noticin' already."

Joe makes an effort an' just saves hisself from bustin' out in a sob as might have told her all — an' this time he folds 'em both up an' holds 'em, a-tryin' to stumble at a prayer in his mind.

"Polly," he says after a bit, "tell me all about it, for I don't understand how it is as it's come about."

But girl as she is, she sees as there's somethin' behind an' she gives him a long look.

"Joe," she says, "I've more to tell than just how this happened, an' when I lay quiet with little Joe on my arm, I made up my mind as the day I brought him home to you, was the day as had come for you to hear it, an' so you shall — but first I must lay him down an' make the room warm."

Which she gets up an' does, an' wont let Joe do nothin' but watch her, an' while she's at it he sees her sweet young face a-workin', an' when everythin's done, an' the fire burnin' bright, an' the kettle on, an' the little fellow comfortable on her arm — she draws a little wooden stool up to his knees an' sits down on it an' her face is a-workin' still.

"Not as I'm afraid to tell you now, Joe, though I've held it back so long; but sometimes I've thought as the day would never come when I could, an' now I'm so glad — so glad," she whispers.

An' then a-holdin' his hand an' the child's too, she tells him the whole story of what her secret was an' why she kep' it one, an' as you may guess it was all about the man as Joe had seen her with.

The night she'd fainted in the street she'd found out his cruel heart for the first time an' it had well-nigh broke her own. The people as she worked for had turned her off through hearin' of him, an' her own mother, as was a hard, strict woman, had believed the scandal an' turned against her too. An' then when she had gone to him in her fear an' trouble he had struck her down with words as was worse than blows.

"But bein' so young, Joe, an' so weak," she says, "I couldn't forget him, an' it seemed as if I couldn't bear my life; an' I knew that if he come back again it would be harder to turn away from him than ever. An' it was — an' when he follorred me an' tried me so as I knew as I'd give up if there wasn't something to hold me strong. An' I asked you to save me that night, Joe, an' you said you would. Joe," she whispers, "don't hate me for bein' so near to sin an' shame."

After a little while she tells him the rest.

"But even when he knowed I was a good man's wife he wouldn't let me rest. He tried to see me again an' again, an' wrote me letters an' besot me in every way, knowin' as I wasn't worthy of you, an' didn't love you as I ought. But the time come when he grew weaker an' you grew stronger, Joe. How could I live with you day after day an' see the contrast between you, an' not learn to love the man as was so patient an' true to me, an' despise him as only loved hisself an' was too selfish an' cruel to have either mercy or pity? So the day come when I knew I needn't fear him nor myself no more an' I told him so. It was then I told you I was goin' to be happy; an' Joe dear, I was happy — particular lately. Do you believe me, Joe? — say as you do."

"Yes, Polly," says Joe. "Thank God!"

"Kiss me, then," she says, "an' kiss little Joe, an' then I'll tell you how the other come about."

He did it prompt, an' with a heavin' heart, an' then the other was soon told.

"I hadn't seen him for a long time when you went away," she tells him, "an' I thought I'd seen the last of him; but you hadn't been gone a week before I met him face to face in the street; an' that same night a letter come, an'

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through me bein' lonesome an' nervous—like, an' seein' him so determined, it frightened me, an' I made up my mind I'd go to the Bonnys an' get heartened up a little before you come back. So I started all in a hurry as soon as I could get ready. But before I'd got more than half way to my journey's end, we had a accident, — not much of a one, for the trains as met each other wasn't goin' so fast but that they could be stopped in time to save much real harm bein' done, an' people was mostly badly shook an' frightened. But I fainted away, an' when I come to myself I was lyin' on a bed in a farm—house near the line, an' the farmer's wife, as was a good soul, she was a—takin' care of me, an' says she, 'Where's your husband, my girl?' an' I says, 'I'm not sure I know, ma'am,' an' faints away again.

"Well, the next mornin' I was lyin' there still, but little Joe was on my arm, an' I had the strength to tell where I lived, an' how it was I didn't know where to send for you. An' the farmer's wife was like a mother to me, an' she cheers me up, an' says, 'Well, never mind. Bless us! what a joyful surprise it'll be to the man! Think of that!' An' I did think of it until I made up my mind as I wouldn't send no word at all until I could come home myself; for, says I, 'He'll think I'm at the Bonnys', an' it'll save him bein' worried.' An' that was how it was, Joe," kind of hesitatin'.

"Have you anything to tell me?"

She looks at him timid an' gentle, an' he looks down at the fire. "Not if you'd rather not, Joe," she says; but I thought — — "

Joe, he thinks a bit, an' then answers her grave an' slow:

"Polly," says he, "I found a piece of that there letter. Will you forgive me, an' let it pass at that for little Joe's sake?"

She stoops down and kisses his hand, with tears in her eyes.

"Yes," she answers, "an' for yours too. You've more to forgive than me, Joe, — an' it was quite nat'ral."

An' she never asks him another question, but sets there sweet an' content, an' they both sets there almost too happy to speak; an' there's such a look in her face as goes to Joe's heart, an' he breaks the quiet, at last, a—sayin':

"Polly, — I hope it aint no wrong in me a—thinkin' it, — for this aint no time for me to have none but the reverentest an' gratefulest humble heart, — but as you set there with the little fellow so peaceful on your breast, I can't help bein' 'minded of the Mother as we see in the churches, an' as some prays to."

Well, mum, that's the whole story, an' somehow it's run out longer than I thought for; but there's nothin' more left to say, but that if you could see that there little Joe to—day he'd astonish you; for though but five year old, I'm blessed if he don't know every figger in the collection by name, an' is as familiar with Henry the Eighthses fam'ly as I am myself; an' says he to me only the other day, "Father — — " at least — — Well, mum, I suppose I may as well own up to it, now I've done, — though a nat'ral back'ardness made it easier for me to tell it the other way. But you're right in supposin' so; an' not to put too fine a point to it, the story is mine, — that there Joe bein' me an' Polly my wife, an' that there collection Smethurstses.