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MRS. LAURA TERESA PODLER sat at her dull yellow schoolroom desk, gazing through a French window at her lawn, where the shrill and wholesome breezes of England bring a temperate moisture, very different from the exhausting vapour baths of the Japanese wet season; a lawn whose emerald green never wanes, never assumes the cruel, dead drab of a far Eastern winter landscape at the dictates of keen Siberian flaws sighing mortally through bleached, fibrous stems and the tattered hideousness of bamboo scrub. She was the widowed mother of James Podler, and had devoted herself during the twenty years of her bereavement which had now elapsed, to James and God. She was equally stern towards both and, had she not become a Catholic, would have made a rabid but refined Nonconformist. In fact, like most English converts, she was at heart a black Protestant, having quitted the Simeonite fold that enclosed her parents for Rome in a blaze of mystical excitement which was synchronous with her engagement to Mr. James Pugin Alphege Podler. Even now she deplored some of the more Pagan embellishments of her spiritual home, and the inanition of the Holy Office. To her, Francis Thompson was licentious, and Newman none the better for having written the *Dream of Gerontius*; the *Grammar of Assent* was quite far enough for anyone to go in the direction of poetry. She had quarrelled with Father Curtal because he had consented to deliver little chats on Catholic mystics at

Mrs. Murphy's Lenten evening parties, which were devised in this manner. Part I, heart-to-heart homily by Father Curtal. Half-time interval for refreshment. Part II, very secular and frivolous music, to comprise gleanings from the Concert Mayol and dubious French Cabarets. As for Mrs. Murphy, who was actually daring to write an ultramontane novel, whose son was a poet and fond of dancing, nothing would induce her to speak to the woman again. Her attitude to her son was one of devotion, as has been said; but the devotion of an unconscious hatred disguising itself as love. She had never forgiven him, though she was not aware of it, for growing up and obtaining a position in which he could not be smacked or bullied; and, having nothing to smack till it was ten years of age, and then snub till its majority, she felt that a great portion of joy had faded from life.

Her face, a thin, ferret-toothed oblong, was rendered the more austere by the grey hair strained back from her high forehead to a meagre knot, and by the deep parenthetic furrows round her mouth; a skinny, meagre appendage did duty as a double chin. But at the moment it expressed dreaminess as approximately as it could. There she sat in the heart of Gloucestershire, at a village where a *recherché* little Roman chapel had lately been built in fussily correct Gothic, which nevertheless compared ill with the debased but still noble Tudor proportions of the parish church; there she sat, while the elms sighed in the flowery paddock beyond, where cows and the house pony grazed in profound peace. Her thoughts were, a little resentfully, half round the world, with her son who had presumed to set so huge a gulf between them, and to whom she was writing her monthly letter. Her glance wandered from a heavy cluster of crimson roses and some harshly magenta

petunias without to the rather plump-looking crucifix hung above a small table covered with a brown, carpet-like cloth, fringed in the lodging-house manner. The sacred emblem had been placed ingeniously in the very middle of one of the acanthuses in faded green and 'caca d'oise', which enlivened the sad cream ground of the wall-paper. She appealed next to a plaster St. Joseph in a pink and brown nightshirt, cocking his beard at a tormented neo-rococo clock in a glass cupola, and two melancholy china dogs; any of which might inspire her. From the panels of the wall cheap chromolithographs of Christ fustigating the money-changers, and St. Alpheah being pelted to death with beef-bones corrected any tendency to lust of eye. She would have been the last to admit that she derived any pleasure from the deft touches of sordidness that vilified the room, but so it was. Noble articles of furniture, she took care, should be degraded by the aesthetic turpitude of mats or antimacassars. The fine proportions of the Georgian chamber suffered from an oppressively ponderous red pine bookcase, breaking out here and there into the dismal cusps of Jubilee Gothic. At about the same period the French window had been re-glazed with a garish border of red, blue and amber. In this setting might be found something of a clue to James's temperament. When roused to any emotion that affected his concrete life, he shunned beauty as owls do the daylight; he found it enervating and likely to detract from the central heat of desire. He would have preferred to conduct an amour in some ugly back bedroom in Camden Town—of the kind immortalised by Walter Sickert; a secret, stimulating, closed-in affair, behind dusty, false lace curtains, the bed of black japanned iron, the wall-paper coming loose at the edges. Ugliness, though he did not care to admit it, roused him like the sting of a lash. The drunkenness and naïve

coarseness of Alba, although he believed himself to be fastidious, appealed to him so strongly that he had called Lulu frigid ; and even Inez Cavara became so relatively ethereal that she was good for nothing but distant and academic admiration.

Mrs. Podler dived into the murky gulfs of her mind, and spent some time deciding which of its treasures she should, and which should not, communicate. She dipped her pen into violet-coloured ink and wrote :

‘ . . . I have had no trace of my asthma since my pilgrimage to Lourdes in the spring ; there was, of course, never any doubt about the result. But if J.C. thinks it better for me to suffer next winter, I must say, “ Thy will be done ”. As it is, there are mercies abounding ; the Buff Orpingtons have done very well, especially the last brood. . . . Father Bland . . . so much safer than Father Curtal. He would never write books about naked pagan Greek gods, like Father Curtal who, if he continues as he does, will, I fear, come to no good end. I sometimes wonder whether his influence on my dear James when at school was altogether desirable. You will be glad to hear that Albert Queale has abandoned his evil ways since his conversion. He has married the typist woman with whom he lived so long in sin, and has gone into Messrs. Horrocks and Webb’s jam factory, which is far more sensible than trying to write novels. That is a shameful way for a man to earn his living, even if he has talent for it ; and Albert certainly has not. I hope they will put less glucose in their jam now that they have a Catholic on the staff. It is said that his father has devised his property to the Theosophists. How long, O Lord ? ’

After continuing in this ejaculatory Puritan vein :
‘ . . . I read in to-day’s *Times* that the immoral Midianite,

your wife, has gone to the Chinese deserts on Satan's business. She hopes to discover something—a Brontosaurus, she calls it—with which she will pretend to falsify the scripture account of how God created the world. Strong faith is indeed necessary in these days of organised hostility to our Creed . . . dear James . . . many trials . . . heathen land . . . Trust . . . heavenly Mother . . . earthly mother prays for you . . . used to correct you'. (She loved to remind James of early passages of discipline, knowing that it infuriated him.) 'My teeth are in a bad way. Dr. Hake advises me to have them all extracted, and I think of going to a dentist in Knightsbridge to have it done. . . . Harrods is conveniently near to the Brompton. Oratory, though it is sad that they should have erected a *common* imitation of the dome in terra-cotta brick—almost sacrilegious indeed. . . . I always enjoy so much travelling by the Great Western Railway, which is somehow more dignified than the other lines. Going to Brighton, for instance, seems to be slightly incorrect, to say nothing of the danger of sitting opposite a Jew; and on the Northern lines there are still too many Presbyterians, despite the years of hard work to which the Aberdeen Dominicans have devoted themselves. My tartan travelling-rug is just 35 years old, and as good as ever. To think that we spent our honeymoon at Strathpeffer! But we were young then, and knew but little of the world. . . .'

She rambled on and on, waking up only when something of a malicious nature occurred to her, when she would rouse from her dreamy state, in which the writing was automatic. Westall, the hairy, simian gardener, with grey whorls like zinc shavings on his neck, maundered down the nut walk, trailing his mowing-machine to the lawn, to make for the soft air that music and fragrance

which delights the cyclist as he passes an old rubblewall enclosing the grounds of a country residence. The gravel paths were mossy and aged-looking; here might not be found the brand-new crazy paving and painfully unsettled ramblers on columns of wire netting, that delight the suburbs. From a mellow old tazza, full of begonias, two satyrs with slant goatish eyes gazing knowingly at the prospects; the nearer seemed to be reading sardonically the secrets of the lady's soul.

In a fleeting access of sentiment Mrs. Podler culled from the brass urceole beneath the crucifix a scarlet head of verbena, which she squashed flat and placed in the envelope with the letter, sanded—for she abhorred blotting-paper—in her Italianate script, purple as a Monsignor. As she sealed the envelope, its intended recipient fled petulantly, with none of that classic equilibrium to which he aspired, through the sticky heat of afternoon from the intolerable boredom of having to await the consummation of his desires, wondering if this time Alba really would have the sense to be kind and forsake the hare-brained caprices which she cultivated for a 'personality'. Why on earth couldn't she just be the simple animal woman that heaven had intended her to be? The trouble was that she had enough brains to want to be something, but not enough to realise that the something should be her natural self. She should never dream of aiming at an artificial one—which ambitions were entirely outside her province. Absurd, but kissable woman!

The immund dust of a by-way blocked with black refuse-boxes saddened the boots of Mr. Podler to a weary grey; unmindful of flies and heat he laboured to restrain the fires within him until a suitable occasion presented itself.

Malvina and McGonigle, lounging in a verandah, saw him amble past with a glum expression, and Malvina said, as she had said before, 'That man simply makes me shudder; he has the "entkleiden" look'.

'Get out!' answered McGonigle. 'What putrid minds you novelists have'.

