

Seeing Things

SECOND GROWTH

MORE than seeming simple, in advance it had appeared right. Right to the point of inevitability. A week had passed since my wife had received, and joyfully answered, Mary Smythe's letter announcing she was coming to New York for a visit. Not only was she coming, but she was bringing her daughter with her. This exciting news was, of course, underscored three times and followed by a picket fence of exclamation points.

Mary had written that she looked forward, as the high point of her stay, to the chance her Polly and our boys would at long last have of becoming friends. "Geography," wrote she, "has played a dirty trick on us in keeping our families apart." Since my wife had gone to school with Mary and Polly's father Tom had been a friend of mine from childhood, we were naturally as pleased with the prospect as Mary. We, too, had been eager for that happy day when Polly and our boys would meet and, in their parents' fashion, become devoted to one another.

Saturday, being school-less, was the day agreed upon. Saturday at one o'clock at our apartment. But neither the Smythes nor my wife and I had taken several things into account. Two of these were the boys. Another was Polly.

Our sons began to suspect that something untoward was up when by noon we closed in on them with orders, which finally turned into supplications, to wash their hands and faces, put on their blue suits, shine their shoes, select their best ties, pick out the whitest of clean shirts, and brush and comb their hair.

"Why?" asked the younger one. "We want to go skating now."

"Who's coming, anyway?" snarled the older one.

"Polly Smythe," beamed my wife. "Isn't that nice?"

"Who's she?"

"A girl," I said brightly, "the daughter of two very dear friends of your mother's and mine."

"A girl—p-e-e-u-u! How old?"

"Eight." My wife was very firm.

"Eight!" groaned the older boy.

"Is she hubba-hubba?" asked his brother.

"I haven't seen her since she was three," their mother said. "She was a darling little girl, the prettiest eyes

you ever saw, and beautiful black hair. She was very cute. I know you'll love her. And I want you both to be nice to her."

"Aw, gee, I wanted to go out with Frank this afternoon."

By one o'clock, and also by a miracle, they were both shining in the discomfort of cleanliness. On the hour the doorbell rang, and there in the outer hall stood Polly and her mother.

Mary had not changed a bit. She was the identical Mary my wife and I had known these many years. As sweet of face, as given to tweeds and oxfords, as capable of somehow carrying the outdoors indoors with her. But Polly—well, even I at one dismayed glance could tell that Polly was not the same Polly my wife remembered at three.

Polly had always been unpredictable. When five, she was reported to have added considerable suspense to a cocktail party her father and mother had given. Frilled and curled, Polly had been allowed to come in. For ten minutes she had remained a model of juvenile silence. The guests, including one matron with outgoing teeth around whom Polly had circled with snake-like fascination, were enchanted by this. Not so Mary and Tom Smythe. As parents, they knew that silence in a child is ominous. They feared the worst, which was not long coming. In one of those talkless moments which will hush the babble of even cocktail parties, Polly was heard to ask the toothsome lady, oh so sweetly, "When it rains, Mrs. Johnson, do your teeth get wet?"

Remembering this, I was not surprised to have Polly accompany her

two tottering curtsies at the door with "Mother said I was to say, 'Glad to see you.'" I was unprepared, however, for what the past few years had done to Polly physically. Polly, who had been pretty, very pretty, as a little girl, would be very pretty in the future when once she grew little again. The siren stuff, though for a moment in fleshly escrow, was plainly in her. Any adult could see this at once. It was in her huge bright eyes which were as black as Lorna Doone's. It was in her cupid's bow mouth which, in spite of the bands distorting it, was tender and smiling. It was in the modeling of her face; in her laugh, too. But Polly's scrawny days were over. As little girls will, she had achieved the fat age. She had the waistline of a baked apple. Indeed, she seemed to be made up entirely of baked apples. A sideward look at my boys told me that they were as conscious of this as I was. I could almost hear their faces drop.

"Mary! Mary!" my wife and I cried. "Why, Polly! so nice to have you here. Boys, you remember Mrs. Smythe. And this is Polly."

WHILE Polly's hat, coat, and immaculate white gloves were being removed, she and the boys were exposed to those "My-how-you've-grown" burlings in which parents will indulge to the annoyance, indifference, or pride of children.

"Now, why don't you take Polly back to your room?" I suggested, already feeling the need of a cocktail.

"Sure," said my younger son. "Polly, want to see my rock collection?"

"Why?" asked Polly, most sensibly.

"'Cause," replied he, "you'll love it." This was said with the most self-convinced, hence convincing, male authority. "'N' I've got sea shells and guns and modeling clay, too."

Accordingly, they were off down the hall, the older boy following at a disrespectful distance. Plainly he was torn between his awareness of superior age and his desire to display



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his own treasures to a female eye.
"Come on," Polly said, turning around to him and smiling a smile, with both her eyes and mouth, which suddenly made her much thinner.

A man's house in days past may have been his castle; a boy's room still remains his confessional. It does not need the smell of tobacco or a parade of pipes to make it male. It is male in its betrayal of curiosities; a happy hunting ground for the young warrior who at one moment dreams of being in the FBI and at the next of joining either the Audubon Society or the Fire or Street Cleaning Department. Messy to the point of chaos it may be and usually is, but its tone is Spartan. All that is missing, as Will Rogers said of the Vatican, is the woman's touch.

The abandoned absorptions and expanding interests of its owner exist side by side or in layers, one above the other. Hence it is part garage, part aquarium, part hothouse, art gallery, and shoeshine parlor. It is also an arsenal, a wing of the Museum of Natural History, and a junkyard for disemboweled toys. It is a Shmoo run, a Disney dump, a carpenter's bench, a repository for twine and fishing tackle, a library, and a chemical laboratory. All of these impinge upon a carpet which can never quite be rid of marbles, modeling clay, crayon parings, whittlings, and sawdust. Its walls, however freshly painted, are certain to be stenciled with fingerprints. A few of its pictures, too, can be counted on to be glassless or awry from the impact of soccer balls, hockey sticks, or wooden swords brandished in good King Arthur's name. Life, male life, male energy and male tastes, have plainly and undaintily been at work and play, accumulating, bulldozing, and exploring. Women enter either at their own peril or to their guaranteed despair.

Polly was not long in discovering this. From sounds which soon floated down the front hall, it became clear that she was not entirely happy in this ruffleless, satinless, and doll-less realm of the blue ribbon rather than the pink into which my boys had led her.

Above our conversation in the living room, the insistent banging of both cap pistols and doors began to resound. As parents will, however, we talked on, pretending not to hear, merely raising our voices, as parents sometimes must when in the neighborhood of their young, in order to hear each other.

"Tell us about Tom," we asked Mary. While she was obliging in detail, a high, shrill, unmistakably feminine scream rang out, followed by the patter of frightened feet rac-

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ing down the hall to the living room door. There stood Polly, white of face, out of breath, tears splashing from her black eyes.

"Mommy!" she was crying. "Mommy, I don't like them. They are horrid. They are shooting guns at me."

"Boys," cried my wife. "Boys," cried I, "come here this minute."

"What have you been doing to Polly?" I thundered when they appeared, their neatness lost, and disgust on their faces.

"Nothing," said the older boy. "We were just shooting at her—in fun—and she doesn't like it."

"She won't play FBI," burst out the younger one, scornfully. "She doesn't like rocks. Or birds. Or fencing. Or cap pistols. Or anything."

Although Mary, my wife, and I were able to quell this first insurrection and establish until leaving time a fair display of order and even of good manners, the visit was not a happy one. Allergies were at all moments more to the fore than sympathies. There was, to be sure, a surprising interval of quiet when the children had been persuaded to return to the boys' rooms, awaiting the an-

nouncement of luncheon. But this Armistice Day hush was more deceptive than encouraging. It was achieved by having all three of them forget each other and bury their wordless mouths in comics.

IN SPITE of all our adult efforts, the talk at the table did not bring Polly and the boys any closer together. If anything, it widened the canyon separating them. Polly lost face at once by admitting she liked sweet potatoes; they lost caste because of never having owned a cat, a dog, or a hamster and by offering turtles and alligators as poor substitutes. Polly, it turned out, had been to only one of the movies they had seen, an Abbott and Costello comedy. What was worse, she had found it as unfunny as they had thought it uproarious. Her playgoing had been limited to an amateur production of "Jack and the Beanstalk"; they could boast of seeing Ethel Mer- man in "Annie Get Your Gun."

Polly preferred perfume to the fragrant exhalations of a chemistry set. The mention of a dead skunk found beside a road filled her with horror. Her delight in bracelets, pocketbooks, and clothes won the

boys' contempt. Her hatred of fishing was as great as their love of it. Believe it or not, she had never heard of a barndoor skate, was uninterested in the details of dismembering quahogs to use them as bait, and was sickened by the thought of cleaning fish of any kind. She had no knife, and they no rings. Bugs did not fascinate her. She did not know the distance of the earth from the sun and thought Saturn was a star. Her eyes failed to brighten at the mention of bauxite, and she was utterly uninformed as to the oddities of a mandrill's posterior.

As a meeting of minds, as a fellowship of spirits, the luncheon, in other words, was a flop—total, thunderous, and embarrassing. Mary, as aware of this as we were, departed with Polly almost as soon as she had gulped her demi-tasse. The original plan had been to have Polly spend the afternoon. But Mary evidently shared our dread of another session on those proving grounds called the boys' rooms.

"I'm so sorry," said she. "We will have to be going. I want to get Polly a new dress and hat."

"Goody!" cried Polly, while my wife and I, though echoing this to ourselves, glared our boys into silence.

"Nice to see you," the older one managed to squeeze out. The younger, being by the calendar that much nearer to uncorrupted honesty, contented himself with, "Good-bye."

If Polly had been the only child of our friends with whom our sons refused to become friendly, we would have blamed her or them. We knew better, however. From their experience and our own. Again and again we have exposed them, hopefully, to our friends' children, male and female. We have done this even as our parents and relatives used to expose us to their friends' children. Sometimes it has worked, and when it does work it affords one of the most delectable of life's needed and reassuring continuities. Often, however, we in our parents' fashion have had our hopes dashed. Slowly, sadly, painfully, we have learned that the hand-me-downs in friendship are few and far between; that friendship is self-won and self-winning, that it cannot be inherited, and must not be forced.

Had Mary written in her letter, "Geography has played a dirty trick on us in keeping our families apart"? This was before the visit. She would not write that now. She would agree with us that geography, and a lot of it, can be the surest guarantee of the continued friendship of parents since it keeps their children safely apart.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

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FICTION

(Continued from page 14)

he needs to submerge himself more deeply in the material he uses and to work through it to the point where he acquires greater disinterestedness.

This reviewer regrets that his judgment here is so unflattering, and hopes that Mr. Mende's next book will realize a promise that only flashes in some of the earlier portions of this novel. He shares the author's enthusiasm for trade unions; but, at the same time, progressive social views

do not, necessarily, guarantee that a book will infect us with feelings and will give us any intensified awareness. And art should achieve this kind of effect. Especially when a novelist has a just cause, one should not need to overdo the case, and to rely on stereotypes. A good and just cause deserves better art than this.

James T. Farrell is best known for his "Studs Lonigan" stories about Chicago's South Side. His latest book, "The Road Between," a novel of Greenwich Village in the Thirties, is scheduled to be published by The Vanguard Press later this spring.

Fiction Notes

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