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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POLLONY UNDIVERTED ***



POLLONY UNDIVERTED

By SYDNEY VAN SCYOC

Illustrated by R. D. Francis

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**With the whole world at her doorstep, what
she wanted was completely out of reach!**

Pollony's dream formed around a glare of light, a tang of men's lotion. Then she was awake to Brendel poking her.

"I'm hungry."

She struggled to burrow back into sleep.

"I'm starving, kid. I can't sleep."

She bleared at the timespot. It was three a.m. "Go 'way."

"Aw, gimme an omelette." Brendel ate a lot lately. His features were coarsening from it; his body was plumpening.

She argued and protested and whined, and he hit her. But it didn't make her feel good any more when he hit her.

Kitchen Central was inop for the night. She punched Storage. Dried ingredients materialized on the cookgrid, a flat metal sheet set into the countertop.

Later, as she took the omelette up, she heard Brendel setting the opera tapes. She scowled. But when opera shattered their live she dropped the skillet and cried, "Oh! Do we have to listen to that trash?" Her voice was more weary than shrill. The opera routine was getting old.

"What you calling trash?" He twitched his plump shoulders.

"It makes me sick!"

He spat profanity.

It wasn't a good fight. He knew something was wrong and he hit her too hard. She slugged back, hurt her hand, cursed, ran and locked herself into the sleep.

She was asleep when he came pounding. She woke and pointed the lock open. She glared.

He said nothing. He ordered his smaller collections—his miniature horses, his ballpoint pens and his old-time cereal box missiles—on to his shelves before mounting his sleepshelf and pointing out the light.

She could hear him not sleeping.

Finally he muttered, "Too damn much cheese but it was okay."

She said nothing. She didn't almost cry as she might have a month before.

Brendel had appeared on their grid a year before, a dark, pugnacious young man, jittering and nervous. "Clare Webster around?"

"Mother isn't here." Her mother collected men. She met them at drinking clubs or collector meets. She gave them her grid card and took theirs, making them promise to come see her. If a man came, she tacked his card on her bulletin board. If he came twice or three times, she marked his card with colored pencil.

Brendel twitched his shoulders. "I got the evening. Wanta have dinner, kid?"

She was seventeen and tired of collecting china roosters and peach-can labels. She was tired of seeing the same stupid people every day. Somewhere there was someone handsome and perfect, and she had to find him and become perfect too. She couldn't waste all her life being stupid like her mother.

It took her two hours to see that Brendel was the perfect person. He was handsome, aggressive, easy to be with. He quarreled all the time and he even had a full-time job.

She married him. She dropped her little-girl collections and diversions. She was no longer a formless adolescent. She was very solid, very adult.

But the solidness had gone. She had found that Brendel's aggressiveness masked fear; his quarrelsomeness masked insecurity. Worst, he had no imagination. He plodded.

It had begun two weeks before. Brendel had come home from work tight and tense. He tried eating, he tried opera and quarreling, he tried exercises. Finally he said, "I'm gonna go see Latsker Smith. Wanta come?"

"Who the hell's Latsker Smith?" Already she was sick of the opera routine—and a little sick of Brendel.

"Drives a car. From Boston. Fella at the plant told me he's in centercity."

Minutes later they gridded out of the suburban maze. They materialized on a corner grid in centercity. There was no one on the dusty street. There was no car near the gaunt brick building where Latsker Smith was staying. They plopped on the doorstep.

Brendel fidgeted and talked. Latsker Smith was the son of a rich industrialist. His father wouldn't support him unless he worked, and Latsker wouldn't work. So he had to live on government non-employment allowance. His pre-grid automobile and airplane were his only diversions. Since he couldn't leave Boston by automobile, Boston being walled up like any city by the streetless suburbs, he saved his allowance until he could commercial-grid his car to another city. There he raced and squealed and spun through the deserted streets of centercity until he had saved enough to commercial-grid the car elsewhere.

A throbbing split the air. A red splinter of car hurtled around the corner and squealed to the curb. A tall, lank man unfolded, ignoring them.



Brendel sprang to overwhelm him. He pulled him to the steps to make introductions. But Latsker Smith peered absently at Pollony and she was embarrassed that Brendel acted like an eager child confronting some heroic figure from a dream.

"Latsker's pop got money." Brendel launched into his story again.

When the story fizzled she said, "Why couldn't you get a job?"

Smith held his head tilted. "Don't want a job."

"If you had a job you wouldn't have to stay one place so long."

"No use being anyplace if I have to leave my car."

She pursed her lips. Inside the car she could see seats, straps, a wheel. It was incomprehensible that he strapped himself in and hurtled through the streets. "It's a stupid thing to do," she said. "You'll get killed."

"No," he said.

"If you hit something you will. I've heard those atrocity stories. There were more people killed in automobiles from—"

"Nothing to hit," he said.

She flung out her arms. "Buildings! Poles!" His lack of response offended her.

"No need to hit them."

"I've seen the films!" She had seen the crumpled metal, the severed limbs, the spreading blood.

"Driver error. No drivers left. Too expensive on government allowance."

"No one stupid enough left, you mean!" But it was stupid to glare when he wouldn't frown. "Okay,

what's it feel like?" she demanded.

He lifted his shoulders and dropped them.

"It must feel some way." She peered down into the machine, trying to imagine herself hurtling in it. "You fly an airplane too," she accused.

He nodded.

"I bet it feels just like gridding. And it takes longer."

"Gridding." He snorted, mildly. "There's no sensation at all to gridding."

"Then how does it feel to fly?" she prodded.

Brendel moved restlessly, bored. "Let's get going."

"We just got here, stupid," she protested.

He was already pulling her to the corner grid. "I'm getting hungry."

She tried to jerk her arm free but couldn't. "How long will you be here?" she called back, swatting Brendel's arm.

He lifted his shoulders and dropped them.

"If I come—" But Brendel had given their number. They were outside their own door, and she hadn't felt a thing. Today she resented not feeling a thing.

"These weird-o's, they talk too much. I'm hungry."

She resented punching his food and didn't even want to quarrel.

She drowsed back into sleep, remembering. Everything was empty. She ate, she slept, she quarreled, she gridded around seeing friends. What else was there? She couldn't get a job; there weren't that many jobs. And with the government allowance for not working, who needed a job? Who needed anything? A time of plenty, her school machine had called it. You just gridded around collecting and arguing to make it interesting. There were so many people moving so fast that you had to quarrel and push or you'd get stepped on.

It was all stupid. Brendel didn't help a bit. He was stupid too.

She tried to imagine Latsker Smith echoing through the empty streets in his scarlet splinter of car. Latsker Smith couldn't be stupid.

She slept three hours before the gridbell rang.

Elka, her cousin, stood on the grid, loose-haired, big-toothed. She swung a hatbox. "I didn't get you up?"

"No," Pollony said hopelessly.

"I'm gridding to NYC hatting and—"

"It's not even seven."

"Poll, I'm contritest but you weren't sleeping and—"

"I don't need hats."

"You haven't seen the darling I got in Paris. I gridded over with Sella Kyle and, honestly, there was a shop that—"

She convinced Elka that she was not going hatting. Elka took her toll in coffee and gridded after her Paris hat. Pollony barely admired it and Elka left.

Before she could dial Brendel's breakfast her mother was on the grid, fluffy, fleecy, thrusting a wad of bills at her.

"Just on my way to Mexico, toodle. Punch me some coffee?" Breathless moments later she was gone.

"What took so long?" Brendel demanded when she woke him.

"Momma stopped." She hated him like this, his face creased and puffy from sleep. She had never thought he would get fat.

He gulped his breakfast and left. Sometimes she hated him for just being.

The gridbell rang. It was a salesman. He insinuated she didn't have the money to buy his product. She said his merchandise stank. He left grinning but she didn't feel better.

The bell rang. A young man muttered, "Mis-grid," and disappeared.

She had gotten to the dress when she heard the door open. She eyed the hall reflector and saw Ferren, her mother's brother, slip into the cook. She dressed hastily. Ferren would order breakfast and keep the silver to turn in from his own grid for the deposit.

He was plumped up to the counter, a wooly haired man, attacking a stack of eggcakes.

"Let me have them."

He purred, taking spoon and knife from a pocket. "The government allowance is hardly sufficient for a man of my tastes. Shielded by your father's fortune as you are—"

"You could get a job." She punched coffee. She wished he would go away. He was always watching, smiling, spinning together soft words.

"And add to the work shortage?" He wagged his wooly head.

"Then don't complain. There should be a syrup pitcher too."

He produced it, purring.

The gridbell rang. Two pig-faced men in black Gridco uniforms blocked the doorway. "You got Ferren Carmichaels inside, lady."

"No." You always lied to Gridco collectors.

"We traced him here from Dallas."

"Well, he isn't here now."

"How come we heard him talking?"

"He isn't here." Gridco could not remove a grid even though the subscriber refused to pay his quarterly bill. The grid was held by law to be essential to human existence in the twisting, walled alleys of suburbia. Gridco could only send collectors to follow until their quarry fell or was pushed into their hands. And a man who had once fallen into Gridco hands paid eagerly forever after.

"We can pull another trace."

"Do that!" She slammed the door.

She had time for a quick swallow of coffee before the bell rang.

"He didn't go no farther."

She sighed. "Well, he won't come out. I can't make him."

"He'll come sometime." They leaned back against nothing, waiting.

"You're blocking my grid."

Dutifully they stepped into the narrow corridor.

She slammed the door. "They are going to stand there until you go out."

Ferren drained his coffee cup. "I'll settle here, then."

"If you—"

He tutted. "Thank you for the lunch invitation."

"I—" She bit her tongue. She would not get mad.

He wagged his head. "I'll peruse Brendel's books. Fine collection for a young man, books."

Gritting her teeth, she hurtled back to the dress.

The collectors rang every five minutes after that. They kept ringing until she went and told them Ferren would not come out.

It wasn't the way she had imagined it would be when she was married. What with punching Brendel's meals, sending out his clothes, going collecting with him and quarreling, she hardly had a minute. And the same stupid people, Elka, Ferren, her mother and father, were always there.

The bell rang. Her father scowled, seeing Ferren on Brendel's best sitshelf. "Where?" he said grimly.

"Mexico," she said.

"Pottery," he said, going.

The bell rang. A heavy-jawed youth said, "Miss Webster gave me—"

"My mother has gone to Mexico." She slammed the door.

Minutes later Sella Kyle gridded in, crisp, prim, blonde. "I haven't seen you in such a time, Poll. Coffee?"

She entertained Sella and wished she would go and knew Ferren knew she wanted Sella to go and found it amusing.

Every five minutes the collectors rang.

She had just talked Sella out the door when Lukia Collins gridded in. Lukia had never been Pollony's close friend in school. But now Lukia was always near, pushing, prodding at Pollony, smiling too brightly at Brendel.

"You two *are* coming to lunch with me."

"I've already asked Ferren to lunch."

"Silly, he can punch his own."

"Oh, no," Pollony said.

"I take the silver." Ferren smiled comfortably.

Lukia flipped her hand at him. "Atrocious man. Now, Pollony—"

It ended with Lukia inviting herself to come back to lunch. She had hardly vacated the grid when Elka appeared.

She unwrapped her purchases, smirking at Ferren. "You'd be surprised the number of hats a girl needs." She stayed half an hour.

Another young man came for her mother. Two salesman, a traveling circular and a friend came. Then Brendel was on the grid.

"Who these lugs for?"

"Uncle Ferren," she said shortly.

He lifted a lip at them, then bounced inside. "Forget your bill, Ferry? Hey, kid, punch drinks."

"I refused to honor it," Ferren said.

Brendel was already fishing in his pocket. "Drinks, kid."

She went to punch. She hated his trying to give money to everyone who came along.

"No, no, it is a matter of principle," Ferren insisted. But the money changed hands. "And there were certain other obligations."

"How much you need?" Brendel fished into his pocket again, grinning.

The bell rang. It was Lukia. "All these ravenous people waiting on me?" She had changed into a fire-red daysuit. "Dobble, you should have fed the beasts." She snapped her fingers. "Up, beasts. I'll help you punch, dob."

Glowering, Pollony moved toward the cook. Brendel followed, chattering and arguing with Lukia.

Pollony was beginning to think again of a swiftly accelerating car, of her body encased beside that of Latsker Smith and hurtled through dusty streets.

Brendel said, "How many for opera?"

She whirled and glared.

"Pollony's a bug on opera. Tell them how you like opera, kid."

She glared. The last time Lukia and Ferren had been here he had done this, and the time before. Didn't he have any imagination?

"Tell them, kid."

Fool! Didn't he know they were laughing at him?

She wanted to tear loose from her whole life. It was trivial. It was everyday. It was gossip and collections and stupid people. She had to tear loose or she would go on and on, all her life, being nothing but—herself.

She was too good for that.

She was too good for Brendel. He had tricked her and turned into a fattening fool. It was stupid to stay with him.

"Aw, come on, kid."

She drew herself up very straight and imagined she must look imposing. "I'll ask you all to leave," she said calmly.

Gone were the smiles.

"I'm closing my grid to public access. I'll ask you to leave immediately." The words came out stiffly and precisely. She imagined she must already be more than just herself.

"What the hell!"

"Brendel, you may come back when I am gone. I shall not return." She smiled, remotely. "I'm tired of punching your food and going collecting and quarreling and being hit around."

"I never hit you hard!" he said indignantly.

Lukia stared at him. "Dobble!"

"Well, she made me do it. What'm I supposed to do?"

"Dobble, you're perfectly justified!" But Lukia's eyes remained on Brendel, bright and greedy.

Pollony glared. She would not stay and fight Lukia for Brendel.

She flung the door open. The two collectors snapped alert. "I want to be alone," she intoned. Brendel eyed her balefully. But he had already noticed Lukia's interest. "Where we gonna go?" "We can go to my live," Lukia said. "I think Dobbie deserves her little whim." Brendel could not believe she was not going to fight. "You, kid! You're acting like a kid." Ferren took Brendel's arm. "Don't stoop to conventional pettiness, Brendel."

Brendel flushed. "I'm coming back. You're not rooking me out of my collections." He turned abruptly and stepped on the grid. Giving a three-passenger order, he disappeared. Lukia followed. Ferren stepped on, tossed bills to the collectors, and disappeared.

Pollony closed the door. She leaned against it, breathing the silence.

Then she hurried through the live, setting it in order. She straightened the books Ferren had been examining and found two missing.

Even as Lukia was punching dinner and saying all the things designed to make Brendel want Pollony back only briefly, as a point of pride, Pollony was whisking into a brisk trousersuit and wondering how much had piled up in the account where she kept her parents' gifts.

Even as Brendel was feeling Lukia's face with his eyes, letting her excitement speak to his own, Pollony was at the bank having her balance marked into her deposit clip.

Even as Ferren was smiling and wondering how much the two books would bring, Pollony was rapping at the door of the apartment house in centercity and being told that, yes, Mr. Smith still lived there.

Presently Latsker Smith roared around the corner and braked his car. He unfolded from the cockpit. He nodded.

"Have you got money to go to Boston yet?" She held herself very straight.

He shook his head.

"I have money," she said.

The pale eyes clung to her.

"My parents give me an allowance, and I could get jobs wherever we were. I just want to ride with you. I wouldn't even talk unless you wanted me to." She had to be with him. She had to sit and stand beside him, as relaxed and withdrawn as he was. She had to freeze people with her words and with her unrespondingness. She had to make an end of stupidity.

He took a deposit clip from a pocket. He pointed to a figure. "Match that?"

She withdrew her own clip and showed him a figure that exceeded his.

"How much allowance?"

She told him.

He nodded to the car. "Wait there. Take me five minutes to pack."

Dreadingly, joyously, she folded into the car. She watched as he lanked up the steps. She settled back, holding her shoulders rigid and her head straight. She would sit and stand by him. She would chill people with her reserve. She would be very solid and very adult.



But minutes later she looked at her wrist and saw that he had been more than five minutes. She wished he wouldn't take so long.

When he came down the steps two at a time, she tried not to remember that she hated people who came down steps two at a time. She didn't like the way his hair flopped against his forehead either. And she almost got out of the car when she saw his trousersuit was much too short. It made him look off-balance.

He got into the car. "Don't touch this." He pointed to the starter button. He scowled. "Or this or this or this." He pointed to the pedals, to the gearshift lever. He reached out and heaved his suitcase into her lap. He said brusquely, "Don't let it bump the door panel." A corner dug into her stomach.

And then he turned his head and ignored her. Completely. And she forgot the steps, the hair and the trousersuit and knew she would not get out of the car so long as he was in it.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POLLONY UNDIVERTED ***

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