Fifty Pounds

A.E. Coppard

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After tea Philip Repton and Eulalia Burnes discussed their gloomy circumstances. Repton was the precarious sort of London journalist, a dark deliberating man, lean and drooping, full of genteel unprosperity, who wrote articles about Single Tax, Diet and Reason, The Futility of this, that and the other, or The Significance of the other, that and this; all done with a bleak care and signed P. Stick Repton. Eulalia was brown-haired and hardy, undeliberating and intuitive; she had been milliner, clerk, domestic help and something in a canteen; and P. Stick Repton had, as one commonly says, picked her up at a time when she was drifting about London without a penny in her purse, without even a purse, and he had not yet put her down.

'I can't understand! It's sickening, monstrous!' Lally was fumbling with a match before the penny gas fire, for when it was evening, in September, it always got chilly on a floor so high up. Their flat was a fourth-floor one and there were — O, fifteen thousand stairs! Out of the window and beyond the chimneys you could see the long glare from lights in High Holborn, and hear the hums and hoots of buses. And that was a comfort. 'Lower! Turn it lower!' yelled Philip. The gas had ignited with an astounding thump; the kneeling Lally had thrown up her hands and dropped the matchbox, saying 'Damn' in the same tone as one might say Good morning to a milkman.

'You shouldn't do it, you know,' grumbled Repton. 'You'll blow us to the deuce.' And that was just like Lally, that was Lally all over, always: the gas, the nobs of sugar in his tea, the way she... and the, the... O dear, dear! In their early life together, begun so abruptly and illicitly six months before, her simple hidden beauties had delighted him by their surprises; they had peered and shone brighter, had waned and recurred; she was less the one star in his universe than a faint galaxy.

This room of theirs was a dingy room, very small but very high. A lanky gas tube swooped from the middle of the ceiling towards the middle of the table-cloth as if burning to discover whether that was pink or saffron or fawn — and it was hard to tell — but on perceiving that the cloth, whatever its tint, was disturbingly spangled with dozens of cup-stains and several large envelopes, the gas tube in the violence of its

disappointment contorted itself abruptly, assumed a lateral bend, and put out its tongue of flame at an oleograph of Mona Lisa which hung above the fireplace.

Those envelopes were the torment to Lally; they were the sickening, monstrous manifestations which she could not understand. There were always some of them lying there, or about the room, bulging with manuscripts that no editors — they couldn't have perused them — wanted; and so it had come to the desperate point when, as Lally was saying, something had to be done about things. Repton had done all he could; he wrote unceasingly, all day, all night, but all his projects insolvently withered, and morning, noon and evening brought his manuscripts back as unwanted as snow in summer. He was depressed and baffled and weary. And there was simply nothing else he could do, nothing in the world. Apart from his own wonderful gift he was useless, Lally knew, and he was being steadily and stupidly murdered by those editors. It was weeks since they had eaten a proper meal. Whenever they obtained any real nice food now, they sat down to it silently, intently and destructively. As far as Lally could tell there seemed to be no prospect of any such meals again in life or time, and the worst of it all was Philip's pride — he was actually too proud to ask anyone for assistance! Not that he would be too proud to accept help if it were offered to him: O no, if it came he would rejoice at it! But still, he had that nervous shrinking pride that coiled upon itself, and he would not ask; he was like a wounded animal that hid its woe far away from the rest of the world. Only Lally knew his need, but why could not other people see it — those villainous editors! His own wants were so modest and he had a generous mind.

'Phil,' Lally said, seating herself at the table. Repton was lolling in a wicker arm-chair beside the gas fire. 'I'm not going on waiting and waiting any longer, I must go and get a job. Yes, I must. We get poorer and poorer. We can't go on like it any longer, there's no use, and I can't bear it.'

'No, no, I can't have that, my dear...'

'But I will!' she cried. 'O, why are you so proud?'

'Proud! Proud!' He stared into the gas fire, his tired arms hanging limp over the arms of the chair. 'You don't understand. There are things the flesh has to endure, and things the spirit too must endure...' Lally loved to hear him talk like that; and it was just as well, for Repton was much given to such discoursing. Deep in her mind was the conviction that he had simple access to profound, almost unimaginable, wisdom. 'It isn't pride, it is just that there is a certain order in life, in my life, that it would not do for. I could not bear it,

I could never rest: I can't explain that, but just believe it, Lally.' His head was empty but unbowed; he spoke quickly and finished almost angrily. 'If only I had money! It's not for myself. I can stand all this, any amount of it. I've done so before, and I shall do again and again I've no doubt. But I have to think of you.'

That was fiercely annoying. Lally got up and went and stood over him.

'Why are you so stupid? I can think for myself and fend for myself. I'm not married to you. You have your pride, but I can't starve for it. And I've a pride, too, I'm a burden to you. If you won't let me work now while we're together, then I must leave you and work for myself.'

'Leave! Leave me now? When things are so bad?' His white face gleamed his perturbation up at her. 'O well, go, go.' But then, mournfully moved, he took her hands and fondled them. 'Don't be a fool, Lally; it's only a passing depression, this; I've known worse before, and it never lasts long, something turns up, always does. There's good and bad in it all, but there's more goodness than anything else. You see.'

'I don't want to wait for ever, even for goodness. I don't believe in it, I never see it, never feel it, it is no use to me. I could go and steal, or walk the streets, or do any dirty thing — easily. What's the good of goodness if it isn't any use?'

'But, but,' Repton stammered, 'what's the use of bad, if it isn't any better?'

'I mean...' began Lally.

'You don't mean anything, my dear girl.'

'I mean, when you haven't any choice it's no use talking moral, or having pride, it's stupid. O, my darling' — she slid down to him and lay against his breast — 'it's not you, you are everything to me; that's why it angers me so, this treatment of you, all hard blows and no comfort. It will never be any different, I feel it will never be different now, and it terrifies me.'

'Pooh!' Repton kissed her and comforted her: she was his beloved. 'When things are wrong with us our fancies take their tone from our misfortunes, badness, evil. I sometimes have a queer stray feeling that one day I shall be hanged. Yes, I don't know what for, what could I be hanged for? And, do you know, at other times I've had a kind of intuition that one day I shall be — what do you think? — Prime Minister of the

country! Yes, well, you can't reason against such things. I know what I should do, I've my plans, I've even made a list of the men for my Cabinet. Yes, well, there you are!'

But Lally had made up her mind to leave him; she would leave him for a while and earn her own living. When things took a turn for the better she would join him again. She told him this. She had friends who were going to get her some work.

'But what are you going to do, Lally, I...'

'I'm going away to Glasgow,' said she.

'Glasgow?' He had heard things about Glasgow! Good heavens!

'I've some friends there,' the girl went on steadily. She had got up and was sitting on the arm of his chair. 'I wrote to them last week. They can get me a job almost any when, and I can stay with them. They want me to go — they've sent the money for my fare. I think I shall have to go.'

'You don't love me then!' said the man.

Lally kissed him.

'But do you? Tell me!'

'Yes, my dear,' said Lally, 'of course.'

An uneasiness possessed him; he released her moodily. Where was their wild passion flown to? She was staring at him intently, then she tenderly said: 'My love, don't you be melancholy, don't take it to heart so. I'd cross the world to find you a pin.'

'No, no, you mustn't do that,' he exclaimed idiotically. At her indulgent smile he grimly laughed too, and then sank back in his chair. The girl stood up and went about the room doing vague nothings, until he spoke again.

'So you are tired of me?'

Lally went to him steadily and knelt down by his chair. 'If I was tired of you, Phil, I'd kill myself.'

Moodily he ignored her. 'I suppose it had to end like this. But I've loved you desperately.' Lally was now weeping on his shoulder, and he began to twirl a lock of her rich brown hair absently with his fingers as if it were a seal on a watch chain. 'I'd been thinking we might as well get married, as soon as things had turned round.'

'I'll come back, Phil' — she clasped him so tenderly — 'as soon as you want me.'

'But you are not really going?'

'Yes,' said Lally.

'You're not to go!'

'I wouldn't go if... if anything... if you had any luck. But as we are now I must go away, to give you a chance. You see that, darling Phil?'

'You're not to go; I object. I just love you, Lally, that's all, and of course I want to keep you here.'

'Then what are we to do?'

'I... don't... know. Things drop out of the sky. But we must be together. You're not to go.'

Lally sighed: he was stupid. And Repton began to turn over in his mind the dismal knowledge that she had taken this step in secret, she had not told him while she was trying to get to Glasgow. Now here she was with the fare, and as good as gone! Yes, it was all over.

'When do you propose to go?'

'Not for a few days, nearly a fortnight.'

'Good God,' he moaned. Yes, it was all over then. He had never dreamed that this would be the end, that she would be the first to break away. He had always envisaged a tender scene in which he could tell her, with dignity and gentle humour, that... Well, he never had quite hit upon the words he would use, but that was the kind of setting. And now, here she was with her fare to Glasgow, her heart turned towards Glasgow, and she as good as gone to Glasgow! No dignity, no gentle humour — in fact he was enraged — sullen but enraged; he boiled furtively. But he said with mournful calm:

'I've so many misfortunes, I suppose I can bear this, too.' Gloomy and tragic he was.

'Dear, darling Phil, it's for your own sake I'm going.'

Repton sniffed derisively. 'We are always mistaken in the reasons for our commonest actions; Nature derides us all. You are sick of me; I can't blame you.'

Eulalia was so moved that she could only weep again. Nevertheless she wrote to her friends in Glasgow promising to be with them by a stated date.

Towards the evening of the following day, at a time when she was alone, a letter arrived addressed to herself. It was from a firm of solicitors in Cornhill inviting her to call upon them. A flame leaped up in Lally's heart: it might mean the offer of some work which would keep her in London after all! If only it were so she would accept it on the spot, and Philip would have to be made to see the reasonability of it. But at the office in Cornhill a more astonishing outcome awaited her. There she showed her letter to a little office boy with scarcely any fingernails and very little nose, and he took it to an elderly man who had a superabundance of both.

Smiling affably the long-nosed man led her upstairs into the sombre den of a gentleman who had some white hair and a lumpy yellow complexion. Having put to her a number of questions relating to her family history, and appearing to be satisfied and not at all surprised by her answers, this gentleman revealed to Lally the overpowering tidings that she was entitled to a legacy of eighty pounds by the will of a forgotten and recently deceased aunt. Subject to certain formalities, proofs of identity and so forth, he promised Lally the possession of the money within about a week.

Lally's descent to the street, her emergence into the clamouring atmosphere, her walk along to Holborn, were accomplished in a state of blessedness and trance, a trance in which life became a thousand times aerially enlarged, movement was a delight, and thought a rapture. She would give all the money to Philip, and if he very much wanted it she would even marry him now. Perhaps, though, she would save ten pounds of it for herself. The other seventy would keep them for... it was impossible to say how long it would keep them. They could have a little holiday somewhere in the country together, he was so worn and weary. Perhaps she had better not tell Philip anything at all about it until her lovely money was really in her hand. Nothing in life, at least nothing about money, was ever certain; something horrible might happen at the crucial moment and the money be snatched from her very fingers. O, she would go mad then! So for some days she kept her wonderful secret.

Their imminent separation had given Repton a tender sadness that was very moving. 'Eulalia,' he would say; for he had suddenly adopted the formal version of her name: 'Eulalia, we've had a great time together, a wonderful time, there will never be anything like it again.' She often shed tears, but she kept the grand secret still locked in her heart. Indeed, it occurred to her very forcibly that even now his stupid pride might cause him to reject her money altogether. Silly, silly Philip! Of course it would have been different if they had married; he would naturally have taken it then, and really, it would have been

his. She would have to think out some dodge to overcome his scruples. Scruples were such a nuisance, but then it was very noble of him: there were not many men who wouldn't take money from a girl they were living with.

Well, a week later she was summoned again to the office in Cornhill and received from the white-haired gentleman a cheque for eighty pounds drawn on the Bank of England to the order of Eulalia Burnes. Miss Burnes desired to cash the cheque straightway, so the large-nosed elderly clerk was deputed to accompany her to the Bank of England close by and assist in procuring the money.

'A very nice errand!' exclaimed that gentleman as they crossed to Threadneedle Street past the Royal Exchange. Miss Burnes smiled her acknowledgment, and he began to tell her of other windfalls that had been disbursed in his time — but vast sums, very great persons — until she began to infer that Blackbean, Carp and Ransome were universal dispensers of heavenly largesse.

'Yes, but,' said the clerk, hawking a good deal from an affliction of catarrh, 'I never got any myself, and never will. If I did, do you know what I would do with it?' But at that moment they entered the portals of the bank, and in the excitement of the business, Miss Burnes forgot to ask the clerk how he would use a legacy, and thus she possibly lost a most valuable slice of knowledge. With one fifty-pound note and six five-pound notes clasped in her handbag she bade good-bye to the long-nosed clerk, who shook her fervently by the hand and assured her that Blackbean, Carp and Ransome would be delighted at all times to undertake any commissions on her behalf. Then she fled along the pavement, blithe as a bird, until she was breathless with her flight. Presently she came opposite the window of a typewriting agency. Tripping airily into its office she laid a scrap of paper before a lovely Hebe who was typing there.

'I want this typed, if you please,' said Lally.

The beautiful typist read the words on the scrap of paper and stared at the heiress.

'I don't want any address to appear,' said Lally; 'just a plain sheet, please.'

A few moments later she received a neatly typed page folded in an envelope, and after paying the charge she hurried off to a District Messenger office. Here she addressed the envelope in a disguised hand to P. Stick Repton, Esq. at their address in Holborn. She read the typed letter through again:

Dear Sir,

In common with many others I entertain the greatest admiration for your literary abilities, and I therefore beg you to accept this tangible expression of that admiration from a constant reader of your articles who, for purely private reasons, desires to remain anonymous.

Your very sincere, WELLWISHER.

Placing the fifty-pound note upon the letter Lally carefully folded them together and put them both into the envelope. The attendant then gave it to a uniformed lad, who sauntered off whistling very casually, somewhat to Lally's alarm — he looked so small and careless to be entrusted with fifty pounds. Then Lally went out, changed one of her five-pound notes and had a lunch — half-a-crown, but it was worth it. O, how enchanting and exciting London was! In two days more she would have been gone: now she would have to write off at once to her Glasgow friends and tell them she had changed her mind, that she was now settled in London. O, how enchanting and delightful! And to-night he would take her out to dine in some fine restaurant, and they would do a theatre. She did not really want to marry Phil, they had got on so well without it, but if he wanted that too she did not mind — much. They would go away into the country for a whole week. What money would do! Marvellous! And looking round the restaurant she felt sure that no other woman there, no matter how well-dressed, had as much as thirty pounds in her handbag.

Returning home in the afternoon she became conscious of her own betraying radiance; very demure and subdued and usual she would have to be, or he might guess the cause of it. Though she danced up the long flights of stairs, she entered their room quietly, but the sight of Repton staring out of the window, forlorn as a drowsy horse, overcame her and she rushed to embrace him, crying 'Darling!'

'Hullo, hullo!' he smiled.

'I'm so fond of you, Phil dear.'

'But... but you're deserting me!'

'O no,' she cried archly; 'I'm not — not deserting you.'

'All right.' Repton shrugged his shoulders, but he seemed happier. He did not mention the fifty pounds then: perhaps it had not come yet — or perhaps he was thinking to surprise her.

'Let's go for a walk, it's a screaming lovely day,' said Lally.

'O, I dunno.' He yawned and stretched. 'Nearly tea-time, isn't it?'

'Well, we...' Lally was about to suggest having tea out somewhere, but she bethought herself in time. 'I suppose it is. Yes, it is.'

So they stayed in for tea. No sooner was tea over than Repton remarked that he had an engagement somewhere. Off he went, leaving Lally disturbed and anxious. Why had he not mentioned the fifty pounds? Surely it had not gone to the wrong address? This suspicion once formed, Lally soon became certain, tragically sure, that she had misaddressed the envelope herself. A conviction that she had put No. 17 instead of No. 71 was almost overpowering, and she fancied that she hadn't even put London on the envelope — but Glasgow. That was impossible, though, but — O, the horror! — somebody else was enjoying their fifty pounds. The girl's fears were not allayed by the running visit she paid to the messenger office that evening, for the rash imp who had been entrusted with her letter had gone home and therefore could not be interrogated until the morrow. By now she was sure that he had blundered; he had been so casual with an important letter like that! Lally never did, and never would again, trust any little boys who wore their hats so much on one side, were so glossy with hair-oil, and went about whistling just to madden you. She burned to ask where the boy lived, but in spite of her desperate desire she could not do so. She dared not, it would expose her to... to something or other she could only feel, not name; you had to keep cool, to let nothing, not even curiosity, master you.

Hurrying home again, though hurrying was not her custom, and there was no occasion for it, she wrote the letter to her Glasgow friends. Then it crossed her mind that it would be wiser not to post the letter that night; better wait until the morning, after she had discovered what the horrible little messenger had done with her letter. Bed was a poor refuge from her thoughts, but she accepted it, and when Phil came home she was not sleeping. While he undressed he told her of the lecture he had been to, something about Agrarian Depopulation it was, but even after he had stretched himself beside her, he did not speak about the fifty pounds. Nothing, not even curiosity, should master her, and so she calmed herself, and in time fitfully slept.

At breakfast next morning he asked her what she was going to do that day.

'O,' replied Lally offhandedly, 'I've a lot of things to see to, you know; I must go out. I'm sorry the porridge is so awful this morning, Phil, but...'

'Awful?' he broke in. 'But it's nicer than usual! Where are you going? I thought — our last day, you know — we might go out somewhere together.'

'Dear Phil!' Lovingly she stretched out a hand to be caressed across the table. 'But I've several things to do. I'll come back early, eh?' She got up and hurried round to embrace him.

'All right,' he said. 'Don't be long.'

Off went Lally to the messenger office, at first as happy as a bird, but on approaching the building the old tremors assailed her. Inside the room was the cocky little boy who bade her 'Good morning' with laconic assurance. Lally at once questioned him, and when he triumphantly produced a delivery book she grew limp with her suppressed fear, one fear above all others. For a moment she did not want to look at it: Truth hung by a hair, and as long as it so hung she might swear it was a lie. But there it was, written right across the page, an entry of a letter delivered, signed for in the well-known hand, P. Stick Repton. There was no more doubt, only a sharp indignant agony as if she had been stabbed with a dagger of ice.

'O yes, thank you,' said Lally calmly. 'Did you hand it to him yourself?'

'Yes'm,' replied the boy, and he described Philip.

'Did he open the letter?'

'Yes'm.'

'There was no answer?'

'No'm.'

'All right.' Fumbling in her bag, she added: 'I think I've got a sixpence for you.'

Out in the street again she tremblingly chuckled to herself. 'So that is what he is like, after all. Cruel and mean!' He was going to let her go and keep the money in secret to himself! How despicable! Cruel and mean, cruel and mean. She hummed it to herself: 'Cruel and mean! Cruel and mean!' It eased her tortured bosom. 'Cruel and mean!' And he was waiting at home for her, waiting with a smile for their last day together. It would

have to be their last day. She tore up the letter to her Glasgow friends, for now she must go to them. So cruel and mean! Let him wait! A bus stopped beside her and she stepped on to it, climbing to the top and sitting there while the air chilled her burning features. The bus made a long journey to Plaistow. She knew nothing of Plaistow, she wanted to know nothing of Plaistow, but she did not care where the bus took her; she only wanted to keep moving, and moving away, as far away as possible from Holborn and from him, and not once let those hovering tears down fall.

From Plaistow she turned and walked back as far as the Mile End Road. Thereabouts, wherever she went she met clergymen, dozens of them. There must be a conference, about charity or something, Lally thought. With a vague desire to confide her trouble to some one, she observed them; it would relieve the strain. But there was none she could tell her sorrow to, and failing that, when she came to a neat restaurant she entered it and consumed a fish. Just beyond her three sleek parsons were lunching, sleek and pink; bald, affable, consoling men, all very much alike.

'I saw Carter yesterday,' she heard one say. Lally liked listening to the conversation of strangers, and she had often wondered what clergymen talked about among themselves.

'What, Carter! Indeed. Nice fellow Carter. How was he?'

'Carter loves preaching, you know!' cried the third.

'O yes, he loves preaching!'

'Ha ha ha, yes.'

'Ha ha ha, oom.'

'Awf'ly good preacher, though.'

'Yes, awf'ly good.'

'And he's awf'ly good at comic songs, too.'

'Yes?'

'Yes!'

Three glasses of water, a crumbling of bread, a silence suggestive of prayer.

'How long has he been married?'

'Twelve years,' returned the cleric who had met Carter.

'O, twelve years!'

'I've only been married twelve years myself,' said the oldest of them.

'Indeed!'

'Yes, I tarried very long.'

'Ha, ha, ha, yes.'

'Ha, ha, ha, oom.'

'Er... have you any family?'

'No.'

Very delicate and dainty in handling their food they were; very delicate and dainty.

'My rectory is a magnificent old house,' continued the recently married one. 'Built originally 1700. Burnt down. Rebuilt 1784.'

'Indeed!'

'Aumph!'

'Seventeen bedrooms and two delightful tennis courts.'

'O, well done!' the others cried, and then they all fell with genteel gusto upon a pale blancmange.

From the restaurant the girl sauntered about for a while, and then there was a cinema wherein, seated warm and comfortable in the twitching darkness, she partially stilled her misery. Some nervous fancy kept her roaming in that district for most of the evening. She knew that if she left it she would go home, and she did not want to go home. The naphtha lamps of the booths at Mile End were bright and distracting, and the hum of the evening business was good despite the smell. A man was weaving sweetstuffs from a pliant roll of warm toffee that he wrestled with as the athlete wrestles with the python. There were stalls with things of iron, with fruit or fish, pots and pans, leather, string, nails. Watches for use or for ornament — what d'ye lack? A sailor told naughty stories while selling bunches of green grapes out of barrels of cork dust which he swore he had stolen from the Queen of Honolulu. People clamoured for them both. You could buy back numbers of the comic papers at four a penny, rolls of linoleum for very little more — and use either for the other's purpose.

'At thrippence per foot, mesdames,' cried the sweating cheapjack, lashing himself into ecstatic furies, 'that's a piece of fabric weft and woven with triple-strength Andalusian jute, double-hot-pressed with rubber from the island of Pagama, and stencilled by an artist as poisoned his grandfather's cook. That's a piece of fabric, mesdames, as the king of heaven himself wouldn't mind to put down in his parlour — if he had the chance. Do I ask thrippence a foot for that piece of fabric? Mesdames, I was never a daring chap.'

Lally watched it all, she looked and listened; then looked and did not see, listened and did not hear. Her misery was not the mere disappointment of love, not that kind of misery alone; it was the crushing of an ideal in which love had had its home, a treachery cruel and mean. The sky of night, so smooth, so bestarred, looked wrinkled through her screen of unshed tears; her sorrow was a wild cloud that troubled the moon with darkness.

In miserable desultory wandering she had spent her day, their last day, and now, returning to Holborn in the late evening, she suddenly began to hurry, for a new possibility had come to lighten her dejection. Perhaps, after all, so whimsical he was, he was keeping his 'revelation' until the last day, or even the last hour, when (nothing being known to her, as he imagined) all hopes being gone and they had come to the last kiss, he would take her in his arms and laughingly kill all grief, waving the succour of a flimsy bank-note like a flag of triumph. Perhaps even, in fact surely, that was why he wanted to take her out to-day! O, what a blind wicked stupid girl she was, and in a perfect frenzy of bubbling faith she panted homewards for his revealing sign.

From the pavement below she could see that their room was lit. Weakly she climbed the stairs and opened the door. Phil was standing up, staring so strangely at her. Helplessly and half-guilty she began to smile. Without a word said he came quickly to her and crushed her in his arms, her burning silent man, loving and exciting her. Lying against his breast in that constraining embrace, their passionate disaster was gone, her doubts were flown; all perception of the feud was torn from her and deeply drowned in a gulf of bliss. She was aware only of the consoling delight of their reunion, of his amorous kisses, of his tongue tingling the soft down on her upper lip that she disliked and he admired. All the soft wanton endearments that she so loved to hear him speak were singing in her ears, and then he suddenly swung and lifted her up, snapped out the gaslight, and carried her off to bed.

Life that is born of love feeds on love; if the wherewithal be hidden, how shall we stay our hunger? The galaxy may grow dim, or the stars drop in a wandering void; you can neither keep them in your hands nor crumble them in your mind.

What was it Phil had once called her? Numskull! After all it was his own fifty pounds, she had given it to him freely, it was his to do as he liked with. A gift was a gift, it was poor spirit to send money to anyone with the covetous expectation that it would return to you. She would surely go to-morrow.

The next morning he awoke her early, and kissed her.

'What time does your train go?' said he.

'Train!' Lally scrambled from his arms and out of bed.

A fine day, a glowing day. O bright, sharp air! Quickly she dressed, and went into the other room to prepare their breakfast. Soon he followed, and they ate silently together, although whenever they were near each other he caressed her tenderly. Afterwards she went into the bedroom and packed her bag; there was nothing more to be done, he was beyond hope. No woman waits to be sacrificed, least of all those who sacrifice themselves with courage and a quiet mind. When she was ready to go she took her portmanteau into the sitting-room; he, too, made to put on his hat and coat.

'No,' murmured Lally, 'you're not to come with me.'

'Pooh, my dear!' he protested; 'nonsense.'

'I won't have you come,' cried Lally with an asperity that impressed him.

'But you can't carry that bag to the station by yourself!'

'I shall take a taxi.' She buttoned her gloves.

'My dear!' His humorous deprecation annoyed her.

'O, bosh!' Putting her gloved hands around his neck she kissed him coolly. 'Good-bye. Write to me often. Let me know how you thrive, won't you, Phil? And' — a little waveringly — 'love me always.' She stared queerly at the two dimples in his cheeks; each dimple was a nest of hair that could never be shaved.

'Lally darling, beloved girl! I never loved you more than now, this moment. You are more precious than ever to me.'

At that, she knew her moment of sardonic revelation had come — but she dared not use it, she let it go. She could not so deeply humiliate him by revealing her knowledge of his perfidy. A compassionate divinity smiles at our puny sins. She knew his perfidy, but to triumph in it would defeat her own pride. Let him keep his gracious, mournful airs to the last, false though they were. It was better to part so, better from such a figure than from an abject scarecrow, even though both were the same inside. And something capriciously reminded her, for a flying moment, of elephants she had seen swaying with the grand movement of tidal water — and groping for monkey-nuts.

Lally tripped down the stairs alone. At the end of the street she turned for a last glance. There he was, high up in the window, waving good-byes. And she waved back at him.

Story Notes:

"Fifty Pounds" showcases A.E. Coppard at his most characteristic: lyrical, quietly ironic, and deeply sympathetic to characters living at the margins of respectability. Like much of his best work, it locates profound emotional drama inside the cramped circumstances of ordinary life.

The story's central irony is elegant in its construction. Lally devises her anonymous gift precisely to sidestep Philip's pride – that "nervous shrinking pride that coiled upon itself" – only to have his apparent silence about it become the very thing that breaks her faith in him. Coppard sets a trap of misunderstanding and springs it with perfect timing, so that the reader, knowing what Lally does not yet know (that the letter was delivered), watches her build her case against Philip from nothing. It is a masterclass in free indirect style: we are so thoroughly inside Lally's perspective that her logic feels airtight even as we sense its flaw.

What elevates the story beyond a neat ironic fable is Coppard's refusal to resolve it cleanly. We never learn why Philip said nothing – whether from pride, from a plan to surprise her, or from something less admirable. The ending withholds the revelation Lally almost makes, and she departs still deceived, waving from the street while he waves from the window. It is a tableau of connection and separation that manages to be simultaneously tender and devastating.

Coppard's prose is a constant pleasure throughout. His descriptive set-pieces – the gas tube "putting out its tongue of flame" at the Mona Lisa, the Mile End cheapjack with his Andalusian jute – have the compressed vitality of good poetry. The digression into the clergymen's lunch, apparently incongruous, works beautifully as a counterpoint: their sleek, well-fed complacency throws Lally's hunger – physical, emotional, moral – into sharper relief.

Lally herself is one of Coppard's great creations: practical, clear-eyed, generous, and wrong. Her generosity is genuine and her reasoning about it is sound, which makes her final

humiliation all the more affecting. Philip, by contrast, remains largely opaque — and perhaps deliberately so. He is defined by what Lally projects onto him, which is partly the story's point.

"Fifty Pounds" is finally a story about the limitations of knowing another person, and the strange courage it takes to love someone anyway. Coppard frames this without sentimentality, and the memory it leaves — of elephants "groping for monkey-nuts," that sudden strange image Lally turns to at the moment of parting — suggests a writer whose instincts were always more poetic than programmatic.