



Polly of the Circus

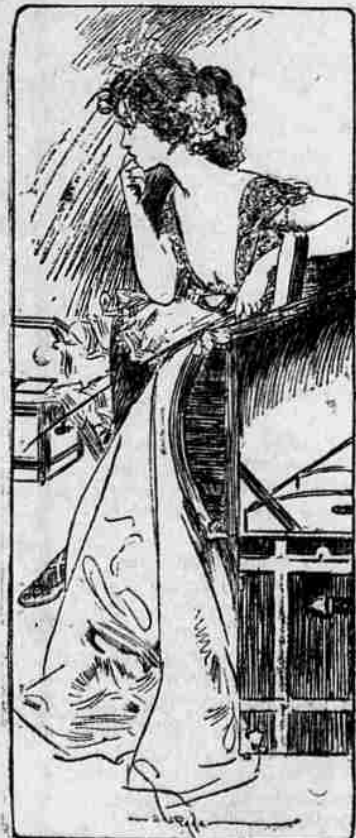
BY MARGARET MAYO

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Here is a circus romance redolent of the fresh sawdust of the ring, vibrant with the incessant clamor of the band, panoramic in its ever moving display of clowns, acrobats, horses and captive wild animals. You will read of Polly, the daughter of the circus, and of Bingo, on whose broad back she rode; of the "leap of death" girl; of "Muvver Jim," the boss canvasman, and Toby, the clown, who loved the circus orphan and cared for her like father and mother; of Deacon Strong, who hated a circus, and of Rev. John Douglas, who grew to love a circus girl. You will read of gossip that threatened to divide a pastor and his flock, of Ruth and Naomi, of a show girl's renunciation and of Polly's first and last ride on Barbarian, the circus horse.

CHAPTER I

THE band of the "Great American Circus" was playing noisily. The performance was in full swing. Beside a shabby trunk in the women's dressing tent sat a young, wistful faced girl, chin in hand, unheeding the chatter of the women about her or the picturesque disarray of the surrounding objects. Her eyes had been so long accustomed to the glitter and tinsel of circus fineries that she saw nothing unusual in a picture that might have held a painter spellbound. Circling the inside of the tent and forming a double line down the center were partially unpacked trunks belching forth impudent masses of satins, laces, artificial hair, paper flowers and paste jewels. The scent of moist earth mingled oddly with the perfumed odors of the garments heaped on the grass. Here and there high circles of lights threw a strong, steady glare upon the half clad figure of a robust acrobat or the thin, drooping shoulders of a less stalwart sister. Temporary ropes stretched from one pole to another were laden with bright colored stockings, gaudy, spangled gowns or dusty street clothes discarded by the performers before slipping into their circus attire. There were no nails or hooks, so hats and veils were pinned to the canvas walls. The furniture was limited to one camp chair in front of each trunk, the ill of which served as a tray for the paints, powders and other essentials of makeup. A pail of water stood by the side of each chair, so that the performers



In the women's dressing tent sat a young, wistful faced girl.

might wash the delicately shaded lights, handkerchiefs and other small articles not to be intrusted to the slow, careless process of the village laundry. Some of these had been washed tonight and hung to dry on the lines between the dusty street garments.

Women whose "turns" came late sat about, half clothed, reading, crocheting or sewing, while others added pencilled eyebrows, powder or rouge to their already exaggerated makeups. Here and there a child was putting her sawdust baby to sleep in the till of her trunk before beginning her part in the evening's entertainment. Young and old went about their duties with a systematic, businesslike air, and even the little knot of excited women near Polly—it seemed that one of the men had upset a circus tradition—kept a sharp lookout for their turns.

"What do you think about it, Polly?" asked a handsome brunette as she surveyed herself in the costume of a Roman charioteer.

"About what?" asked Polly vacantly. "Leave Polly alone! She's in one of her trances!" called a motherly, good natured woman whose trunk stood next to Polly's and whose business was to support a son and three daughters upon stalwart shoulders, both figuratively and literally.

"Well, I ain't in any trance," answered the dark girl, "and I think it's pretty tough for him to take up with a rank outsider and expect us to warm up to her as though he'd married one of our own folks." She tossed her head, the pride of class distinction welling high in her ample bosom.

"He ain't askin' us to warm up to her," contradicted Mlle. Eloise, a pale, light haired sprite, who had arrived late and was making undignified efforts to get out of her clothes by way of her head. She was Polly's understudy and next in line for the star place in the bill.

"Well, Barker has put her into the 'leap of death' stunt, ain't he?" continued the brunette. "Course that ain't a regular circus act," she added, somewhat mollified, "and so far she's had to dress with the freaks, but the next thing we know he'll be ringin' her in on a regular stunt and be puttin' her in to dress with us."

"No danger of that," sneered the blond. "Barker is too old a stager to mix up his sheep and his goats." Polly had again lost the thread of the conversation. Her mind had gone roving to the night when the frightened girl about whom they were talking had made her first appearance in the circus lot, clinging timidly to the hand of the man who had just made her his wife. Her eyes had met Polly's with a look of appeal that had gone straight to the child's simple heart.

A few nights later the newcomer had allowed herself to be strapped into the cumbersome "leap of death" machine which hurled itself through space at each performance and flung itself down with force enough to break the neck of any unskilled rider. Courage and steady nerve were the requisites for the job, so the manager had said, but any physician would have told him that only a trained acrobat could long endure the nervous strain, the muscular tension and the physical rack of such an ordeal.

What matter? The few dollars earned in this way would mean a great deal to the mother whom the girl's marriage had left desolate.

Polly had looked on hungrily the night that the mother had taken the daughter in her arms to say farewell in the little country town where the circus had played before her marriage. She could remember no woman's arms about her, for it was fourteen years since tender hands had carried her mother from the performers' tent into the moonlit lot to die. The baby was so used to seeing "mumstie" throw herself wearily on the ground after coming out of the "big top" exhausted that she crept to the woman's side, as usual, that night and gazed laughingly into the sightless eyes, gurgling and prattling and stroking the unresponsive face. There were tears from those who watched, but no word was spoken.

Clown Toby and the big "boss canvasman" Jim had always taken turns amusing and guarding little Polly while her mother rode in the ring. So Toby now carried the babe to another side of the lot, and Jim bore the lifeless body of the mother to the distant ticket wagon, now closed for the night, and laid it upon the seller's cot.

"It's allus like this in the end," he murmured as he drew a piece of canvas over the white face and turned away to give orders to the men who were beginning to load the "props" used earlier in the performance.

When the show moved on that night it was Jim's strong arms that lifted the mite of a Polly close to his stalwart heart and climbed with her to the high seat on the head wagon. Uncle Toby was intrusted with the brown satchel in which the mother had al-

ways carried Polly's scanty wardrobe. It seemed to these two men that the eyes of the woman were fixed steadily upon them.

Barker, the manager, a large, noisy, good natured fellow, at first mumbled something about the kid being "excess baggage," but his objections were only half hearted, for, like the others, he was already under the hypnotic spell of the baby's round, confiding eyes, and he eventually contented himself with an occasional reprimand to Toby, who was now sometimes late on his ruses. Polly wondered at these times why the old man's stories were so suddenly cut short just as she was so "comfy" in the soft grass at his feet. The boys who used to look sharp because of their boss at loading time now learned that they might loiter so long at "Muvver Jim" was "hikin' it round for the kid." It was Polly who had dubbed big Jim "Muvver," and the sobriquet had stuck to him in spite

of his six feet two and shoulders that an athlete might have envied. Little by little Toby grew more stooped, and small lines of anxiety crept into the brownish circles beneath Jim's eyes, the lips that had once shut so firmly became tender and tremulous, but neither of the men would willingly have gone back to the old emptiness. It was a red letter day in the circus when Polly first managed to climb up on the pole of an unhitched wagon and from there to the back of a friendly Shetland pony. Jim and Toby had been "neglectin' her education," they declared, and from that time on the blood of Polly's ancestors was given full encouragement.

Barker was quick to grasp the advantage of adding the kid to the daily parade. She made her first appearance in the streets upon something

very like a Newfoundland dog, guarded from the rear by Jim and from the fore by a white faced clown who was thought to be all the funniest because he twisted his neck so much.

From the street parade to Polly's first appearance in the big top had seemed a short while to Jim and Toby. They were proud to see her circling the ring in bright colors and to hear the cheers of the people, but a sense of loss was upon them.

"I always said she'd do it!" cried Barker, who now took upon himself the credit of Polly's triumph.

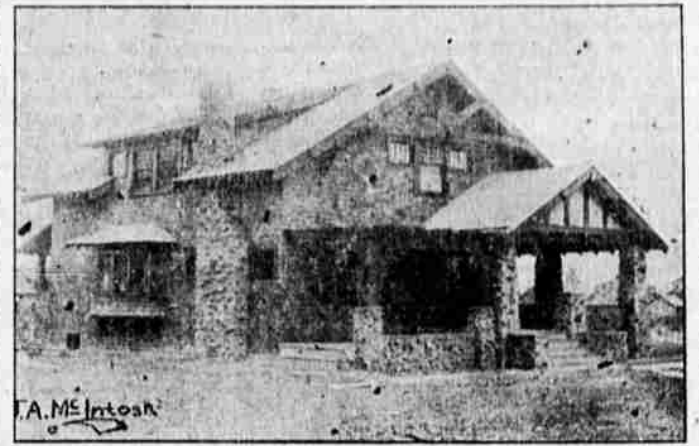
And what a triumph it was! Polly danced as serenely on Bingo's back as she might have done on the concert boards. She swayed gracefully with the music. Her tiny sandals twinkled as she stood first upon one foot and then upon the other.

Uncle Toby forgot to use many of his tricks that night, and Jim left the loading of the wagons to take care of itself while he hovered near the entrance, anxious and breathless. The performers crowded around the girl with outstretched hands and congratulations as she came out of the ring to cheers and applause.

But "Big Jim" stood apart. He was thinking of the buttons that his clumsy fingers used to force into the stiff, starched holes too small for them and of the pigtail so stubborn at the ends, and Toby was remembering the little shoes that had once needed to be laced in the cold, dark mornings and the strings that were always snapping.

Something had gone. They were not philosophers to reason, like Emerson, that for everything we lose we gain something. They were simple souls, these two; they could only feel.

(To be continued.)



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