

Storm Country Polly

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CHAPTER XIII

No more unhappy girl lived in all of Tompkins county than Polly Hopkins. Seemingly never-ending days dragged by their minutes one by one. When she woke up in the morning she wished it were night! When she crawled into bed she wished it were morning! And every twenty-four hours brought renewed anguish to Jerry. Pollyop spent most of her time trying to soothe him.

And thus the two little waifs lived until the news spread through the Silent City that Evelyn Robertson and Marcus MacKenzie were going to be married in a fashionable church in Ithaca.

The wedding day dawned bright with sunshine; and, together with Jerry, Pollyop went into town, hid herself in the thick shrubbery in Dewitt park and watched with tormented soul the gorgeous display of riches.

She saw Evelyn in all her beauty and the resplendent Marcus; also the haughty Mrs. Robertson, leaning on the arm of Robert Percival. How pale his face was! Great tears blinded Polly's eyes as she wondered vaguely and bewilderedly if he ever thought of her.

It was a long, sad night which she spent after that event, but still she lived on and carried her heavy burden in silence. Week by week she counted on her slender fingers the months which would have to be lived through before Daddy Hopkins could come home. Oh, how she wanted to steal into his arms, to lay her head against him and to be sure he was in the Silent City for ever and ever! Jerry must have him, too, and many were the promises she made to the child during the wild fall weather of the Storm country that perhaps tomorrow Daddy would come, perhaps the next day, until the child's face too gathered an expression as if he were always listening for footsteps outside the hut.

The autumn rains had no more than set in before Marcus MacKenzie took up again his persecutions of the squatters. On his return from his wedding trip he and Evelyn went to live with Mrs. Robertson for the winter.

One day Percival approached MacKenzie with another request that he use his influence to liberate Jeremiah Hopkins.

"It's wrong for his daughter to stay in such a place alone with that frail child, Marc," protested Robert earnestly.

Evelyn looked up from her sewing. In her own happiness the thought that her handsome cousin loved the squatter girl had tapers in her memory. Her eyes went from his troubled face to her husband's. Marc's expression was dark and forbidding, and his full red lips dragged down at the corners! Her heart fluttered at the thought of his rage if by chance he got an inkling of her duplicity.

"The buzzy won't be there long, my friend," returned Marcus, gritting his teeth. "I've a plan to put her out with the rest. Why you stand by those people has always puzzled me, Percival."

"They're a forlorn lot," replied Robert, flushing. "Now, what about Hopkins?"

A look of contempt flung on MacKenzie's face, and he flung out his hands as if throwing away something he detested.

"He'll serve his time," he retorted abruptly, "and when he does come back, his brains won't be where he left them."

Keeping her eyes on her husband, Evelyn uttered an exclamation. How somber and forceful he seemed with that network of wrinkles across his broad brow. Anger distended his nostrils, and the look he had fixed upon Robert was full of compelling strength.

"You're both sickening," she broke out fretfully. "Perfectly sickening!"

"Now listen to me, Eve," ejaculated Robert, turning to her. "You know very well that I'm interested in the Hopkins family—"

She did not look at him until his sentence was chopped off in confusion. Then she threw him a peculiar glance.

"Oh, I know that well enough!" she rejoined, dropping her eyes, "but what makes me so impatient is that the second you and Marc come within speaking distance, you begin an argument about them. Why can't you both make a resolution not to talk about those people?"

Her cousin walked to the window and stared out into the garden. A nervous cough came from MacKenzie.

"I won't do it, Eve," asserted Robert presently, flinging around. "Something's got to be done for Polly Hopkins. She's so young and unhappy!"

"Young and pretty, you mean, Bob," laughed Marcus disagreeably. "Why don't you marry the trotlop and put an end to your philanthropy? Bennett's dead; so he can't interfere with you!"

Percival's fists doubled as feeling blood left his face wax-white.

Throwing her work into a basket at her side, Mrs. MacKenzie arose.

"Marcus," she snapped, "you're perfectly disgusting! Now here I speak my mind! I don't ever intend to sit in the same room with you two unless you keep your conversation off the squatters."

She marched to the door, her lovely head held high; and Marcus strove after her.

"Come back here, Evelyn," he ordered. "How dare you talk like that to me?"

It was the first time Marcus had spoken to her just that way; and the sharpness of his tones and the glitter in his dark eyes sent a sudden rage through her. She whirled squarely upon him. At the sight of her face he took a backward step. He had never seen the blue fade from his wife's eyes and a gleam like bright steel take its place.

"I said exactly what I meant," she told him. "I positively refuse to listen to wrangles about the Silent City. Now you both understand, don't you?"

Suddenly she went deathly pale, held out a trembling hand, and swayed as if she were going to fall. She looked so stricken and ill that Marcus caught her to him. Everything but his lovely young bride faded from his mind.

"What's the matter, dear heart?" he cried. "Sit down a minute! There! You know very well, Eve darling, I didn't mean to be brutal."

She knew he did not require an answer and gave him none; she only sobbed hysterically against his arm.

"Neither did I, Evelyn," said Robert, in a low voice.

He went to his cousin's side instantly, begging her forgiveness. The girl turned her head and impulsively kissed his hand.

"Never mind now, Bob," she said faintly. "Please go away like a good boy."

After Percival's departure, Marcus gathered his wife into his arms and sat down with her on his knee.

"There now, sweetheart," he soothed, and he drew her head to his shoulder and kissed her. "Don't cry any more!"

"It makes me so nervous, Marc, dear," she explained, sitting up, "to hear quarrels between you and Robert."



"Come Back Here, Evelyn," He Ordered. "How Dare You Talk Like That to Me?"

ert. And—and—I don't feel very well," MacKenzie studied her keenly.

"Then I'll get a doctor today," he exclaimed, much concerned.

A flush covered the girl's face, and she hid it against his coat.

"I don't need a doctor, darling," she whispered, "but I do want care and quiet. That's all!"

A strange unknown thrill shot through the man.

"Look at me, beloved," he begged, quivering. He forced his wife's face up to his and searched deep into the blue eyes. "Eve, my love, my own darling!" was all he could say.

Then Evelyn rested in supreme happiness against her husband's breast for a long time.

One cold blustering morning a little while before Thanksgiving, Evelyn MacKenzie came down to breakfast alone. She was very pale, and her eyelids showed signs of weeping. The night before her husband had let loose the reins upon his violent temper. He had arrived home at a late hour, chafing and irritable.

Awaking his wife from a sound sleep, he demanded to know if she were cognizant of the fact that Robert was trying to obtain a pardon for Hopkins. Several representative citizens, among whom were two distinguished lawyers, had approached him on the subject.

"And that isn't all," he fumed. "I started something else today, and he's trying to block me."

He jerked at his collar so violently that the stiff linen tore with a whining sound.

"D—n that thing," he exploded and threw the ruined neckwear on the floor. "I won't stand any more interference."

"If you don't want to bring Bob to terms," he went on, "I will! That's my word! I've held my peace as long as I can!—Good God, now, don't start to cry!"

But in spite of his imperious command, Evelyn had wept long after her husband's leavey breathing told her that he was asleep.

Next morning, walking into the dining room wearily, she found her cousin, Robert, standing near the window, his hands in his pockets. She went straight to his side.

"Bob," she breathed.

The young man turned upon her and caught the hand she laid on his arm.

"You've got to help me now, Eve," he began, without other response to her greeting. "It's all very well for Marc to take a high hand in some matters, but this thing he's planning is brutal."

"I can't do anything with him," cried the girl. "He told me about it last night; and I talked and talked till I'm hoarse. Bob, why don't you go away somewhere?"

Robert shook his head dismally.

"I can't, Eve, I can't," he returned. "I know what Polly is, but she's young and—and—"

He paused, brushed back his hair and hurried on:

"I love her, that's all! If Marc continues in— Ah, here he comes."

The door flung open, and MacKenzie strode into the room. He came to a halt at the sight of his young wife and her cousin.

"What's up?" he exclaimed testily.

"Bob wants to talk to you, dear," explained Evelyn, in a conciliatory tone. She had learned in the past months that suppressing her own temper was to travel along the lines of least resistance.

"Well, have some breakfast," was the ungracious reply. "Sit down, both of you."

"I've had my breakfast," answered Robert. "I wanted to have a word with you, Marc, before you went into town. I want to buy of you at your own price all the land the squatters are on. That would relieve—"

"Squatters again, eh?" came in quick interruption. "My dear Robert," MacKenzie placed his fingers on the back of his chair and watching his wife, proceeded, "I really dislike to be abrupt in my own family and in your house, but you know there is such a thing as a man minding his own business."

A deep flush rose to Percival's brow.

"I am minding my own business," he shot back, "if it's your will to persecute a girl who's almost dead with grief, it's mine to help her if I can. This last thing you're trying to put over is abominable!"

In rough impatience Marcus sat down, Evelyn dropping into her place opposite him.

"From your interest one would think you had a more intimate reason than just humanity, Robert," he sneered broadly. "Is that it?"

Into Evelyn's pale face rushed a mass of color, and she shrank back as if she had received a blow. As quickly the flush receded, leaving her whiter than before.

Robert came forward to the table.

"You're perfectly right, Marc," he confessed almost inaudibly. "I do love Polly Hopkins—I—"

MacKenzie interrupted him by rising to his feet, his handsome face suffused with anger.

"Then it's time I cleared her out," he answered. "A squatter in the family—a thief—a liar—"

Mrs. MacKenzie struggled to her feet and began to cry.

"I can't stand any more," she whimpered. "I simply can't, Marc. The way you both quarrel over those people gets on my nerves. You promised me, Marcus, you wouldn't ever do it again."

All the concentrated rage he had gathered in the past few weeks burst forth in a vicious snap.

"Then tell your precious cousin to keep his nose out of my affairs, my dear! I'm perfectly capable of attending to them. I don't wish to sell that land, but I do intend to get rid of that tribe; and both of you might just as well understand it now as later."

He said it with such forceful determination that Evelyn threw an entreating glance at Robert. Uttering a sharp exclamation, he turned swiftly and went out.

The next few hours he spent in Ithaca, trying to turn aside the blow that threatened to fall upon Polly Hopkins. But so great was MacKenzie's influence that Percival's own friends shook their heads when he approached them.

Utterly cast down by the futility of his morning's work on behalf of the squatter girl, Robert Percival wended his way to the Silent City. He could not let the relentless law burst in upon Pollyop unprepared. Through the settlement he hurried to the Hopkins shanty and paused before it. There still above the door was the printed sign—

"If your heart's loving and kind come right in; if it ain't scoot off."

Ah, surely he did love her in spite of what she had done. As a traveler in a dry and thirsty land longs for fresh water, so he desired Polly Hop-



There Still Above the Door Was the Printed Sign, "If Your Heart's Loving and Kind Come Right in; If It Ain't Scoot Off."

kins, Yaln had been his efforts to tear her image from his heart. Often he had been tempted to marry her and take her out of her dreadful circumstances, but each time the desire came to him, the vision of the dying farmer killed it.

Broodingly his eyes swept the narrow lake and the eastern, rearing hills. He remembered how he and Polly Hopkins had sat together on the ragged rocks, watching the flocks of swallows over the sky above, like clouds of birds across wonder-blue water.

With a groan he threw off these memories, and striding forward, he rapped on the hut door.

Pollyop Hopkins opened it, looked at him, bent her head but spoke no word.

"I want to talk to you, child," was the excuse he gave; and still silent, she moved backward and allowed him to enter the room.

Now that he was there, Robert felt as if he could not force his tongue to say the things she must hear. He was oppressed by his utter failure to keep the promise made that day before "The Greatest Mother in the World," and knew not how to explain it.

"Polly," he had commenced, when Pollyop, because she was so tired, so forlornly helpless, began to sob bitterly. The sight of him after all these weary days quite overcame her.

"Don't," he interjected impetuously. "Please don't do that."

Her tears only added to the remorse that scourged him and gave new vitality to his passion; but, like a wall of fire between them, burned his jealousy of Oscar Bennett.

"I want to help you," he stammered. "Pollyop shook her head. This last thing you're trying to put over is abominable!" she whispered. "Jerry'll die—"

(To Be Continued.)

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