

# Polly of the Circus

BY MARGARET MAYO

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## CHAPTER IV.

THE blare of the circus band had been a sore temptation to Mandy Jones all afternoon and evening. Again and again it had dragged her from her work to the study window, from which she could see the wonders so tantalizingly near. Mandy was housekeeper for the Rev. John Douglas, but the unwashed supper dishes did not trouble her as she watched the lumbering elephants, the restless lions, the long-necked giraffes and the striped zebras that came and went in the nearby circus lot. And yet, in spite of her own curiosity, she could not forgive her vagrant "worse half," Hasty, who had been lured from duty early in the day. She had once dubbed him Hasty in a spirit of derision, and the name had clung to him. The sarcasm seemed doubly appropriate tonight, for he had been away since 10 that morning, and it was now past 9.

The young pastor for a time had enjoyed Mandy's tirades against her husband, but when she began calling shrilly out of the window to chance acquaintances for news of him he slipped quietly into the next room to finish tomorrow's sermon. Mandy renewed her operations at the window with increased vigor when the pastor had gone. She was barely saved from pitching headforemost into the lot by the timely arrival of Deacon Strong's daughter, who managed with difficulty to connect the excited woman's feet with the floor.

"Foh de Lor' sake!" Mandy gasped as she stood panting for breath and blinking at the pretty, young, apple-faced Julia. "I was suah most gone dat time." Then followed another outburst against the delinquent Hasty.

But the deacon's daughter did not hear. Her eyes were already wandering anxiously to the lights and the tinsel of the little world beyond the window.

This was not the first time today that Mandy had found herself talking to space. There had been a steady stream of callers at the parsonage since 11 that morning, but she had long ago confided to the pastor that she suspected their reasons.

"Day comes in here a-trackin' up my floors," she said, "an' a-askin' why you don't stop de circus from a-showin' nex' to de church an' den a-cranin' dar necks out de winder till I can't get no housework done."

"That's only human nature," Douglas had answered, with a laugh, but Mandy had declared that she knew another name for it and had mumbled something about "hypocritters" as she seized her broom and began to sweep imaginary tracks from in front of the door.

Many times she had made up her mind to let the next caller know just what she thought of "hypocritters," but her determination was usually weakened by her still greater desire to excite increased wonder in the faces of her visitors.

Divided between these two inclinations, she gazed at Julia now. The shining eyes of the deacon's daughter conquered, and she launched forth into an eager description of how she had just seen a "wonderful striped annamule" with a "pow'ful long neck walk right out of the tent" and how he had "come apart afore her very eyes" and two men had slipped "right out of his insides." Mandy was so carried away by her own eloquence and so busy showing Julia the sights beyond the window that she did not hear Miss Perkins, the thin-lipped spinster, who entered, followed by the Widow Willoughby, dragging her seven-year-old son Willie by the hand.

The women were protesting because their choir practice of "What Shall the

Harvest Be" had been interrupted by the unrequested accompaniment of the "hochee-cochee" from the nearby circus band.

"It's scandalous!" Miss Perkins snapped. "Scandalous! And somebody ought to stop it." She glanced about with an unmistakable air of grievance at the closed doors, feeling that the pastor was undoubtedly behind one of them when he ought to be out taking action against the things that her soul abominated.

"Well, I'm sure I've done all that I could," piped the widow, with a weak, martyred air. She was always martyred. She considered it an appropriate attitude for a widow. "He can't blame me if the choir is out of key tomorrow."

"Mercy me!" interrupted the spinster. "If there isn't Julia Strong a-leanin' right out of that window a-lookin' at the circus, and her pa a deacon of the church, and this the house of the pastor! It's shocking! I must go to her."

"Ma, let me see, too," begged Willie as he tugged at his mother's skirts.

Mrs. Willoughby hesitated. Miss Perkins was certainly taking a long while for her argument with Julia. The glow from the red powder outside the window was positively alarming.

"Dear me!" she said. "I wonder if there can be a fire." And with this pretext for investigation she, too, joined the little group at the window.

A few moments later, when Douglas entered for a fresh supply of paper, the backs of the company were toward him. He crossed to the study table without disturbing his visitors and smiled to himself at the eager way in which they were hanging out of the window.

Douglas was a sturdy young man of eight and twenty, frank and boyish in manner, confident and light-hearted in spirit. He had seemed too young to the deacons when he was appointed to their church, and his keen enjoyment of outdoor games and other healthful sports robbed him of a certain dignity in their eyes. Some of the women of the congregation had been inclined to side with the deacons, for it hurt their vanity that the pastor found so many other interests when he might have been sitting in dark, stuffy rooms discussing theology with them, but Douglas had been either unconscious of or indifferent to their resentment and had gone on his way with a cheery nod and an unconquerable conviction of right that had only left them floundering. He intended to quit the room now unnoticed, but was unfortunately enough to upset a chair as he turned from the table. This brought a chorus of exclamations from the women, who, chattering, rushed quickly toward him.

"What do you think of my naughty boy, Willie?" simpered the widow. "He dragged me quite to the window."

Douglas glanced amusedly first at the five-foot-six widow and then at the helpless red-haired urchin by her side, but he made no comment beyond offering a chair to each of the women.

"Our choir practice had to be entirely discontinued," declared Miss Perkins sourly as she accepted the proffered chair, adjusted her skirts for a stay and glanced defiantly at the parson, who had dutifully seated himself near the table.

"I am sure I have as true an ear as anybody," whimpered the widow, with an injured air. "But I defy any one to lead 'What Shall the Harvest Be?' to an accompaniment like that." She jerked her hand in the direction of the window. The band was again playing the "hochee-cochee."

"Never mind about the choir practice," said Douglas, with a smile. "It is soul, not skill, that our congregation needs in its music. As for that music out there, it is not without its com-

mon. Why, the small boys would rather hear that band than the finest church organ in the world."

"And the small boys would rather see the circus than to hear you preach, most likely," snapped Miss Perkins. It was adding insult to injury for him to try to console her.

"Of course they would, and so would some of the grownups if they'd only tell the truth about it," said Douglas, laughing.

"What?" exclaimed Miss Perkins. "Why not?" asked Douglas. "I am sure I don't know what they do inside the tents, but the parade looked very promising."

"The parade!" the two women echoed in one breath. "Did you see the parade?"

"Yes, indeed," said Douglas enthusiastically. "But it didn't compare with the one I saw at the age of eight." He turned his head to one side and looked into space with a reminiscence smile. The widow's red-haired boy crept close to him.

"The Shetland ponies seemed as small as mice," he continued dreamily, "the elephants huge as mountains, the great calliope wuffed my soul to the very skies, and I followed that parade right into the circus lot."

"Did you see inside de tent?" Willie asked eagerly.

"I didn't have enough money for that," Douglas answered frankly. He turned to the small boy and pinched his ear. There was sad disappoint-



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ment in the youngster's face, but he brightened again when the parson confessed that he "peeped."

"A parson peepin'" cried the thin-lipped Miss Perkins.

"I was not a parson then," corrected Douglas good-naturedly.

"You were going to be," persisted the spinster.

"I didn't be a boy first in spite of that fact."

The sudden appearance of Hasty proved a diversion. He was looking very sheepish.

"Hyar he is, Mars John; look at him!" said Mandy.

"Hasty, where have you been all day?" demanded Douglas severely.

Hasty fumbled with his hat and spattered for time. "Did yo' say whar's I been, sah?"

"Dat's what he done ast yo'," Mandy prompted threateningly.

"I bin 'celved, Mars John," declared Hasty solemnly. Mandy snorted incredulously. Douglas waited.

"A gemmen in de circus done tole me dis maw'nin' dat ef I carry water fo' de el'phants he'll let me in de circus fo' nuffin', an' I make a 'greement wid him. Mars John, did yo' ebber seed an el'phant drink?" he asked, rolling his eyes. John shook his head.

"Well, sah, he jes' put dat trunk a his'n into de pall jes' once an'-swish-water gone."

Douglas laughed, and Mandy muttered sullenly.

"Well, sah," continued Hasty. "I tote water fo' dem el'phants all day long, an' when I cum rou'n' to see de circus de gemmen won't let me in. An' when I try to crawl under de tent dey pulls me out by de laigs an' beats me." He looked from one to the other, expecting sympathy.

"Saves you right," was Mandy's unfeeling reply. "If yo's so anxious to be a-totin' water, jes' yo' come along

outside and tote some fo' Mandy."

"I can't do no mo' carryin', Mandy," protested Hasty. "T's hurted in mah arm."

"What hurt yo'?"

"Tiger."

"A tiger?" exclaimed the women in unison.

"Done chawed it mos' off," he declared solemnly. "Deacon Elverson, he seed it, an' he says I's hurt bad."

"Deacon Elverson!" cried the spinster. "Was Deacon Elverson at the circus?"

"He was in de lot, a-tryin' to look in, same as me," Hasty answered innocently.

"You'd better take Hasty into the kitchen," said Douglas to Mandy, with a dry smile. "He's talking too much for a wounded man."

Mandy disappeared with the disgraced Hasty, advising him, with sneer, "to get de tiger to chaw off his laigs, so's he wouldn't have to walk no mo'."

The women gazed at each other with lips closed tightly. Elverson's behavior was beyond their power of expression. Miss Perkins turned to the pastor as though he were somehow to blame for the deacon's backsliding, but before she could find words to argue the point the timid little deacon appeared in the doorway, utterly unconscious of the hostile reception that Hasty had prepared for him. He glanced nervously from one set face to the other, then coughed behind his hat.

"We're all very much interested in the circus," said Douglas. "Can't you tell us about it?"

"I just went into the lot to look for my son," stammered the deacon. "I feared Peter had strayed."

"Why, deacon?" said Mrs. Willoughby. "I just stopped by your house and saw Mrs. Elverson putting Peter to bed."

The deacon was saved from further embarrassment by an exclamation from Julia, who had stayed at the window. "Oh, look; something has happened!" she cried. "There's a crowd. They are coming this way."

Douglas crossed quickly to Julia's side and saw an excited mob collecting before the entrance to the main tent. He had time to discover no more before Mandy burst in at the door, panting with excitement and rolling her large, white-rimmed eyeballs.

"Mars John, a little circus girl done fall off her boss!" she cried. "Dr. Hartley say can dey bring her in heah?"

"Of course," said Douglas, hurrying outside.

There were horrified exclamations from the women, who were aghast at the idea of a circus rider in the parsonage. In their helpless indignation they turned upon the little deacon, feeling intuitively that he was enjoying the drama. Elverson was retreating toward the door when he was suddenly thrust aside by Douglas.

In the young pastor's arms was a white, spangled burden of humanity, her slender arm hung lifeless over his shoulder. The silk stocking was torn from one bruised ankle; her hair fell across her face, veiling it from the unfriendly glances of the women. Douglas passed out of sight up the stairway without looking to the right or left, followed by the doctor.

Mandy reached the front door in time to push back a crowd of intruders. She had barely closed the door when it was thrust open by Jim.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Go way fum here!" cried Mandy as her eyes unconsciously sought the stairs.

Jim followed the direction of her glance and cleared the steps at a bound. Mandy pursued him, muttering angrily. Deacon Elverson, too, was about to follow when a grim reminder from Miss Perkins brought him around, and he made for the door instead. He started back on opening it, for standing on the threshold was a clown in his grotesque makeup. His white clothes were partially concealed by a large traveling ulster held together by one button. In one hand he carried a small leather satchel; in the other a girl's sailor hat. A little tan coat was thrown across his arm. The giggles of the boy hiding behind his mother's skirt were the only greetings received by the trembling old man in the doorway.

He glanced uncertainly from one unfriendly face to the other, waiting for a word of invitation to enter, but none came.

(Continued next week)

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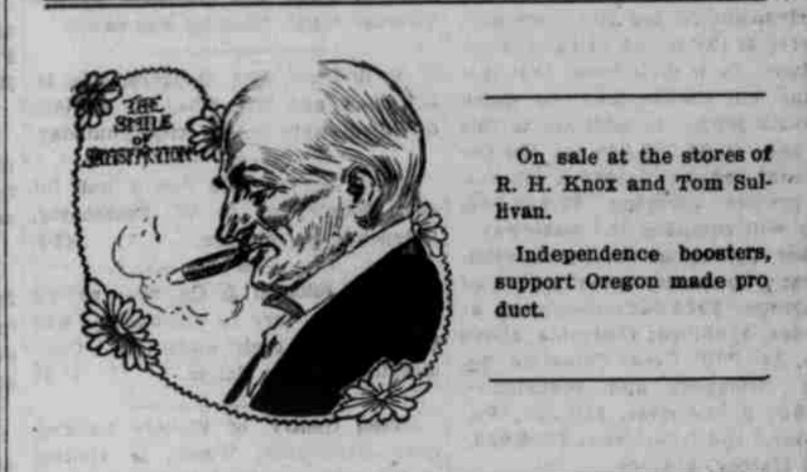
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