

Polly of the Circus

BY MARGARET MAYO

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(Continued from last week)

"Excuse me," he said. "I just brought some of her little things. She'd better put on her coat when she goes out. It's gettin' kinder chilly."

He looked again into the blank faces. Still no one spoke. He stepped forward, trembling with anxiety. A sudden fear clutched at his heart, the muscles of his face worked pitifully, the red painted lips began to quiver.

"It ain't—it ain't that, is it?" he faltered, unable to utter the word that filled him with horror.

Even Miss Perkins was momentarily touched by the anguish in the old man's voice. "I guess you will find the person you are looking for up-



The painted clown stood alone. She answered tartly and flounced out of the house, calling to Julia and the others to follow her and declaring that she would soon let folks know how the parson had brought a "circus ridin' girl" into the parsonage.

The painted clown stood alone, looking from one wall to the other, then crossed the room and placed the satchel and the little coat and hat on the study table. He was careful not to wrinkle the coat, for this was Polly's birthday gift. Jim and he had planned to have sandwiches and soda pop on the top of the big wagon when they offered their treasures to-night. But now the wagon would soon be leaving, and where was Polly? He turned to ask this question as Mandy came down the stairs.

"Well, if dar ain't anudder one!" she cried.

"Never mind, Mandy," said Douglas, who was just behind her, carrying a small water pitcher and searching for a bottle of brandy which had been placed in the medicine chest for emergencies.

"You can take these upstairs," he told her when he had filled the pitcher with water and found the liquor. Mandy looked threateningly at Toby, then reluctantly went on her way.

Douglas turned to the old man pleasantly. His was the first greeting that Toby had received, and he at last found voice to ask whether Polly was badly hurt.

"The doctor hasn't told us yet," said Douglas kindly.

"I'm her Uncle Toby—not her real

uncle," the old man explained, "but that's what she calls me. I couldn't come out right away because I'm on in the concert. Could I see her now, please?"

"Here's the doctor," said Douglas as Hartley came down the stairs, followed by Jim. "Well, doctor, not bad, I hope?"

"Yes, rather bad," said the doctor, adding quickly as he saw the suffering in Toby's face, "but don't be alarmed. She's going to get well."

"How long will it be before we can have her back—before she can ride again?" asked Jim gruffly as he stood apart, twisting his brown, worn hat in his hands.

"Probably several months," said the doctor. "No bones are broken, but the ligaments of one ankle are torn, and she received a bad blow on the head. It will be some time before she recovers consciousness."

"What are we goin' to do, Jim?" asked Toby helplessly.

"You needn't worry. We'll take good care of her here," said Douglas, seeing desperation written on their faces.

"Here?" They looked at him incredulously. And this was a parson!

"Where are her parents?" the doctor asked, looking at Jim and Toby.

"She ain't got no parents 'cept Toby an' me," replied Jim. "We've took care of her ever since she was a baby."

"Oh, I see!" said the doctor. "Well, one of you'd better stay here until she can be moved."

"That's the trouble. We can't," said Toby, hanging his head. "You see, sir, circus folks is like soldiers. No matter what happens, the show has to go on, an' we got to be in our places."

"Well, well, she'll be safe enough here," said the doctor. "It is a fortunate thing that Mr. Douglas can manage this. Our town hospital burned down a few months ago, and we've been rather puzzled as to what to do with such cases." He took his leave, with a cheery "Good night" and a promise to look in upon the little patient later. Jim shuffled awkwardly toward the pastor.

"It's mighty good of you to do this," he mumbled, "but she ain't goin' to be no charity patient. Me an' Toby is goin' to look after her keep."

"Her wants will be very few," Douglas answered kindly. "You needn't trouble much about that."

"I mean it," said Jim savagely. He met Douglas' glance of surprise with a determined look, for he feared that his chance of being useful to Polly might be slipping out of his life.

"You musn't mind Jim," the clown pleaded at the pastor's elbow. "You see, pain gets some folks different from others, an' it always kinder makes him savage."

"Oh, that's all right," Douglas answered quickly. His own life had been so lonely that he could understand the selfish yearning in the big man's heart. "You must do what you think best about these things. Mandy and I will look after the rest."

Jim hung his head, feeling somehow that the pastor had seen straight into his heart and discovered his petty weakness. He was about to turn toward the door when it was thrown open by Barker.

"Where is she?" shouted the manager, looking from one to the other.

"She can't come," said Jim in a low, steady voice, for he knew the storm of opposition with which Barker would meet the announcement.

"Can't come?" shrieked Barker. "Of course she'll come. I can't get along without her. She's got to come." He looked at Jim, who remained silent and firm. "Why ain't she comin'?" he asked, feeling himself already defeat-

ed. "She's hurt bad," was Jim's laconic reply.

"The devil she is!" said Barker, looking at Douglas for confirmation. "Is that right?"

"She won't be able to travel for some time," said Douglas.

"Mr. Barker is our manager," Toby explained as he edged his way to the pastor's side.

"Some time!" Barker looked at Douglas as though he were to blame for their misfortune. "Well, you just bet she will," he declared menacingly.

"See here, Barker, don't you talk to him like that," said Jim, facing the manager. "He's darned square, even if he is a parson." Barker turned away. He was not a bad hearted man, but he was irritated and upset at losing the star feature of his bill.

"Ain't this my doggedest luck?" he muttered to himself as his eye again traveled to the boss canyonman. "You get out of here, Jim," he shouted. "An' start them wagons. The show's got to go on, Pol or no Pol!"

He turned with his hand on the doorknob and jerked out a grudging thanks to the pastor. "It's all fixed good of you to take her in," he said. "but it's tough to lose her. Good night!" He banged the door and clattered down the steps.

Jim waited. He was trying to find words in which to tell his gratitude. None came, and he turned to go, with a short "Goodby."

"Good night, Jim," said the pastor. He crossed the room and took the big fellow's hand.

"Much obliged," Jim answered gruffly. It was his only polite phrase, and he had taught Polly to say it. Douglas waited until Jim had passed down the steps, then turned to Toby, who still lingered near the table.

"You'll tell her how it was me an' Jim had to leave her without sayin' goodby, won't you, sir?" Toby pleaded.

"Yes, indeed," Douglas promised.

"I'll jes' put this little bit of money into her satchel." He picked up the little brown bag that was to have been Polly's birthday gift. "Me an' Jim will be sendin' her more soon."

"You're goin' to miss her, I'm afraid," Douglas said, feeling an irresistible desire to gain the old man's confidence.

"Lord bless you, yes, sir!" Toby answered, turning upon him eagerly. "Me an' Jim has been father an' moth-

er an' jes' about everything to that little one. She wasn't much bigger'n a handful of peanuts when we begun a-worryin' about her."

"Well, Mandy will do the worryin' now," Douglas laughed. "She's been dyin' for a chance to mother somebody all along. Why, she even tried it on me."

"I noticed as how some of those church people seemed to look kinder queer at me," said Toby. "An' I been a-wonderin' if mebbe they might feel the same about her."

"Oh, they're all right!" Douglas assured him. "They'll be her friends in no time."

"She's fit for 'em, sir," Toby pleaded. "She's good, clean into the middle of her heart."

"I'm sure of it," Douglas answered.

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"I've heard 'em some church folks feel towards us circus people, sir, an' I jes' wanted you to know that there ain't finer families or better mothers or fathers or grandfathers or grandmothers anywhere than among us. Why, that girl's mother rode the horses afore her, an' her mother afore that, an' her grandmother an' grand-father afore that, an' there ain't nobody what's cared more for their good name an' their children's good name 'an her people has. You see, sir, circus folks is all like that. They's jes' like our big family. They tends to their business an' takes good care of themselves. They has to or they couldn't do their work. It's 'cause I'm leavin' her with you that I'm sayin' all this," the old man apologized.

"I'm glad you told me, Toby," Douglas answered kindly. "I've never known much about circus folks."

"I guess I'd better be goin'," Toby faltered as his eyes roved hungrily toward the stairway.

"I'll send you our route, an' mebbe you'll be lettin' us know how she is."

"Indeed, I will," Douglas assured him heartily.

"You might tell her we'll write ever day or so," he added.

"I'll tell her," Douglas promised earnestly.

"Good night!" The old man hesitated, unwilling to go, but unable to find further pretext for staying.

"Good night, Toby," Douglas extended his hand toward the bent figure that was about to shuffle past him. The withered hand of the white faced clown rested in the strong grasp of the pastor, and his pale little eyes sought the face of the stalwart man before him. A numb desolation was growing in his heart. The object for which he had gone on day by day was being left behind, and he must stumble forth into the night alone.

"It's hard to leave her," he mumbled, "but the show has got to go on."

The door shut out the bent, old figure. Douglas stood for some time where Toby had left him, still thinking of his prophetic words. His reverie was broken by the sounds of the departing wagons, the low muttered curses of the drivers, the shrieking and roaring of the animals, as the circus train moved up the distant hill.

"The show has got to go on," he repeated as he crossed to his study table and seated himself for work in the dim light of the old fashioned lamp. He put out one hand to draw the sheets of his interrupted sermon toward him, but instead it fell upon a small sailor hat. He twisted the hat absently in his fingers, not yet realizing the new order of things that was coming into his life. Mandy tiptoed softly down the stairs. She placed one pudgy forefinger on her lips and rolled her large eyes skyward. "Dat sure am an angel chile straight from hebbin," she whispered. "She done got a face jes' like a little flower."

"Straight from heaven," Douglas repeated as she crossed softly to the table and picked up the satchel and coat. "You can leave the lamp, Mandy. I must finish tomorrow's sermon."

She turned at the threshold and shook her head rather sadly as she saw the imprint of the day's cares on the young pastor's face.

"Yo' mus' be pow'ful tired," she said.

"No, no; not at all. Good night, Mandy."

She closed the door behind her, and Douglas was alone. He gazed absently at the pages of his unfinished sermon as he tapped his idle pen on the desk. "The show has got to go on," he repeated, and far up the hillside with the slow moving wagons Jim and Toby looked with unseeing eyes into the dim, starlit distance and echoed the thought. "The show has got to go on."

(Continued next week)

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