

Polly of the Circus

BY MARGARET MAYO
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(Continued from last week)

Polly mistook the pastor's reverent for envy, and her tender heart was quick to find consolation for him.

"You ain't got all the worst of it," she said. "If we tried to play a dump like this for six months, we'd starve to death. You certainly must give 'em a great show," she added, surveying him with growing interest.

"It doesn't make much difference about the show"—Douglas began, but he was quickly interrupted.

"That's right; it's jes' the same with a circus. One year you give 'em the rottenest kind of a thing, an' they eat it up; the next year you hand 'em a knockout, an' it's a frost. Is that the way it is with a church show?"

"Much the same," Douglas admitted, half amusedly, half regretfully. "Very often when I work the hardest I seem to do the least good."

"I guess our troubles is pretty much alike," Polly nodded, with a motherly



"Well, you take my tip. Don't you never go in for ridin'."

air of condescension, "only there ain't so much danger in your act."

"I'm not so sure about that," he laughed.

"Well, you take my tip." She leaned forward as though about to impart a very valuable bit of information. "Don't you never go in for ridin'. There ain't no act on earth so hard as a ridin' act. The rest of the bunch has got it easy alongside of us. Take the fellows on the trapeze. They always get their tackle up in jes' the same place. Take the balancin' acts. There ain't no difference in their layouts. Take any of 'em as depends on regular props, and they ain't got much chance a-goin' wrong. But, say, when you have to do a ridin' act there ain't never no two times alike. If your horse is feelin' good, the ground is stumby; if the ground ain't on the blink, the horse is wobbly. There's always somethin' wrong somewhere, and you ain't never knowin' how it's goin' to end, especially when you got to do a careful act like mine. There's a girl, Eloise, in our bunch what does a showy act on a horse what Barker calls Barbarian. She goes on in my place sometimes, and, say, them Rubes applauds her as much as me, an' her stunts is baby tricks alongside of mine. It's enough to make you sick of art." She shook her head dolefully, then sat up with renewed interest.

"You see, mine is careful balancin' an' all that, an' you got to know your horse an' your ground for that. Now, you get wise to what I'm a-tellin' you and don't you never go into anything which depends on anything else."

"Thank you, Polly, I won't," Douglas somehow felt that he was very much indebted to her.

"I seen a church show once," Polly said suddenly.

"You did?" Douglas asked, with new interest.

"Yes," she answered, closing her lips and venturing no further comment.

"Did you like it?" he questioned after a pause.

"Couldn't make nothin' out of it. I don't care much for readin'."

"Oh, it isn't all reading," he corrected.

"Well, the guy I saw read all of his'n. He got the whole thing right out of a book."

"Oh, that was only his text," laughed Douglas.

"Text?"

"Yes. And later he tried to interpret to his congrega—"

"Easy! Easy!" she interrupted. "Come again with that, will you?"

"He told them the meaning of what he read."

"Well, I don't know what he told 'em, but it didn't mean anything to me. But maybe your show is better'n his was," she added, trying to pacify him.

Douglas was undecided whether to feel amused or grateful for Polly's ever increasing sympathy. Before he could trust his twitching lips to answer she had put another question to him.

"Are you goin' to do a stunt while I am here?"

"I preach every Sunday. If that's

what you mean. I preach this mornin'."

"Is this Sunday?" she asked, sitting up with renewed energy and looking about the room as though everything had changed color.

"Yes."

"And you got a matinee?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"We have services," he corrected, gently.

"We rest up on Sundays," she said in a tone of deep commiseration.

"Oh, I see," he answered, feeling it no time to enter upon another discussion as to the comparative advantages of their two professions.

"What are you goin' to spiel about today?"

"About Ruth and Naomi."

"Ruth and who?"

"Naomi," he repeated.

"Naomi," she echoed, tilting her head from side to side as she listened to the soft cadences of the word. "I never heard that name before. It 'ud look awful swell on a billboard, wouldn't it?"

"It's a Bible name, honey," Mandy said, eager to get into the conversation. "Dar's a bufal picture bout her. I seed it."

"I like to look at pictures," Polly answered tentatively. Mandy crossed the room to fetch the large Bible with its steel engravings.

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and longing to bring to it floods of light and enrichment.

"I guess I'd like to hear you spiel," and she fell to studying him solemnly.

"You would?" he asked eagerly.

"Is there any more to that story?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"Yes, indeed."

"Would you read me a little more?" She was very humble now.

"Where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part me and thee."

Their eyes met. There was a long pause. Suddenly the sharp, sweet notes of the church bell brought John Douglas to his feet with a start of surprise.

"Have you got to go?" Polly asked regretfully.

"Yes, I must, but I'll read the rest from the church. Open the window, Mandy!" And he passed out of the door and quickly down the stairs.

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"ENTREAT ME NOT TO LEAVE THEE," HE READ.

"We got a girl named Ruth in our 'eap of death' stunt. Some of the folks is kinder down on 'er, but I ain't."

She might have told Douglas more of her forlorn little friend, but just then Mandy came to the bed hugging a large, old-fashioned Bible, and Douglas helped to place the ponderous book before the invalid.

"See, honey, dar dey is," the old woman said, pointing to the picture of Ruth and Naomi.

"Them's crackerjacks, ain't they?" Polly gasped, and her eyes shone with wonder. "Which one's Ruth?"

"Dis one," said Mandy, pointing with her thumb.

"Why, they're dressed just like our chariot drivers. What does it say about 'em?"

"You can read it for yourself," Douglas answered gently. There was something pathetic in the eagerness of the starved little mind.

"Well, I ain't much on readin'—out loud," she faltered, growing suddenly conscious of her deficiencies. "Read it for me, will you?"

"Certainly." And he drew his chair nearer to the bed. One strong hand supported the other half of the Bible and his head was very near to hers as his deep, full voice pronounced the solemn words in which Ruth pleaded so many years before.

"Entreat me not to leave thee," he read, "or to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God."

He stopped to ponder over the poetry of the lines.

"Kind of pretty, ain't it?" Polly said softly. She felt awkward and constrained and a little overawed.

"There are far more beautiful things than that," Douglas assured her enthusiastically as the echo of many such rang in his ears.

"There are?" And her eyes opened wide with wonder.

"Yes, indeed," he replied, pitying more and more the starvation of mind

human enough to resent the injustice of his fate.

Douglas's mother had suffered so much because of the impractical efforts of her husband that she discouraged the early tendencies of the son toward drawing and mathematics and tried to direct his thoughts toward creeds and Bible history. When he went away for his collegiate course she was less in touch with him and he was able to devote to his art. He spent his vacations in a neighboring city before a drawing board in the office of a distinguished architect, his father's friend.

Douglas was not a brilliant divinity student, and he was relieved at last when he received his degree in theology and found himself appointed to a small church in the middle west.

His step was very bright the morning he first went up the path that led to his new home. His artistic sense was charmed by the picturesque approach to the church and parsonage. The view toward the tree encircled spire was unobstructed, for the church had been built on the outskirts of the town to allow for a growth that had not materialized. He threw up his head and gazed at the blue hills, with their background of soft, slow-moving clouds. The smell of the fresh earth, the bursting of the buds, the forming of new life, set him thrilling with a joy that was very near to pain.

He stopped halfway up the path and considered the advantages of a new front to the narrow eaved cottage, and when his foot touched the first step of the vine covered porch he was far more concerned about a new portico than with any thought of his first sermon.

His speculations were abruptly cut short by Mandy, who bustled out of the door with a wide smile of welcome on her black face and an unmistakable ambition to take him immediately under her motherly wing. She was much concerned because the church people had not met the new pastor at the station and brought him to the house. Upon learning that Douglas had pur-

poosely avoided their escort, preferring to come to his new home the first time alone, she made up her mind that she was going to like him.

Mandy had long been a fixture in the parsonage. She and her worse half, Hasty Jones, had come to know and discuss the weaknesses of the many clergymen who had come and gone, the deacons and the congregation, both individually and collectively. She confided to Hasty that she didn't "blame de new parson for not wantin' to mix up wid dat ar crowd."

In the study that night, when she and Hasty helped Douglas to unpack his many boxes of books, they were as eager as children about the drawings and pictures which he showed them. His mind had gone beyond the parsonage front now, and he described to them the advantage of adding an extra ten feet to the church spire.

Mandy felt herself almost an artist when she and Hasty bade the pastor good night, for she was still quivering from the contagion of Douglas' enthusiasm. Here, at last, was a master who could do something besides find fault with her.

"I jes' wan' to be on de groun' de firs' time dat Mars Douglas and dat ere Deacon Strong clinches," she said to Hasty as they locked the doors and turned out the hall light. "Did you done see his jaw?" she whispered.

"He look laughin' enough now, but jes' you wait till he done set dat 'ere jaw o' his'n, and dar ain't nobody what's goin' ter unset it."

"Maybe dar ain't goin' ter be no clinchin'," said Hasty, hoping for Mandy's assurance to the contrary.

"What?" shrieked Mandy. "Wid dat 'ere sneakin' Widow Willoughby already a-tellin' de deacons how ter start de new parson a-goin' proper?"

"Now, why youse always a-pickin' on to dat 'ere widow?" asked Hasty, already enjoying the explosion which he knew his defense of the widow was sure to excite.

"I don't like no woman what's allus braggin' 'bout her clean floors," answered Mandy shortly. She turned out the last light and tiptoed upstairs, trying not to disturb the pastor.

John Douglas was busy already with pencil and paper, making notes of the plans for the church and parsonage, which he would perfect later on. Alas, for Douglas' day dreams! It was not many weeks before he understood with a heavy heart that the deacons were far too dull and uninspired to share his faith in beauty as an aid to man's spiritual uplift.

"We think we've done pretty well by this church," said Deacon Strong, who was the business head, the political boss and the moral mentor of the small town's affairs. "Just you worry along with the preachin', young man, and we'll attend to the buyin' and buildin' operations."

Douglas' mind was too active to content itself wholly with the writing of sermons and the routine of formal pastoral calls. He was a keen humanitarian, so little by little he came to be interested in the heart stories and disappointments of many of the village unfortunates, some of whom were outside his congregation. The mentally sick, the despondent, who needed words of hope and courage more than dry talks on theology, found in him an ever ready friend and adviser, and these came to love and depend on him. But he was never popular with the creed bound element of the church.

Mandy had her wish about being on the spot the first time that the parson's jaw squared itself at Deacon Strong. The deacon had called at the parsonage to demand that Douglas put a stop to the boys playing baseball in the adjoining lot on Sunday. Douglas had been unable to see the deacon's point of view. He declared that baseball

was a healthy and harmless form of exercise, that the air was meant to be breathed and that the boys who enjoyed the game on Sunday were principally those who were kept indoors by work on other days. The close of the interview was unsatisfactory both to Douglas and the deacon.

"Dey kinder made me cold an' prickly all up an' down de back," Mandy said later when she described their talk to Hasty. "Dat 'ere deacon don' know nuffin 'bout gittin' roun' de parson." She tossed her head with a feeling of superiority. She knew the way. Make him forget himself with a laugh. Excite his sympathy with some village underdog.

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