

Polly of the Circus

BY MARGARET MAYO
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(Continued from last week)



"You'll save a heap of trouble for the parson by doin' it quick."

"I don't believe you."
"You would 'a' believed me if you'd seen the fellow that was just a-cillin' on her and her a-huggin' and a-kindin' of her and a-singin' that she'd be a-waitin' for him here when he come back."
"You lie!" cried Douglas, taking a step toward the retreating deacon.
"There's the fellow now!" cried Strong as he pointed to the gate.
"Suppose you ask him afore you call me a liar."
Douglas turned quickly and saw Jim approaching. His face lighted up with relief at the sight of the big, lumbering fellow.
"How are you, Mr. Douglas?" said Jim awkwardly.
"You've seen Polly?" asked Douglas, shaking Jim cordially by the hand.
"Yes, I've seen her."
"The deacon here has an idea that

"Angry?" he echoed, almost bitterly "I guess it couldn't ever come to that between you an' me. I'll be all right." He shrugged his great shoulders. "It's just kinder sudden, that's all. You see, I never figured on givin' you up, an' when you said you wasn't comin' back it kinder seemed as though I couldn't see nothin' all my life but long, dusty roads an' nobody in 'em. But it's all right now, an' I'll just be gettin' along to the wagon."

"That, Jim, you haven't seen Mr. Douglas," Polly protested, trying to keep him with her until she could think of some way to comfort him.

"I'll look in on him comin' back," said Jim, anxious to be alone with his disappointment. He was out of the gate before she could stop him.

"Hurry back, won't you, Jim? I'll be waiting for you." She watched him going quickly down the road, his fists thrust into his brown coat pockets and his hat pulled over his eyes. He did not look back, as he used to do, to wave a parting farewell, and she turned toward the house with a troubled heart.

She had reached the lower step when Strong and Elverson approached her from the direction of the church.
"Was that feller here to take you back to the circus?" demanded Strong.
She opened her lips to reply, but before she could speak Strong assured her that the congregation wouldn't do anything to stop her if she wished to go. He saw the blank look on her face.

"We ain't tryin' to pry into none of your private affairs," he explained, "but my daughter saw you and that feller a-makin' up to each other. If you're calculatin' to run away with him you'll save a heap of trouble for the parson by doin' it quick."
"The parson?"
"You can't blame the congregation for not wantin' him to keep you here. You got sense enough to see how it looks. He'd see it, too, if he wasn't just plain bullheaded. Well, he'd better get over his stubbornness right now. If he don't we'll get another minister; that's all."

"Another minister? You don't mean—" It was clear enough now. She recalled Douglas' troubled look of an hour ago. She remembered how he had asked if she couldn't go away. It was this that he meant when he promised not to give her up, no matter what happened. In an instant she was at the deacon's side pleading and terrified. "You wouldn't get another minister? Oh, please, Deacon Strong, listen to me, listen! You were right about Jim. He did come to get me, and I am going back to the circus—only you won't send Mr. Douglas away, you won't! Say you won't!" She was searching his eyes for mercy. "It wasn't his fault that I kept staying on. He didn't know how to get rid of me. He did try. He tried only today."

"So he's comin' round," sneered Strong.

"Yes, yes, and you won't blame him any more, will you?" she hurried on anxiously. "You'll let him stay, no matter what he does, if I promise to go away and never, never come back again?"

"I ain't holdin' no grudge agin him," Strong grumbled. "He talks pretty rough sometimes, but he's been a good enough minister. I ain't forgettin' that."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Strong, thank you. I'll get my things. It won't take a minute." She was running up the steps when a sudden thought stopped her. She returned quickly to Strong. "We'd better not let him know just yet. You can tell him afterward. Tell him that I ran away. Tell him that—"

She was interrupted by Douglas, who came from the house. "Hello, Strong! Back again?" he asked, in some surprise. Polly remained with her eyes fixed upon the deacon, searching for some way of escape. The pastor approached. She burst into nervous laughter. "What's the joke?" Douglas asked.

"It's only a little surprise that the deacon and I are plannin'." She tried to control the catch in her voice. "You'll know about it soon, won't he, deacon? Good afternoon Mr. Strong!" She flew into the house, laughing hysterically.

Douglas followed her to the step with a puzzled frown. It was unlike Polly to give way to her moods before others. "Have you gentlemen changed your minds about the little girl stayin' on?" he asked uneasily.

"It's all right now," said Strong, seating himself with a complacent air. "All right? How so?" questioned Douglas, more and more puzzled by the deacon's evident satisfaction.

"Because," said Strong, rising and facing the pastor—"because your circus feller gal is goin' to leave you of her own accord."

"Have you been talking to that girl?" asked Douglas sternly.

"I have," said Strong, holding his breath.

The deacons were slightly uneasy. The frown on Douglas' forehead was deepening. "Oh, see how serious he looks!" she teased, with a toss of her head toward the grim visaged pastor.

"Is this some trick?" he demanded sternly.
"Don't be angry," she pleaded. "Wish me luck."
She held out one small hand. He did not take it. She wavered, then she felt the eyes of the deacons upon her. Courage returned, and she spoke in a firm, clear voice. "I am going to run away."

Douglas stepped before her and studied her keenly.
"Run away?" he exclaimed incredulously.
"Yes—to the circus with Jim."

"You couldn't do such a thing," he answered excitedly. "Why, only a moment ago you told me you would never leave me."

"Oh, but that was a moment ago," she cried in a strained high voice. "That was before Jim came. You see, I just know how I felt until I saw Jim, and heard all about my old friends—how Barker is keepin' my place for me and how they all want to see me. And I want to see them and to hear the music and the laughter and the clown songs—Oh, the clown songs!" She waited about, humming the snatch of melody that Mandy had heard the morning that Polly first woke in the parsonage.

"Ting, ting—
That's how the bells ring.
Ting, ting, pretty young thing."
She paused, her hands clasped behind her head, and gazed at them with a brave little smile. "Oh, it's going to be fine—fine!"

"You don't know what you're doin'," said Douglas. He seized her roughly by the arm. Pain was making him brutal. "I won't let you go! Do you hear me? I won't—not until you've thought it over."

"I have thought it over," Polly answered, meeting his eyes and trying to speak lightly. Her lips trembled. She could not bear for him to think her so ungrateful. She remembered his great kindness, the many thoughtful acts that had made the past year so precious to her.

"You've been awfully good to me, Mr. John." She tried to choke back a sob. "I'll never forget it—never! I'll always feel the same toward you. But you mustn't ask me to stay. I want to get back to them that knew me first—to my own. Circus folks aren't cut out for parsons' homes, and I was born in the circus. I love it—I love it!" She felt her strength going and cried out.

And how he had at last put his books in a cupboard, where they grew dusty from long neglect. She marvelled at their reappearance now, but something in his set, faraway look made her afraid to inquire. Thus she went on from day to day, growing more impatient with Hasty and more silent with the pastor.

Mandy needed humor and companionship to oil the wheels of her hard drum life. There was no more laughter in the house, and she began to droop.

Polly had been away from the parsonage a month when the complacency of the village was again upset by the arrival of the "Great American Circus."

There were many callers at the parsonage that day, for speculation was now at fever heat about the pastor. "Will he try to see her?" "Has he forgotten her?" and "What did he ever find in her?" were a few of the many questions that the women were asking each other. Now that the cause of their envy was removed they would gladly have reinstated the pastor as their idol, for, like all truly feminine souls, they could not bear to see a man unhappy without wishing to comfort him, nor happy unless they were the "street cause of his state."

"How dare any man be happy without me?" had been the cry of each woman since Eve was created to mate with Adam.

Douglas had held himself more and more aloof from the day of Polly's disappearance. He expressed no opinion about the deacons or their recent disapproval of him. He avoided meeting them offener than duty required, and Strong felt so uncomfortable and tongue-tied in his presence that he too was glad to make their talks as few as possible.

Nothing was said about the pastor's plans for the future or about his continued connection with the church, and the inquisitive sisterhood was on the point of exploding from an over-accumulation of unanswered questions.

He delivered his sermons conscientiously, called upon his poor, listened to the sorrows, real and fancied, of his parishioners and shut himself up with his books or walked alone on the hill behind the church.

He had been absent all day when Mandy looked out on the circus for the dozenth time and saw that the afternoon performance was closing. It had driven her to desperation to hear that Miss Polly was not in the parade that morning and to know that the pastor had made no effort to find out about her. For weeks both she and Hasty had hoped that the return of the circus might bring Polly back to them, but now it was nearly night and there had been no word from her. Why didn't she come running in to see them, as Mandy had felt so sure she would? Why had the pastor stayed away on the hills all day?

Unanswered questions were always an abandonment to Mandy, so finally she drew a quarter from the knotted gingham rag that held her small wad of savings and told Hasty to "go long to de show an' find out 'bout Miss Polly."

She was anxiously waiting for him when Deacon Strong knocked at the door for the second time that afternoon.

"Is Mr. Douglas back yet?" he asked.
"No, sah, he ain't," said Mandy very shortly. She felt that Strong and Elverson had been "a-tryin' to spy on de parson all day," and she resented their visits more than she usually did.
"What time are you expectin' him?"
"I don't nebbler spec' Massa Douglas till I sees him."

Strong granted ungraciously and went down the steps. He saw from the window that he met Elverson in front of the church.
"Dey sure am a-meantin' trouble," she mumbled.

The band had stopped playing; the last of the audience had straggled down the street. She opened the door and stood on the porch; the house seemed to suffocate her. What was keeping Hasty?

He came at last, but Mandy could tell from his gait that he brought unwelcome news.
"Ain't she dar?"
"She's a-trabbellin' wid 'em, Mandy, but she didn't done ride."
"See heah, Hasty Jones, is dat ere chille sick?"
"I don't rightly know," said Hasty. "A great big man, what wore clothes like a gemmen, comed out wid a whip in his hand an' says as how he's 'bliged to 'nounce anudder gal in Miss Polly's place. An' den he says as how de udder gal was jes' as good, an' den everybody look disappointed like, an' den out comes de udder gal on a hoss an' do tricks, an' I ain't heard no more 'bout Miss Polly."

"She's sick, dat's what I says," Mandy declared excitedly, "an' somebody's got to do somethin'!"
"I done all I knowed," drawled Hasty, fearing that Mandy was regretting her twenty-five cent investment.
"Go long out an' fix up dat 'ere kitchen fire," was Mandy's impatient reply. "I got to keep dem vittels warm for Massa John."

She wished to be alone, so that she could think of some way to get hold of Polly. "Dat baby faced mornin' glory done got Mandy all wobbly 'bout de heart," she declared to herself as she crossed to the window for a sight of the pastor.

(To be continued)

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"OH, SEE HOW SERIOUS HE LOOKS!" SHE TEASED.

Polly is going back to the circus with you." He nodded toward Strong, almost laughing at the surprise in store for him.
"Back to the circus?" asked Jim.
"Did she say anything to you about it?" He was worried by the bewilderment in Jim's manner.
Before Jim could reply Polly, who had reached the steps in time to catch the last few words, slipped quickly between them. She wore her coat and hat and carried a small brown satchel.
"Of course I did, didn't I, Jim?" she said, turning her back upon the pastor and motioning to Jim not to answer. Douglas gazed at her in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he asked in a hoarse, strained voice. He glanced at the coat and hat. "Where are you going?"
Polly avoided his eyes and continued nervously to Jim.
"What made you come back? Why didn't you wait for me down the street? Now you've spoiled everything." She pretended to be very vexed with him. The big fellow looked puzzled. He tried to protest, but she put a warning finger to her lips and pressed the little brown satchel into his hand. "It's no use," she went on hurriedly. "We might as well tell them everything now." She turned to Douglas and pretended to laugh. "You have found us out."

wildly. "I want Bingo. I want the lights and the music and the hoops. I want the shrieks of the animals and the rattle of the wheels in the plains at night. I want to ride in the big parade. I want to live and die—just die—as circus folks die. I want to go back. I want to go back."
She put out one trembling hand to Jim and rushed quickly through the gate, laughing and sobbing hysterically and calling to him to follow.

CHAPTER XII.
LONELY days followed Polly's desertion of the parsonage. Mandy went about her duties very quietly, feeling that the little comments which once amused the pastor had now become an interruption to thoughts in which she had no part. He would sit for hours with his head in his hands, taking no notice of what passed before him. She tried to think of new dishes to tempt his appetite and shook her head sadly as she bore the unattractive food back to the kitchen.
She sometimes found a portfolio of drawings lying open upon his study table. She remembered the seal with which he had planned to remodel the church and parsonage when he first came to them, how his enthusiasm had gradually died for lack of encourage-

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