

Polly of the Circus

BY MARGARET MAYO
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(Continued from last week)

It was nearly dark when she saw him coming slowly down the path from the hill. She lighted the study lamp.



"She's sick, that's what I say."

lamp, rearranged the cushions and tried to make the room look cheery for his entrance.

"I'm afraid you're mighty tired," she said.

"Oh, no," answered Douglas absently.

"Maybe you'd like Mandy to be serving your supper in here tonight. It's more cheerful."

He crossed to the window and looked it upon the circus lot. The flare of torches and the red fire came up to meet his pale, tense face. "How like the picture of thirteen months ago," he thought, and old Toby's words came back to him—"The show has got to go on."

He longed to have done with dreams and speculation, to feel something tangible, warm and real within his grasp. "I can't go on like this," he cried. "I can't!" He turned from the window and walked hurriedly up and down the room. Indoors or out, he found no rest. He threw himself in the armchair near the table and sat tormented in thought.

Mandy came softly into the room. She was followed by Hasty, who carried a tray laden with things that ought to have tempted any man. She motioned for Hasty to put the tray on the table and then began arranging the dishes. Hasty stole to the window and peeped out at the tempting fare of red fire.

When Douglas discovered the presence of his two "faithfuls" he was touched with momentary contrition.

"Have you had a hard day with the new gravel walk?" he asked Hasty, remembering that he had been laying a fresh path to the Sunday school room.

"Jes' yo' come eat yo' supper," Mandy called to Douglas. "Don't yo' worry your head 'bout dat lazy husband' ob mine. He ain't goin' ter work 'nuff to hurt himself." For an instant she had been tempted to let the pastor know how Hasty had gone to the circus and seen nothing of Polly, but her motherly instinct won the day, and she urged him to eat before disturbing him with her own anxieties. It was no use. He only toyed with his food; he was clearly ill at ease and eager to be alone. She gave up trying to tempt his appetite and began to lead up in a roundabout way to the things which she wished to ask.

"Dat's quite some racket out dar in de lot tonight," she said. Douglas did not answer. After a moment she went on, "Hasty didn't work on no walk today." Douglas looked at her quizzically, while Hasty, convinced that for reasons of her own she was going to get him into trouble, was making frantic motions. "He done gone ter de circus," she blurted out. Douglas' face became suddenly grave. Mandy saw that she had touched an open wound.

"I jes' couldn't stan' it, Massa John. I had ter find out 'bout dat anzel child. There was a pause. She felt that he was waiting for her to go on.

"She didn't done ride today."

He looked up with the eyes of a dumb, persecuted animal. "And de gemmen in de show didn't tell nobody why—jes' speaked 'bout de udder gal takin' her place."

"Why didn't she ride?" cried Douglas, in an agony of suspense.

"Dat's what I don't know, sah," Mandy began to cry. It was the first time in his experience that Douglas had ever known her to give way to any such weakness.

Hasty came down from the window and tried to put one arm about Mandy's shoulders.

"Leub me alone, yo' nigger!" she exclaimed, trying to cover her tears with a show of anger that she did not feel; then she rushed from the room, followed by Hasty.

The band was playing loudly. The din of the night performance was increasing. Douglas' nerves were strained to the point of breaking. He would not let himself go near the window. He stood by the side of the table, his fists clenched, and tried to beat back the impulse that was pulling him toward the door. Again and again he set his teeth.

It was uncertainty that gnawed at him so. Was she ill? Could she need him? Was she sorry for having left him? Would she be glad if he went

for her and brought her back with him? He recalled the hysterical note in her behavior the day that she went away—how she had pleaded, only a few moments before Jim came, never to be separated from him. Had she really cared for Jim and for the old life? Why had she never written? Was she ashamed? Was she sorry for what she had done? What could it mean? He threw his hands above his head with a gesture of despair. A moment later he passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XIII

JIM was slow tonight. The big show was nearly over, yet many of the props used in the early part of the bill were still unloaded.

He was tinkering absentmindedly with one of the wagons in the back lot, and the men were standing about idly waiting for orders when Barker came out of the main tent and called to him sharply.

"Hey, there, Jim! What's your excuse tonight?"

"Excuse for what?" Jim crossed slowly to Barker.

"The cook tent was started half an hour late, and the sideshow top ain't loaded yet."

"Your wagons is on the bum; that's what! No. 18 carries the cook tent, an' the blacksmith has been tinkerin' with it all day. Ask him what shape it's in."

"You're always stallin'," was Barker's sullen complaint. "It's the wagons or the blacksmiths or anything but the truth. I know what's the matter, all right."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jim sharply.

"I mean that all your time's took up a-carryin' and a-fechin' for that girl what calls you 'Muvver Jim.'"

"What have you got to say about her?" Jim eyed him with a threatening look.

"I got a-plenty," said Barker as he turned to snap his whip at the small boys who had stolen into the back lot.

"Back under the rear edge of the top. She's been about as much as a sick cat since she come back."

"I saw her act last night."

"Yes," answered Jim doggedly.

"Wasn't it punk? She didn't show at all this afternoon; said she was sick."

"And me with all them people inside what knowed her waitin' to see her."

"Give her a little time," Jim pleaded. "She ain't rode for a year."

"Time!" shouted Barker. "How much does she want? She's been back a month, and instead of beacin' up she's a-gettin' worse. There's only one thing for me to do."

"What's that?" asked Jim uneasily.

"I'm goin' to call her, and call her hard."

"Look here, Barker," and Jim squared his shoulders as he looked steadily at the other man, "you're boss here, and I takes orders from you, but if I catches you abusin' Poll you bein' boss won't make no difference."

"You can't bluff me!" shouted Barker. "I ain't bluffin'. I'm only tellin' you."

"I ain't bluffin' nothin'."

"Well, you tell her to get on to her job. If she don't, she quits; that's all."

He hurried into the ring.

Jim took one step to follow him, then stopped and gazed at the ground with thoughtful eyes. He, too, had seen the change in Polly. He had tried to rouse her. It was no use. She had



"Star gassin', Poll? he asked."

looked at him blankly. "If she would only complain," he said to himself; "if she would only get mad, anything, anything to wake her." But she did not complain. She went through her daily routine very humbly and quietly. She sometimes wondered how Jim could talk so much about her work, but before she could answer the question her mind drifted back to other days, to a garden and flowers, and Jim stole away unmissed and left her with folded hand and wide, staring eyes, gazing into the distance.

The memory of these times made Jim helpless tonight. He had gone on hoping from day to day that Barker

might not notice the "let down" in her work, and now the blow had fallen. How could he tell her?

One of the acts came tumbling out of the main tent. There was a moment's confusion as clowns, acrobats and animals passed each other on their way to and from the ring; then the lot cleared again, and Polly came slowly from the dressing tent. She looked very different from the little girl whom Jim had led away from the parson's garden in a simple white frock one month before. Her thin, pensive face contrasted oddly with her glittering attire. Her hair was knotted high on her head and intertwined with flowers and jewels. Her slender neck seemed scarcely able to support its burden. Her short, full skirt and low cut bodice were ablaze with white and colored stones.

"What's on, Jim?" she asked.

"The 'leap of death.' You got plenty of time."

Polly's mind went back to the girl who answered that call a year ago. Her spirit seemed very near tonight. The band started the first Barker made his grandiose announcement about the wonderful act about to be seen, and her eyes wandered to the distant church steeple. The moonlight seemed to shun it tonight. It looked cold and grim and dark. She wondered whether the siren bell that once called its flock to worship had become as mute as her own dead heart. She did not hear the whirr of the great machine inside the tent as it plunged through space with its girl occupant. These things were a part of the daily routine, part of the strange, vague dream through which she must stumble for the rest of her life.

Jim watched her in silence. Her face was turned from him. She had forgotten his presence.

"Star gassin', Poll?" he asked at length, dreading to disturb her reverie.

"I guess I was, Jim." She turned to him with a little, forced smile. He longed to save her from Barker's threatened rebuke.

"How you feelin' tonight?"

"I'm all right," she answered cheerfully.

"Anything you want?"

"Want?" She turned upon him with startled eyes. There was so much that she wanted that the mere mention of the word had opened a well of pain in her heart.

"I mean can I do anything for you?"

"Oh, of course not." She remembered how little any one could do.

"What is it, Poll?" he begged, but she only turned away and shook her head with a sigh. He followed her with anxious eyes. "What made you cut out the show today? Was it because you didn't want to ride afore folks what knowed you—ride afore him mebbe?"

"Him?" Her face was white. Jim feared she might swoon. "You don't mean that he was?"

"Oh, no," he answered quickly, "of course not. Parsons don't come to places like this one. I was only figurin' that you didn't want other folks to see an' to tell him how you was ridin'."

She did not answer.

"Was that it, Poll?" he urged.

"I don't know." She stared into space.

"Was it?"

"I guess it was," she said after a long time.

"I knowed it!" he cried. "I was a fool to a-brung you back! You don't belong with us no more."

"Oh, don't, Jim! Don't! Don't make me feel I'm in the way here too!"

"Here too?" He looked at her in astonishment. "You wasn't in his way, was you, Poll?"

"Yes, Jim." She saw his look of unbelief and continued hurriedly: "Oh, I tried not to be! I tried so hard. He used to read me verses out of a Bible about my way being his way and my people his people, but it isn't so, Jim. Your way is the way you are born, and your people are the people you are born with, and you can't change it. Jim, no matter how hard you try."

"You was changin' it," he answered, savagely. "You was gettin' jes' like them people. It was me what took you away an' spoiled it all. You oughtn't to a' come. What made you after you said you wouldn't?"

She did not answer. Strange things were going through the mind of the slow witted Jim. He braced himself for a difficult question.

"Will you answer me somethin' straight?" he asked.

"Why, of course," she said as she met his gaze.

"Do you love the parson, Poll?"

She started.

"Is that it?"

Her lids fluttered and closed; she caught her breath quickly, her lips apart, then looked far into the distance.

"Yes, Jim, I'm afraid that's it." The little figure drooped, and she stood before him with lowered eyes, unarméd. Jim looked at her helplessly, then shook his big, stupid head.

"Ain't that h—?"

It seemed such a short time to Jim since he had picked her up, a cooling babe, at her dead mother's side. He watched the tender, averted face. Things had turned out so differently from what he had planned.

"An' he don't care about you—like that?" he asked after a pause.

"No, not in that way." She was anxious to defend the parson from even the thought of such a thing. "He was good and kind always, but he didn't care that way. He's not like that."

"I guess I'll have a talk with him," said Jim, and he turned to go.

"Talk?" she cried.

He stopped and looked at her in astonishment. It was the first time that he had ever heard that sharp note in her voice. Her tiny figure was stiffened with decision. Her eyes were blazing.

"If you ever dare to speak to him—about me, you'll never see me again."

Jim was perplexed.

"I mean it, Jim. I've made my choice, and I've come back to you. If you ever try to fix up things between him and me, I'll run away—really and truly away—and you'll never get me back."

He shuffled awkwardly to her side and reached apologetically for the tin she clutched fast. He held it in his big rough hand, toying nervously with the tiny fingers.

"I wouldn't do nothin' that you wasn't a-wantin', Poll. I was just a-tryin' to help you, only I—I never seem to know how."

She turned to him with tear dimmed eyes and rested her hands on his great broad shoulders, and he saw the place where he dwelt in her heart.

CHAPTER XIV

THE "leap of death" implements were being carried from the ring, and Jim turned away to superintend their loading.

Performers again rushed by each other on their way to and from the main tent.

Polly stood in the center of the lot frowning and anxious. The mere mention of the parson's name had in itself been impossible for her to ride tonight. For hours she had been whipping herself up to the point of doing it, and now her courage failed her. She followed Barker as he came from the ring.

"Mr. Barker, please!"

He turned upon her sharply.

"Well, what is it now?"

"I want to ask you to let me off again tonight." She spoke in a short jerky, desperate way.

"What?" he shrieked. "Not go into the ring, with all them people inside what's paid their money because they knowed you?"

"That's it!" she cried. "I can't! I can't!"

"You're gettin' too tony!" Barker sneered. "That's the trouble with you. You ain't been good for nothin' since you was at that parson's house. You didn't stay there, and you're no use here. First thing you know you'll be out all round."

"Out?"

"Sure. You don't think I'm goin' to head my bill with a 'dead one,' do you?"

"I am not a 'dead one,'" she answered excitedly. "I'm the best ride you've had since mother died. You've said so yourself."

"That was afore you got in with them church cranks. You talk about your mother! Why, she'd be ashamed to own you!"

"She wouldn't!" cried Polly. Her eyes were flashing; her face was scarlet. The pride of hundreds of years of ancestry was quivering with indignation. "I can ride as well as I ever could, and I'll do it too. I'll do it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" echoed Barker. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I can't go into that ring tonight," she declared, "and I won't."

She was desperate now and trading upon a strength beyond her own.

He looked at her with momentary decision. She was a good rider, the best since her mother, as he had often told her. He could see this meant an issue. He felt she would be on her mettle tomorrow, as far as her work was concerned, if he let her alone tonight.

"All right," he said sullenly. "You can stay off tonight. I got the money in there anyway, and I got their money. I'll let Eloise do a turn on Barbarian, but tomorrow you'd better show me your old act."

"I'll show you!" she cried. "I'll show you!"

"Well, see that you do." He crossed into the ring.

Polly stood where Barker had left her, white and tense. Jim came toward her from the direction of the wagons. He glanced at her uneasily. "What's he been a-sayin' to you?"

"He says I can't ride any more."

Her lips closed tightly. She stared straight ahead of her. "He says I was no good to the people that took me in and I'm no use here."

"It's not so!" thundered Jim.

"No, it's not!" she cried. "I'll show him, Jim! I'll show him—tomorrow!" She turned toward the dressing tent. Jim caught her firmly by the wrist.

"Wait, Poll! You ain't ever goin' into the ring a-feelin' that way." Her eyes met his defiantly.

"What's the difference? What's the difference?" She wrenched her wrist quickly from him and ran into the dressing tent, laughing hysterically.

"An' I brung her back to it," mumbled Jim as he turned to give orders to the property men.

Most of the "first half props" were loaded, and some of the men were asleep under the wagons. The lot was clear. Suddenly he felt some one approaching from the back of the enclosure. He turned and found himself face to face with the stern, solitary figure of the parson, wrapped in his long black cloak. The moonlight slipped through a rift in the clouds and fell into a circle around them.

"What made you come here?" was all Jim said.

"I heard that Miss Polly didn't ride today. I was afraid she might be ill."

(To be continued)

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