POLLY of the CIRCUS

BY MARGARET MAYO

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CHAPTER IV (Continued)

"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. "Ma an' Jim will be sendin' her more soon."

"You're going 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. "Ma an' Jim has been father an' mother an' jes' about everything to that little one. She wasn't much bigger'n a bar'l full of peanuts when we begun a-worryin' about her."

"No matter what happens, the show has to go on."

"Well, Mandy will do the worrying now," Douglas laughed. "She's been dying 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.

"I've heard how some church folks feels towards us circus people, sir, an' I jes' wanted you to know that the ain't finer families or better men or 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' grandfather 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 one 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 ev'ry 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 finger forefinger on her lips and rolled her large eyes skyward. "Dat sure am an angel chile straight from heaben," 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."

CHAPTER V.

THE church bells were ringing their first warning for the morning service when Mandy peeped into the spare bedroom for the second time and glanced cautiously at the wisp of hair that bespoke a feminine head somewhere between the covers and the little white pillow on the four poster bed. There was no sound from the sleeper, so Mandy ventured across the room on tiptoe and raised the shades. The drooping boughs of autumn foliage lay shimmering against the window panes, and through them might be seen the gray outline of the church. Mandy glanced again toward the bed to make sure that the burst of sunlight had not wakened the invalid, then crossed to a small, rickety chair laden with the discarded finery of the little circus rider.

"Lawdy sakes!" she cried, holding up a spangled dress admiringly. "Ain't dat beautiful!" She drew near the mirror, attempting to see the reflection of the tinsel and chiffon against her very ample background of gingham and avoirdupois. "You'd sure be a swell nigger wid dat on, honey!" she chuckled to herself. "Wouldn't dem deacons holler if dey done see dat?"

The picture of the deacons' astonishment at such a spectacle so grew upon Mandy that she was obliged to cover her generous mouth to shut in her convulsive laughter lest it awaken the little girl in the bed. She crossed to the old fashioned bureau which for many months had stood unused against the wall. The drawer creaked as she opened it to lay away the gay, spangled gown.

"It'll be a mighty long time afore she puts on dem t'ings ag'in," she said, with a doubtful shake of her large, round head.

Then she went back to the chair and picked up Polly's sandals and examined the beadwork with a great deal of interest. "Lawdy, lawdy!" she cried as she compared the size of the sandals to that of her own rough, worn shoes. She was again upon the point of exploding with laughter as the church bell added a few final and more emphatic clangs to its warning.

She turned, with a start, motioning a vain warning out of the window for the bell to be silent, but the little sleeper was already stirring uneasily on her pillow. One soft arm was thrown languidly over her head. The large blue eyes opened and closed

"You'd sure be a swell nigger wid dat on, honey!" she chuckled.

dreamily as she murmured the words of the clown song that Jim and Toby had taught her years ago:

"Ting ling,
That's what the bells sing."

Mandy reached the side of the bed as the girl's eyes opened a second time and met hers with a blank stare of astonishment. A tiny frown came into the small white forehead.

"Where's the mother?" she asked faintly, trying to find something familiar in the black face before her.

"Hush, child, hush," Mandy whispered. "Yo' jes' lay peaceably wid de pain while I go fetch yo' de hot bell nectar."

"Hot what?" the girl repeated as her eyes roved hither and thither about the strange walls and the unfamiliar furniture of the room. "This ain't the show!" she cried suddenly.

"Lor' bless you, no! Dis ain't no show!" Mandy answered, and she laughed reassuringly.

"Then where am I?" Polly asked, half breathless with bewilderment.

"Nobber you mind 'bout dat," was Mandy's unsatisfactory reply.

"But I do mind," protested Polly, trying to raise herself to a sitting position. "Where's the bunch?"

"De wat?" asked Mandy in surprise.

"The bunch—Jim and Toby an' the rest of the push?"

"Lor' bless you," Mandy exclaimed, "dey's done gone long wid de circus hours ago."

"Gone! Show gone!" Polly cried in amazement. "Then what am I doin' here?"

"Ho' on dar, honey! Ho' on!" Mandy entreated. "Don't yo' 'member?"

"Let me alone!" Polly put aside the arm that was trying to place a shawl around her. "I gotta get out of here."

"Youse got plenty o' time for dat," Mandy answered. "Jes' yo' wait a while."

"I can't wait, an' I won't!" Polly shrieked, almost beside herself with anxiety. "I got to get to the next burg—Wakefield, ain't it? What time is it? Let me alone! Let me go!" she cried, struggling desperately.

The door opened softly, and the young pastor stood looking down at the picture of the frail, white faced child and her black, determined captor.

"Here, here! What's all this about?" he asked in a firm tone, though evidently amused.

"Who are you?" returned the girl as she shoved herself quickly back against the pillows and drew the covers close under her chin, looking at him oddly over their top.

"She done been cuttin' up somefin awful!" Mandy explained as she tried to regain enough breath for a new encounter.

"Cutting up? You surprise me, Miss Polly," he said, with mock seriousness.

"How do you know I'm Polly?" the little rebel asked, her eyes gleaming large and desperate above the friendly covers.

"If you will be very good and keep very quiet, I will try to tell you," he said as he crossed to the bed.

"I won't be quiet, not for nobody," Polly objected, with a bold disregard of double negatives. "I got to get a move. If you ain't goin' to help me you needn't butt in."

"I am afraid I can't help you to go just yet," Douglas replied. He was beginning to perceive that there were tasks before him other than the shaping of Polly's character.

"What are you tryin' to do to me, anyhow?" she asked as she shot a glance of suspicion from the pastor to Mandy. "What am I up against?"

"Don't you be scared, honey," Mandy reassured her. "Youse jes' as safe here as you done been in de circus."

"Safer, we hope," Douglas added with a smile.

"Are you two bug?" Polly questioned as she turned her head from one side to the other and studied them with a new idea. "Well, you can't get none the best of me. I can get away all right, an' I will too."

She made a desperate effort to put one foot to the floor, but fell back with a cry of pain.

"Dar, dar," Mandy murmured, putting the pillow under the poor, cramped neck and smoothing the tangled hair from Polly's forehead. "You done hurt yo'sef for suah dis time."

The pastor had taken a step toward the bed. His look of amusement had changed to one of pity.

"You see, Miss Polly, you have had a very bad fall, and you can't get away just yet nor see your friends until you are better."

"It's only a scratch," Polly whimpered. "I can do my work; I got to." One more feeble effort and she succumbed, with a faint "jiminy crickets!"

"Uncle Toby told me that you were a very good little girl," Douglas said as he drew up a chair and sat down by her side, confident by the expression on her face that at last he was master of the situation. "Do you think he would like you to behave like this?"

"I sure am on the blink," she sighed as she settled back wearily upon the pillow.

"You'll be all right soon," Douglas answered cheerily. "Mandy and I will help the time to go."

"I recollect now," Polly faltered without hearing him. "It was the last hoop. Jim seemed to have a hunch I was goin' to be in for trouble when I went into the ring. Bingo must 'a' felt it too. He kept a-pullin' and a-jerkin' from the start. I got myself tangled to make the last jump, an'—I can't remember no more." Her head drooped, and her eyes closed.

"I wouldn't try just now if I were you," Douglas answered tenderly.

"It's my wheel, ain't it?" Polly questioned after a pause.

"Yoh whut, chile?" Mandy exclaimed as she turned from the table, where she had been rolling up the unused bandages left from the doctor's call the night before.

"I say it's my creeper, my paddle," Polly explained, trying to locate a few of her many pains. "Gee, but that hurts!" She tried to bend her ankle. "Is it punctured?"

"Only sprained," Douglas strived to control his expression on Mandy's puzzled face. "Better not talk any more about it."

"Ain't anything the matter with my tongue, is there?" she asked, turning her head to one side and studying him curiously.

"I don't think there is," he replied good naturedly.

"How did I come to fall in here and how?" she asked as she studied the walls of the unfamiliar room.

"We brought you here."

"It's a swell place," she conceded grudgingly.

"We are comfortable," he admitted as a telltale smile again hovered about his lips. He was thinking of the changes that he must presently make in Miss Polly's vocabulary.

"Is this the big top?" she asked.

"The—what?" he stammered.

"The main tent," she explained.

"Well, no; not exactly. It's going to be your room now, Miss Polly."

"My room! Gee! Think of that!" she gasped as the possibility of her actually having a room all of her own took hold of her mind. "Much obliged," she said, with a nod, feeling that something was expected of her. She knew no other phrase of gratitude than the one "Muvver Jim" and Toby had taught her to say to the manager when she received from him the first stick of red and white striped candy.

"SHE DONE BEEN CUTTIN' UP SOMEFIN AWFUL!"

"You're very welcome," Douglas answered, with a ring of genuine feeling in his voice.

"Awful quiet, ain't it?" she ventured after a pause. "Guess that's what woke me up."

Douglas laughed good naturedly at the thought of quiet as a disturber and added that he feared it might at first be rather dull for her, but that Jim and Toby would send her news of the circus and that she could write to them as soon as she was better.

"I'll have to be a heap better 'an I ever was 'fore I can write much," Polly drawled, with a whimsical little smile.

"I will write for you," the pastor volunteered, understanding her plight.

"You will?" For the first time he saw a show of real pleasure in her eyes.

"Every day," Douglas promised solemnly.

"An' you will show me how?"

"Indeed, I will."

"How long am I in for?" she asked.

"The doctor can tell better about that when he comes."

"The doctor! So—it's as bad as that, eh?"

"Oh, that need not frighten you," Douglas answered consolingly.

"I ain't frightened," she bridled quickly; "I ain't never scared of nothin'. It's only 'cause they need me in the show that I'm a-kickin'."

"Oh, they will get along all right," he said reassuringly.

"Get along!" Polly flashed with sudden resentment. "Get along without my act?" It was apparent from her look of astonishment that Douglas had completely lost whatever ground he had heretofore gained in her respect. "Say, have you seen that show?" She waited for his answer with pity and contempt.

"No," admitted John weakly.

"Well, I should say you ain't or you wouldn't make no crack like that. I'm the whole thing in that push," she said, with an air of self complacency, "an' with me down an' out that show will be on the bum for fair."

"I beg your pardon," was all Douglas could say, confused by the sudden volley of unfamiliar words.

"You're kiddin' me," she said, turning her head to one side, as was her wont when assailed by suspicion. "You must 'a' seen me ride?"

"No, Miss Polly, I have never seen a circus," Douglas told her, half regretfully, a sense of his deep privation stealing upon him.

"What?" cried Polly incredulously.

"Lordy, no, chile. He ain't nobber seed none ob dem t'ings," Mandy interrupted as she tried to arrange a few short stemmed posies in a variegated bouquet.

"Well, what do you think of that?" Polly gasped. "You're the first one I ever saw that hadn't." She was looking at him as though he were a deity.

"So I'm a Rube," Douglas shook his head with a sad little smile and good naturedly agreed that he had sometimes reared as much.

"That's what we always calls a guy like you," she explained ingenuously and added hopefully, "Well, you must 'a seen our parade. All the pillers see that. It don't cost nothin'."

"I'm afraid I must plead guilty to the charge of being a piker," Douglas admitted, half sheepishly, "for I did see the parade."

"Well, I was the one on the white horse right behind the lion cage," she began excitedly. "You remember?"

"It's a little confused in my mind"—he caught her look of amazement—"just at present," he stammered, feeling her wrath again about to descend upon him.

"Well, I'm the twenty-four sheet stand," she explained.

"Sheet!" Mandy shrieked from her corner.

"Yes, the billboards, the pictures," Polly said, growing impatient at their persistent stupidity.

"She suah am a funny talkin' thing," mumbled Mandy to herself as she clipped the withered leaves from a geranium near the window.

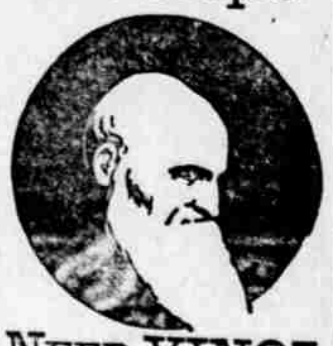
"You are dead sure they know I ain't comin' on?" Polly asked, with a lingering suspicion in her voice.

"Dead sure." And Douglas smiled to himself as he lapsed into her vernacular.

There was a moment's pause. Polly realized for the first time that she must actually readjust herself to a new order of things. Her eyes again roved about the room. It was a cheerful place in which to be imprisoned. Even Polly could not deny that. The broad window at the back, with its white and pink chintz curtains on the inside and its frame of ivy on the outside, spoke of singing birds and sunshine all day long. Everything from the white ceiling to the sweet smelling matting that covered the floor was spotlessly clean. The cane bottomed rocker near the curved window seat with its pretty pillows told of days when a convalescent might look in comfort at the garden beneath. The counterpane, with its old fashioned rose pattern; the little white tidies on the back of each chair and Mandy crooning beside the window all helped to make a homelike picture.

(Continued next week.)

Old People



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