

POLLY of the CIRCUS

BY MARGARET MAYO
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[Continued from last week.]

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 often 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 overaccumulation 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 lot for the dozenth time and saw that the afternoon performance was closing. It had driven her to desperation to learn 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 nebber spec' Massa Douglas till I sees him."

Strong grunted uncivilly and went down the steps. She saw from the window that he met Elverson in front of the church.

"They sure am a-meanin' 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-trabbelin' 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 ever'body 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.

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



"She's sick, dat's what I says." lamp, rearranged the cushions and tried to make the room look cheery for his entrance.

"It's 'frail yo's mighty tired," she said.

"Your wagons is on the bum; that's what! No. 38 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-fetchin' for that girl what calls yo' '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 to peek under the rear edge of the big top. "She's been about as much good as a sick cat since she come back. You 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 bracin' 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' Polle your bein' boss won't make no difference."

"You can't bluff me!" shouted Barker. "I ain't bluffin'. I'm only tellin' you," said Jim very quietly.

"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 gazin', Polle?" 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, passive 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 o' 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 stopped playing. Barker made his grandiloquent 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 solemn bell that once called its flock to worship had become as mute as her own dead heart. She did not hear the whirl 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 gazin', Polle?" 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, Polle?" 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.

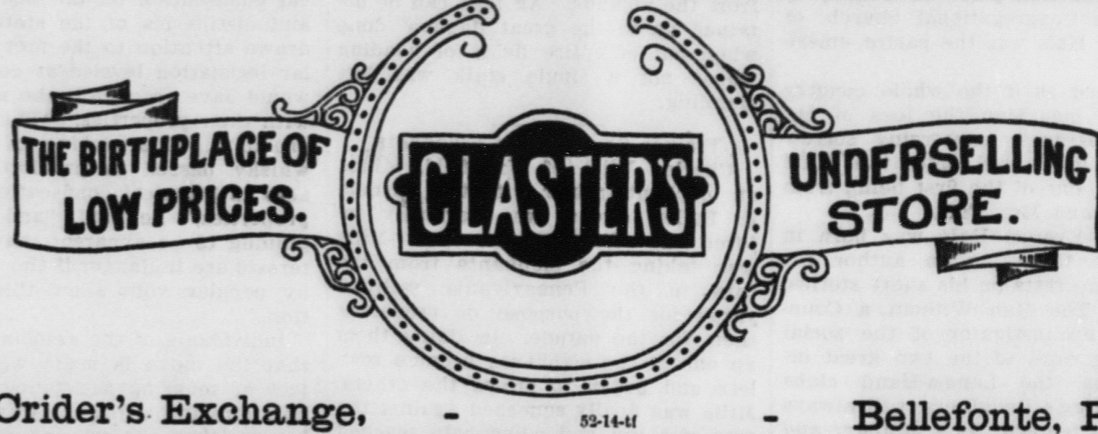
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you ever try to fix up things between him and me. I'll run away—really and truly away—and you'll never, never get me back."

He shuffled awkwardly to her side and reached apologetically for the little clinched fist. He held it in his rough hand, toying nervously with the tiny fingers.

"I wouldn't do nothin' that you wasn't a-wantin', Polle. 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 pastor's name had made it seem 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 rider you've had since mother died. You've said so yourself."

[To be Continued.]

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