Polly of the Circus

Margaret Mayo

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To My "KLEINE MUTTER"

Chapter I

The band of the "Great American Circus" was playing noisily. The performance was in full swing.

Beside a shabby trunk in the women's dressing tent sat a young, wistful−faced girl, chin in hand, unheeding the chatter of the women about her or the picturesque disarray of the surrounding objects. Her eyes had been so long accustomed to the glitter and tinsel of circus fineries that she saw nothing unusual in a picture that might have held a painter spellbound.

Circling the inside of the tent and forming a double line down the centre were partially unpacked trunks belching forth impudent masses of satins, laces, artificial hair, paper flowers, and paste jewels. The scent of moist earth mingled oddly with the perfumed odours of the garments heaped on the grass. Here and there high circles of lights threw a strong, steady glare upon the half−clad figure of a robust acrobat, or the thin, drooping shoulders of a less stalwart sister. Temporary ropes stretched from one pole to another, were laden with bright− coloured stockings, gaudy, spangled gowns, or dusty street clothes, discarded by the performers before slipping into their circus attire. There were no nails or hooks, so hats and veils were pinned to the canvas walls.

The furniture was limited to one camp chair in front of each trunk, the till of which served as a tray for the paints, powders and other essentials of "make−up."

A pail of water stood by the side of each chair, so that the performers might wash the delicately shaded tights, handkerchiefs and other small articles not to be entrusted to the slow, careless process of the village laundry. Some of these had been washed to−night and hung to dry on the lines between the dusty street garments.

Women whose "turns" came late sat about half−clothed reading, crocheting or sewing, while others added pencilled eyebrows, powder or rouge to their already exaggerated "make−ups." Here and there a child was putting her sawdust baby to sleep in the till of her trunk, before beginning her part in the evening's entertainment. Young and old went about their duties with a systematic, business−like air, and even the little knot of excited women near Polly−−it seemed that one of the men had upset a circus tradition−−kept a sharp lookout for their "turns."

"What do you think about it, Polly?" asked a handsome brunette, as she surveyed herself in the costume of a Roman charioteer.

"About what?" asked Polly vacantly.

"Leave Poll alone; she's in one of her trances!" called a motherly, good−natured woman whose trunk stood next to Polly's, and whose business was to support a son and three daughters upon stalwart shoulders, both figuratively and literally.

"Well, _I_ ain't in any trance," answered the dark girl, "and _I_ think it's pretty tough for him to take up with a rank outsider, and expect us to warm up to her as though he'd married one of our own folks." She tossed her head, the pride of class distinction welling high in her ample bosom.

"He ain't asking us to warm up to her," contradicted Mademoiselle Eloise, a pale, light− haired sprite, who had arrived late and was making undignified efforts to get out of her clothes by way of her head. She was Polly's understudy and next in line for the star place in the bill.

"Well, Barker has put her into the 'Leap of Death' stunt, ain't he?" continued the brunette. " 'Course that ain't a regular circus act," she added, somewhat mollified, "and so far she's had to dress with the 'freaks,' but the next thing we know, he'll be ringin' her in on a regular stunt and be puttin' her in to dress with US."

"No danger of that," sneered the blonde; "Barker is too old a stager to mix up his sheep and his goats."

Polly had again lost the thread of the conversation. Her mind had gone roving to the night when the frightened girl about whom they were talking had made her first appearance in the circus lot, clinging timidly to the hand of the man who had just made her his wife. Her eyes had met Polly's, with a look of appeal that had gone straight to the child's simple heart.

A few nights later the newcomer had allowed herself to be strapped into the cumbersome "Leap of Death" machine which hurled itself through space at each performance, and flung itself down with force enough to break the neck of any unskilled rider. Courage and steady nerve were the requisites for the job, so the manager had said; but any physician would have told him that only a trained acrobat could long endure the nervous strain, the muscular tension, and the physical rack of such an ordeal.

What matter? The few dollars earned in this way would mean a great deal to the mother, whom the girl's marriage had left desolate.

Polly had looked on hungrily the night that the mother had taken the daughter in her arms to say farewell in the little country town where the circus had played before her marriage. She could remember no woman's arms about HER, for it was fourteen years since tender hands had carried her mother from the performers' tent into the moonlit lot to die. The baby was so used to seeing "Mumsie" throw herself wearily on the ground after coming out of the "big top" exhausted, that she crept to the woman's side as usual that night, and gazed laughingly into the sightless eyes, gurgling and prattling and stroking the unresponsive face. There were tears from those who watched, but no word was spoken.

Clown Toby and the big "boss canvas−man" Jim had always taken turns amusing and guarding little Polly, while her mother rode in the ring. So Toby now carried the babe to another side of the lot, and Jim bore the lifeless body of the mother to the distant ticket−wagon, now closed for the night, and laid it upon the seller's cot.

"It's allus like this in the end," he murmured, as he drew a piece of canvas over the white face and turned away to give orders to the men who were beginning to load the "props" used earlier in the performance.

When the show moved on that night it was Jim's strong arms that lifted the mite of a Polly close to his stalwart heart, and climbed with her to the high seat on the head wagon. Uncle Toby was entrusted with the brown satchel in which the mother had always carried Polly's scanty wardrobe. It seemed to these two men that the eyes of the woman were fixed steadily upon them.

Barker, the manager, a large, noisy, good−natured fellow, at first mumbled something about the kid being "excess baggage," but his objections were only half−hearted, for like the others, he was already under the hypnotic spell of the baby's round, confiding eyes, and he eventually contented himself with an occasional reprimand to Toby, who was now sometimes late on his cues. Polly wondered, at these times, why the old man's stories were so suddenly cut short just as she was so "comfy" in the soft grass at his feet. The boys who used to "look sharp" because of their boss at loading time, now learned that they might loiter so long as "Muvver Jim" was "hikin' it round for the kid." It was Polly who had dubbed big Jim "Muvver," and the sobriquet had stuck to him in spite of his six feet two, and shoulders that an athlete might have envied. Little by little, Toby grew more stooped and small lines of anxiety crept into the brownish circles beneath Jim's eyes, the lips that had once shut so firmly became tender and tremulous, but neither of the men would willingly have gone back to the old emptiness.

It was a red letter day in the circus, when Polly first managed to climb up on the pole of an unhitched wagon and from there to the back of a friendly, Shetland pony. Jim and Toby had been "neglectin' her eddication" they declared, and from that time on, the blood of Polly's ancestors was given full encouragement.

Barker was quick to grasp the advantage of adding the kid to the daily parade. She made her first appearance in the streets upon something very like a Newfoundland dog, guarded from the rear by Jim, and from the fore by a white−faced clown who was thought to be all the funnier because he twisted his neck so much.

From the street parade to Polly's first appearance in the "big top," had seemed a short while to Jim and Toby. They were proud to see her circling the ring in bright colours and to hear the cheers of the people, but a sense of loss was upon them.

"I always said she'd do it," cried Barker, who now took upon himself the credit of Polly's triumph.

And what a triumph it was!

Polly danced as serenely on Bingo's back as she might have done on the "concert boards." She swayed gracefully with the music. Her tiny sandals twinkled as she stood first upon one foot and then upon the other.

Uncle Toby forgot to use many of his tricks that night; and Jim left the loading of the wagons to take care of itself, while he hovered near the entrance, anxious and breathless. The performers crowded around the girl with outstretched hands and congratulations, as she came out of the ring to cheers and applause.

But Big Jim stood apart. He was thinking of the buttons that his clumsy fingers used to force into the stiff, starchy holes too small for them and of the pigtails so stubborn at the ends; and Toby was remembering the little shoes that had once needed to be laced in the cold, dark mornings, and the strings that were always snapping.

Something had gone.

They were not philosophers to reason like Emerson, that for everything we lose we gain something; they were simple souls, these two, they could only feel.

Chapter II

WHILE Polly sat in the dressing tent, listening indifferently to the chatter about the "Leap of Death" girl, Jim waited in the lot outside, opening and shutting a small, leather bag which he had bought for her that day. He was as blind to the picturesque outdoor life as she to her indoor surroundings, for he, too, had been with the circus since his earliest recollection.

The grass enclosure, where he waited, was shut in by a circle of tents and wagons. The great, red property vans were waiting to be loaded with the costumes and tackle which were constantly being brought from the "big top," where the evening performance was now going on. The gay striped curtains at the rear of the tent were looped back to give air to the panting musicians, who sat just inside. Through the opening, a glimpse of the audience might be had, tier upon tier, fanning and shifting uneasily. Near the main tent stood the long, low dressing "top," with the women performers stowed away in one end, the "ring horses" in the centre, and the men performers in the other end.

A temporary curtain was hung between the main and the dressing tent, to shut out the curious mob that tried to peep in at the back lot for a glimpse of things not to be seen in the ring.

Coloured streamers, fastened to the roofs of the tents, waved and floated in the night air and beckoned to the towns−people on the other side to make haste to get their places, forget their cares, and be children again.

Over the tops of the tents, the lurid light of the distant red fire shot into the sky, accompanied by the cries of the peanut "butchers," the popcorn boys, the lemonade venders,{sic} and the exhortations of the side−show "spieler," whose flying banners bore the painted reproductions of his "freaks." Here and there stood unhitched chariots, half filled trunks, trapeze tackle, paper hoops, stake pullers or other "properties" necessary to the show.

Torches flamed at the tent entrances, while oil lamps and lanterns gave light for the loading of the wagons.

There was a constant stream of life shooting in and out from the dressing tent to the "big top," as gaily decked men, women and animals came or went.

Drowsy dogs were stretched under the wagons, waiting their turn to be dressed as lions or bears. The wise old goose, with his modest grey mate, pecked at the green grass or turned his head from side to side, watching the singing clown, who rolled up the painted carcass and long neck of the imitation giraffe from which two property men had just slipped, their legs still encased in stripes.

Ambitious canvas−men and grooms were exercising, feet in air, in the hope of some day getting into the performers' ring. Property men stole a minute's sleep in the soft warm grass while they waited for more tackle to load in the wagons. Children of the performers were swinging on the tent ropes, chattering monkeys sat astride the Shetland ponies, awaiting their entrance to the ring. The shrieks of the hyenas in the distant animal tent, the roaring of the lions and the trumpeting of the elephants mingled with the incessant clamour of the band. And back of all this, pointing upward in mute protest, rose a solemn church spire, white and majestic against a vast panorama of blue, moonlit hills, that encircled the whole lurid picture. Jim's eyes turned absently toward the church as he sat fumbling with the lock of the little brown satchel.

He had gone from store to store in the various towns where they had played looking for something to inspire wonder in the heart of a miss, newly arrived at her sixteenth year. Only the desperation of a last moment had forced him to decide upon the imitation alligator bag, which he now held in his hand.

It looked small and mean to him as the moment of presentation approached, and he was glad that the saleswoman in the little country store had suggested the addition of ribbons and laces, which he now drew from the pocket of his corduroys. He placed his red and blue treasures very carefully in the bottom of the satchel, and remembered with regret the strand of coral beads which he had so nearly bought to go with them.

He opened the large property trunk by his side, and took from it a laundry box, which held a little tan coat, that was to be Toby's contribution to the birthday surprise. He was big− hearted enough to be glad that Toby's gift seemed finer and more useful than his.

It was only when the "Leap of Death" act preceding Polly's turn was announced, that the big fellow gave up feasting his eyes on the satchel and coat, and hid them away in the big property trunk. She would be out in a minute, and these wonders were not to be revealed to her until the close of the night's performance.

Jim put down the lid of the trunk and sat upon it, feeling like a criminal because he was hiding something from Polly.

His consciousness of guilt was increased as he recalled how often she had forbidden Toby and himself to rush into reckless extravagances for her sake, and how she had been more nearly angry than he had ever seen her, when they had put their month's salaries together to buy her the spangled dress for her first appearance. It had taken a great many apologies and promises as to their future behaviour to calm her, and now they had again disobeyed her. It would be a great relief when to−night's ordeal was over.

Jim watched Polly uneasily as she came from the dressing tent and stopped to gaze at the nearby church steeple. The incongruity of the slang, that soon came from her delicately formed lips, was lost upon him as she turned her eyes toward him.

"Say, Jim," she said, with a Western drawl, "them's a funny lot of guys what goes to them church places, ain't they?"

"Most everybody has got some kind of a bug," Jim assented; "I guess they don't do much harm."

" 'Member the time you took me into one of them places to get me out a the rain, the Sunday our wagon broke down? Well, that bunch WE butted into wouldn't a give Sell's Brothers no cause for worry with that show a' theirn, would they, Jim?" She looked at him with withering disgust. "Say, wasn't that the punkiest stunt that fellow in black was doin' on the platform? You said Joe was only ten minutes gettin' the tire onto our wheel, but say, you take it from me, Jim, if I had to wait another ten minutes as long as that one, I'd be too old to go on a−ridin'."

Jim " 'lowed" some church shows might be better than "that un," but Polly said he could have her end of the bet, and summed up by declaring it no wonder that the yaps in these towns was daffy about circuses, if they didn't have nothin' better an' church shows to go to.

One of the grooms was entering the lot with Polly's horse. She stooped to tighten one of her sandals, and as she rose, Jim saw her sway slightly and put one hand to her head. He looked at her sharply, remembering her faintness in the parade that morning.

"You ain't feeling right," he said uneasily.

"You just bet I am," Polly answered with an independent toss of her head. "This is the night we're goin' to make them rubes in there sit up, ain't it, Bingo?" she added, placing one arm affectionately about the neck of the big, white horse that stood waiting near the entrance.

"You bin ridin' too reckless lately," said Jim, sternly, as he followed her. "I don't like it. There ain't no need of your puttin' in all them extra stunts. Your act is good enough without 'em. Nobody else ever done 'em, an' nobody'd miss 'em if you left 'em out."

Polly turned with a triumphant ring in her voice. The music was swelling for her entrance.

"You ain't my MOTHER, Jim, you're my GRANDmother," she taunted; and, with a crack of her whip she was away on Bingo's back.

"It's the spirit of the dead one that's got into her," Jim mumbled as he turned away, still seeing the flash in the departing girl's eyes.

Chapter III

Polly and Bingo always made the audience "sit up" when they swept into the ring. She was so young, so gaily clad, so light and joyous in all her poses. She seemed scarcely to touch the back of the white horse, as they dashed round the ring in the glare of the tent lights. The other performers went through their work mechanically while Polly rode, for they knew the audience was watching her only.

As for Polly, her work had never lost its first interest. Jim may have been right when he said that the spirit of the dead mother had got into her; but it must have been an unsatisfied spirit, unable to fulfil its ambition in the body that once held it, for it sometimes played strange pranks with Polly. To−night, her eyes shone and her lips were parted in anticipation, as she leaped lightly over the many coloured streamers of the wheel of silken ribbons held by Barker in the centre of the ring, and by Toby and the "tumblers" on the edge of the bank.

With each change of her act, the audience cheered and frantically applauded. The band played faster; Bingo's pace increased; the end of her turn was coming. The "tumblers" arranged themselves around the ring with paper hoops; Bingo was fairly racing. She went through the first hoop with a crash of tearing paper and cheers from the audience.

"Heigh, Bingo!" she shouted, as she bent her knees to make ready for the final leap.

Bingo's neck was stretched. He had never gone so fast before. Barker looked uneasy. Toby forgot to go on with his accustomed tricks. Jim watched anxiously from the entrance.

The paper of one hoop was still left unbroken. The attendant turned his eyes to glance at the oncoming girl; the hoop shifted slightly in his clumsy hand as Polly leapt straight up from Bingo's back, trusting to her first calculation. Her forehead struck the edge of the hoop. She clutched wildly at the air. Bingo galloped on, and she fell to the ground, striking her head against the iron−bound stake at the edge of the ring.

Everything stopped. There was a gasp of horror; the musicians dropped their instruments; Bingo halted and looked back uneasily; she lay unconscious and seemingly lifeless.

A great cry went up in the tent. Panic− stricken, men, women and children began to clamber down from their seats, while others nearest the ground attempted to jump into the ring. Barker, still grasping his long whip, rushed to the girl's side, and shouted wildly to Toby:

"Say something, you. Get 'em back!"

Old Toby turned his white face to the crowd, his features worked convulsively, but he could not speak. His grief was so grotesque, that the few who saw him laughed hysterically. He could not even go to Polly, his feet seemed pinned to the earth.

Jim rushed into the tent at the first cry of the audience. He lifted the limp form tenderly, and kneeling in the ring held her bruised head in his hands.

"Can't you get a doctor!" he shouted desperately to Barker.

"Here's the doctor!" some one called; and a stranger came toward them. He bent over the seemingly lifeless form, his fingers on the tiny wrist, his ear to the heart.

"Well, sir?" Jim faltered, for he had caught the puzzled look in the doctor's eyes as his deft hand pressed the cruelly wounded head.

"I can't tell just yet," said the doctor. "She must be taken away."

"Where can we take her?" asked Jim, a look of terror in his great, troubled eyes.

"The parsonage is the nearest house," said the doctor. "I am sure the pastor will be glad to have her there until we can find out how badly she is hurt."

In an instant Barker was back in the centre of the ring. He announced that Polly's injuries were slight, called the attention of the audience to the wonderful concert to take place, and bade them make ready for the thrilling chariot race which would end the show.

Jim, blind with despair, lifted the light burden and staggered out of the tent, while the band played furiously and the people fell back into their seats. The Roman chariots thundered and clattered around the outside of the ring, the audience cheered the winner of the race, and for the moment Polly was forgotten.

Chapter IV

THE blare of the circus band had been a sore temptation to Mandy Jones all afternoon and evening. Again and again it had dragged her from her work to the study window, from which she could see the wonders so tantalisingly near. Mandy was housekeeper for the Rev. John Douglas, but the unwashed supper dishes did not trouble her, as she watched the lumbering elephants, the restless lions, the long−necked giraffes and the striped zebras, that came and went in the nearby circus lot. And yet, in spite of her own curiosity, she could not forgive her vagrant "worse half," Hasty, who had been lured from duty early in the day. She had once dubbed him Hasty, in a spirit of derision, and the name had clung to him. The sarcasm seemed doubly appropriate to−night, for he had been away since ten that morning, and it was now past nine.

The young pastor for a time had enjoyed Mandy's tirades against her husband, but when she began calling shrilly out of the window to chance acquaintances for news of him, he slipped quietly into the next room to finish to−morrow's sermon. Mandy renewed her operations at the window with increased vigour when the pastor had gone. She was barely saved from pitching head foremost into the lot, by the timely arrival of Deacon Strong's daughter, who managed, with difficulty, to connect the excited woman's feet with the floor.

"Foh de Lor' sake!" Mandy gasped, as she stood panting for breath and blinking at the pretty, young, apple−faced Julia; "I was suah most gone dat time." Then followed another outburst against the delinquent Hasty.

But the deacon's daughter did not hear; her eyes were already wandering anxiously to the lights and the tinsel of the little world beyond the window.

This was not the first time to−day that Mandy had found herself talking to space. There had been a steady stream of callers at the parsonage since eleven that morning, but she had long ago confided to the pastor that she suspected their reasons.

"Dey comes in here a−trackin' up my floors," she said, "and a−askin' why you don' stop de circus from a−showin' nex' to de church and den a−cranin' afar necks out de winder, till I can't get no housework done."

"That's only human nature," Douglas had answered with a laugh; but Mandy had declared that she knew another name for it, and had mumbled something about "hypocritters," as she seized her broom and began to sweep imaginary tracks from in front of the door.

Many times she had made up her mind to let the next caller know just what she thought of "hypocritters," but her determination was usually weakened by her still greater desire to excite increased wonder in the faces of her visitors.

Divided between these two inclinations, she gazed at Julia now; the shining eyes of the deacon's daughter conquered, and she launched forth into an eager description of how she had just seen a "wondeful striped anamule" with a "pow'ful long neck walk right out of the tent," and how he had "come apart afore her very eyes," and two men had slipped "right out a' his insides." Mandy was so carried away by her own eloquence and so busy showing Julia the sights beyond the window, that she did not hear Miss Perkins, the thin−lipped spinster, who entered, followed by the Widow Willoughby dragging her seven−year−old son Willie by the hand.

The women were protesting because their choir practice of "What Shall the Harvest Be?" had been interrupted by the unrequested acompaniment{sic} of the "hoochie coochie" from the nearby circus band.

"It's scandalous!" Miss Perkins snapped. "Scandalous! And SOMEBODY ought to stop it." She glanced about with an unmistakable air of grievance at the closed doors, feeling that the pastor was undoubtedly behind one of them, when he ought to be out taking action against the things that her soul abominated.

"Well, I'm sure I'VE done all that _I_ could," piped the widow, with a meek, martyred air. She was always martyred. She considered it an appropriate attitude for a widow. "He can't blame ME if the choir is out of key to−morrow." "Mercy me!" interrupted the spinster, "if there isn't Julia Strong a−leaning right out of that window a−looking at the circus, and her pa a deacon of the church, and this the house of the pastor. It's shocking! I must go to her."

"Ma, let me see, too," begged Willie, as he tugged at his mother's skirts.

Mrs. Willoughby hesitated. Miss Perkins was certainly taking a long while for her argument with Julia. The glow from the red powder outside the window was positively alarming.

"Dear me!" she said, "I wonder if there can be a fire." And with this pretext for investigation, she, too, joined the little group at the window.

A few moments later when Douglas entered for a fresh supply of paper, the backs of the company were toward him. He crossed to the study table without disturbing his visitors, and smiled to himself at the eager way in which they were hanging out of the window.

Douglas was a sturdy young man of eight and twenty, frank and boyish in manner, confident and light−hearted in spirit. He had seemed too young to the deacons when he was appointed to their church, and his keen enjoyment of outdoor games and other healthful sports robbed him of a certain dignity in their eyes. Some of the women of the congregation had been inclined to side with the deacons, for it hurt their vanity that the pastor found so many other interests when he might have been sitting in dark, stuffy rooms discussing theology with them; but Douglas had been either unconscious of or indifferent to their resentment, and had gone on his way with a cheery nod and an unconquerable conviction of right, that had only left them floundering. He intended to quit the room now unnoticed, but was unfortunate enough to upset a chair as he turned from the table. This brought a chorus of exclamations from the women, who chattering rushed quickly toward him.

"What do you think of my naughty boy, Willie?" simpered the widow. "He dragged me quite to the window."

Douglas glanced amusedly first at the five− foot−six widow and then at the helpless, red− haired urchin by her side, but he made no comment beyond offering a chair to each of the women.

"Our choir practice had to be entirely discontinued," declared Miss Perkins sourly, as she accepted the proffered chair, adjusted her skirts for a stay, and glanced defiantly at the parson, who had dutifully seated himself near the table.

"I am sure _I_ have as true an ear as anybody," whimpered the widow, with an injured air; "but I defy ANY ONE to lead 'What Shall the Harvest Be?' to an accompaniment like THAT." She jerked her hand in the direction of the window. The band was again playing the "hoochie coochie."

"Never mind about the choir practice," said Douglas, with a smile. "It is SOUL not SKILL that our congregation needs in its music. As for that music out there, it is NOT without its compensations. Why, the small boys would rather hear that band than the finest church organ in the world."

"And the SMALL BOYS would rather see the circus than to hear you preach, most likely," snapped Miss Perkins. It was adding insult to injury for him to try to CONSOLE her.

"Of course they would; and so would some of the grown−ups if they'd only tell the truth about it," said Douglas, laughing.

"What!" exclaimed Miss Perkins.

"Why not?" asked Douglas. "I am sure I don't know what they do inside the tents, but the parade looked very promising."

"The PARADE!" the two women echoed in one breath. "Did YOU see the parade?"

"Yes, indeed," said Douglas, enthusiastically. "But it didn't compare with the one I saw at the age of eight." He turned his head to one side and looked into space with a reminiscent smile. The widow's red−haired boy crept close to him.

"The Shetland ponies seemed as small as mice," he continued, dreamily, "the elephants huge as mountains, the great calliope wafted my soul to the very skies, and I followed that parade right into the circus lot."

"Did you seed inside de tent?" Willie asked, eagerly.

"I didn't have enough money for that," Douglas answered, frankly. He turned to the small boy and pinched his ear. There was sad disappointment in the youngster's face, but he brightened again, when the parson confessed that he "peeped."

"A parson peeping!" cried the thin−lipped Miss Perkins.

"I was not a parson then," corrected Douglas, good−naturedly.

"You were GOING to be," persisted the spinster.

"I had to be a boy first, in spite of that fact."

The sudden appearance of Hasty proved a diversion. He was looking very sheepish.

"Hyar he is, Mars John; look at him!" said Mandy.

"Hasty, where have you been all day?" demanded Douglas, severely.

Hasty fumbled with his hat and sparred for time. "Did yo' say whar's I been, sah?"

"Dat's what he done ast yo'," Mandy prompted, threateningly.

"I bin 'ceived, Mars John," declared Hasty, solemnly. Mandy snorted incredulously. Douglas waited.

"A gemmen in de circus done tole me dis mawnin' dat ef I carry water fo' de el'phants, he'll let me in de circus fo' nuffin', an' I make a 'greement wid him. Mars John, did yo' ebber seed an' el'phant drink?" he asked, rolling his eyes. John shook his head.

"Well, sah, he jes' put dat trunk a'his'n into de pail, jes' once an−−swish−−water gone."

Douglas laughed; and Mandy muttered, sullenly.

"Well, sah," continued Hasty, "I tote water fo' dem el'phants all day long, an' when I cum roun' to see de circus, de gemmen won't let me in. An' when I try to crawl under de tent, dey pulls me out by de laigs an' beats me." He looked from one to the other expecting sympathy.

"Serves you right," was Mandy's unfeeling reply. "If yo's so anxious to be a−totin' water, jes' yo' come along outside and tote some fo' Mandy."

"I can't do no mo' carryin', Mandy," protested Hasty. "I'se hurted in mah arm."

"What hurt yo'?"

"Tiger."

"A tiger?" exclaimed the women in unison.

"Done chawed it mos' off," he declared, solemnly. "Deacon Elverson, he seed it, an' he says I's hurt bad."

"Deacon Elverson?" cried the spinster. "Was Deacon Elverson at the circus?"

"He was in de lot, a−tryin' to look in, same as me," Hasty answered, innocently.

"You'd better take Hasty into the kitchen," said Douglas to Mandy, with a dry smile; "he's talking too much for a wounded man."

Mandy disappeared with the disgraced Hasty, advising him with fine scorn "to get de tiger to chew off his laigs, so's he wouldn't have to walk no mo'."

The women gazed at each other with lips closed tightly. Elverson's behaviour was beyond their power of expression. Miss Perkins turned to the pastor, as though he were somehow to blame for the deacon's backsliding, but before she could find words to argue the point, the timid little deacon appeared in the doorway, utterly unconscious of the hostile reception that Hasty had prepared for him. He glanced nervously from one set face to the other, then coughed behind his hat,

"We're all very much interested in the circus," said Douglas. "Can't you tell us about it?"

"I just went into the lot to look for my son," stammered the deacon. "I feared Peter had strayed."

"Why, deacon," said Mrs. Willoughby. "I just stopped by your house and saw Mrs. Elverson putting Peter to bed."

The deacon was saved from further embarrassment by an exclamation from Julia, who had stayed at the window. "Oh, look; something has happened!" she cried. "There's a crowd. They are coming this way."

Douglas crossed quickly to Julia's side, and saw an excited mob collecting before the entrance to the main tent. He had time to discover no more before Mandy burst in at the door, panting with excitement and rolling her large, white−rimmed eyeballs.

"Mars John, a little circus girl done fall off her hoss!" she cried. "Dr. Hartley say can dey bring her in heah?"

"Of course," said Douglas, hurrying outside.

There were horrified exclamations from the women, who were aghast at the idea of a circus rider in the parsonage. In their helpless indignation, they turned upon the little deacon, feeling intuitively that he was enjoying the drama. Elverson was retreating toward the door when he was suddenly thrust aside by Douglas.

In the young pastor's arms was a white, spangled burden of humanity, her slender arm hung lifeless over his shoulder. The silk stocking was torn from one bruised ankle; her hair fell across her face, veiling it from the unfriendly glances of the women. Douglas passed out of sight up the stairway without looking to the right or left, followed by the doctor.

Mandy reached the front door in time to push back a crowd of intruders. She had barely closed the door when it was thrust open by Jim.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Go 'way f'um here!" cried Mandy, as her eyes unconsciously sought the stairs.

Jim followed the direction of her glance, and cleared the steps at a bound. Mandy pursued him, muttering

angrily. Deacon Elverson, too, was about to follow, when a grim reminder from Miss Perkins brought him around and he made for the door instead. He started back on opening it, for standing on the threshold was a clown in his grotesque "make−up"; his white clothes were partially concealed by a large, travelling ulster, held together by one button. In one hand he carried a small leather satchel; in the other a girl's sailor hat; a little tan coat was thrown across his arm. The giggles of the boy hiding behind his mother's skirt were the only greetings received by the trembling old man in the doorway.

He glanced uncertainly from one unfriendly face to the other, waiting for a word of invitation to enter; but none came.

"Excuse me," he said; "I just brought some of her little things. She'd better put on her coat when she goes out. It's gettin' kinder chilly."

He looked again into the blank faces; still no one spoke. He stepped forward, trembling with anxiety. A sudden fear clutched at his heart, the muscles of his face worked pitifully, the red painted lips began to quiver.

"It ain't−− It ain't that, is it?" he faltered, unable to utter the word that filled him with horror.

Even Miss Perkins was momentarily touched by the anguish in the old man's voice. "I guess you will find the person you are looking for upstairs," she answered tartly; and flounced out of the house, calling to Julia and the others to follow her, and declaring that she would soon let folks know how the parson had brought a "circus ridin' girl" into the parsonage.

The painted clown stood alone, looking from one wall to the other, then he crossed the room and placed the alligator satchel and the little coat and hat on the study table. He was careful not to wrinkle the coat, for this was Polly's birthday gift. Jim and he had planned to have sandwiches and soda pop on the top of the big wagon when they offered their treasures tonight; but now the wagons would soon be leaving−−and where was Polly? He turned to ask this question as Mandy came down the stairs.

"Well, if dar ain't anudder one," she cried.

"Never mind, Mandy," said Douglas, who was just behind her, carrying a small water pitcher, and searching for a bottle of brandy which had been placed in the medicine chest for emergencies.

"You can take these upstairs," he told her, when he had filled the pitcher with water and found the liquor. Mandy looked threateningly at Toby, then reluctantly went on her way.

Douglas turned to the old man pleasantly. His was the first greeting that Toby had received, and he at last found voice to ask whether Polly was badly hurt.

"The doctor hasn't told us yet," said Douglas, kindly.

"I'm her Uncle Toby−−not her REAL uncle," the old man explained, "but that's what she calls me. I couldn't come out right away, because I'm on in the concert. Could I see her now, please?"

"Here's the doctor," said Douglas, as Hartley came down the stairs, followed by Jim. "Well, doctor, not bad, I hope?"

"Yes, rather bad," said the doctor, adding quickly, as he saw the suffering in Toby's face, "but don't be alarmed. She's going to get well."

"How long will it be before we can have her back−−before she can ride again?" asked Jim gruffly, as he stood apart, twisting his brown, worn hat in his hands.

"Probably several months," said the doctor. "No bones are broken, but the ligaments of one ankle are torn, and she received a bad blow on the head. It will be some time before she recovers consciousness." "What are we goin' to do, Jim?" asked Toby, helplessly.

"You needn't worry, we'll take good care of her here," said Douglas, seeing desperation written on their faces.

"Here?" They looked at him incredulously.−− And this was a parson!

"Where are her parents?" the doctor asked, looking at Jim and Toby.

"She ain't got no parents 'cept Toby an' me," replied Jim. "We've took care of her ever since she was a baby."

"Oh, I see," said the doctor. "Well, one of you'd better stay here until she can be moved."

"That's the trouble; we can't," said Toby, hanging his head. "You see, sir, circus folks is like soldiers. No matter what happens, the show has to go on, and we got to be in our places."

"Well, well, she'll be safe enough, here," said the doctor. "It is a fortunate thing that Mr. Douglas can manage this. Our town hospital burned down a few months ago, and we've been rather puzzled as to what to do with such cases." He took his leave with a cheery "Good night," and a promise to look in upon the little patient later. Jim

shuffled awkwardly toward the pastor.

"It's mighty good of you to do this," he mumbled, "but she ain't goin' to be no charity patient. Me and Toby is goin' to look after her keep."

"Her wants will be very few," Douglas answered, kindly. "You needn't trouble much about that."

"I mean it," said Jim, savagely. He met Douglas's glance of surprise with a determined look, for he feared that his chance of being useful to Polly might be slipping out of his life.

"You mustn't mind Jim," the clown pleaded at the pastor's elbow. "You see pain gets some folks different from others; and it always kinder makes him savage."

"Oh, that's all right," Douglas answered, quickly. His own life had been so lonely, that he could understand the selfish yearning in the big man's heart. "You must do what you think best about these things; Mandy and I will look after the rest."

Jim hung his head, feeling somehow that the pastor had seen straight into his heart and discovered his petty weakness. He was about to turn toward the door when it was thrown open by Barker.

"Where is she?" shouted the manager, looking from one to the other.

"She can't come," said Jim in a low, steady voice, for he knew the storm of opposition with which Barker would meet the announcement.

"Can't come?" shrieked Barker. "Of course she'll come. I can't get along without her. She's GOT to come." He looked at Jim, who remained silent and firm. "WHY ain't she comin'?" he asked, feeling himself already defeated.

"She's hurt bad," was Jim's laconic reply.

"The devil she is!" said Barker, looking at Douglas for confirmation. "Is that right?"

"She won't be able to travel for some time," said Douglas.

"Mr. Barker is our manager," Toby explained, as he edged his way to the pastor's side.

"Some time!" Barker looked at Douglas as though he were to blame for their misfortune. "Well, you just bet she will," he declared menacingly.

"See here, Barker, don't you talk to him like that," said Jim, facing the manager. "He's darned square even if he is a parson." Barker turned away. He was not a bad−hearted man, but he was irritated and upset at losing the star feature of his bill.

"Ain't this my dod−gasted luck?" he muttered to himself, as his eye again travelled to the boss canvas−man. "You get out a' here, Jim," he shouted, "an' start them wagons. The show's got to go on, Poll or no Poll."

He turned with his hand on the door−knob and jerked out a grudging thanks to the pastor. "It's all fired good of you to take her in," he said, "but it's tough to lose her. Good night!" He banged the door and clattered down the steps.

Jim waited. He was trying to find words in which to tell his gratitude. None came; and he turned to go with a short "good−bye!"

"Good night, Jim," said the pastor. He crossed the room and took the big fellow's hand.

"Much obliged," Jim answered gruffly. It was his only polite phrase, and he had taught Polly to say it. Douglas waited until Jim had passed down the steps, then turned to Toby, who still lingered near the table.

"You'll tell her how it was, me and Jim had to leave her without sayin' 'good−bye,' won't you, sir?" Toby pleaded.

"Yes, indeed," Douglas promised.

"I'll jes' put this little bit o' money into her satchel." He picked up the little brown bag that was to have been Polly's birthday gift. "Me 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. "Me an' Jim has been father an' mother and jes' about everythin' to that little one. She wan't much bigger'n a handful of peanuts when we begun a−worryin' about her."

"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, "and 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, and I jes' wanted ye to know that there ain't finer families, or better mothers or fathers or grandfathers or grandmothers anywhere than we got among us. Why, that girl's mother rode the horses afore her, and her mother afore that, and her grandmother and grandfather afore that, an' there ain't nobody what's cared more for their good name and 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 and takes good care o' theirselves−−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 apologised.

"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, and mebbe you'll be lettin' us know how she is."

"Indeed I will," Douglas assured him, heartily.

"You might tell her we'll write ever' 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 revery 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 realising the new order of things that was coming into his life. Mandy tiptoed softly down the stairs. She placed one pudgy forefinger on her lips, and rolled her large eyes skyward. "Dat sure am an angel chile straight from Hebben," 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 to−morrow'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, star−lit 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 grey 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 tings agin," 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 bead−work 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 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.

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

"Hush, child, hush," Mandy whispered; "jes' you lie puffickly still. Dat's only de furs' bell a−ringin'."

"First bell?" the girl repeated, as her eyes travelled quickly about the strange walls and the unfamiliar fittings 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.

"Nebber 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 and 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 doing here?"

"Hole on dar, honey! hole on!" Mandy cautioned. "Don't you 'cite yo'se'f."

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

"You'se got plenty o' time for dat," Mandy answered. "yes' yo' wait awhile."

"I can't wait, and 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 trying 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 yuh be scared, honey," Mandy reassured her. "You's 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, and 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. "Yuh 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 "Jimminy 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 together 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.

"Yoah what, 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 answered, striving to control his amusement at the 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 quizzically.

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

"How did I come to fall in here, anyhow?" 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 tell− tale 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 a' 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.

"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.

"And 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; "and with me down and 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 nebber seed none ob dem tings," 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 rube I ever saw that hadn't." She was looking at him as though he were a curiosity.

"So I'm a rube!" Douglas shook his head with a sad, little smile and good−naturedly agreed that he had sometimes feared 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 pikers see that−−IT don't cost nothin'."

"I'm afraid I must also 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 sure am a funny talkin' thing!" mumbled Mandy to herself, as she clipped the withered leaves from a plant 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 realised 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.

She wondered what Jim and Toby would say if they could see her now, sitting like a queen in the midst of her soft coverlets, with no need to raise even a finger to wait upon herself.

"Ain't it the limit?" she sighed, and with that Jim and Toby seemed to drift farther away. She began to see their life apart from hers. She could picture Jim with his head in his hands. She could hear his sharp orders to the men. He was always short with the others when anything went wrong with her.

"I'll bet 'Muvver Jim's' in the dumps," she murmured, as a cloud stole across the flower−like face; then the tired muscles relaxed, and she ceased to rebel.

"Muvver Jim"? Douglas repeated, feeling that he must recall her to a knowledge of his presence.

"That's what I calls him," Polly explained, "but the fellows calls him 'Big Jim.' You might not think Jim could be a good mother just to look at him, but he is; only, sometimes, you can't tell him things you could a real mother," she added, half sadly.

"And your real mother went away when you were very young?"

"No, she didn't go AWAY−−−−"

"No?" There was a puzzled note in the pastor's voice.

"She went out," Polly corrected.

"Out!" he echoed blankly.

"Yes−−finished−− Lights out."

"Oh, an accident." Douglas understood at last.

"I don't like to talk about it." Polly raised herself on her elbow and looked at him solemnly, as though about to impart a bit of forbidden family history. It was this look in the round eyes that had made Jim so often declare that the kid knew everything.

"Why mother'd a been ashamed if she'd a knowed how she wound up. She was the best rider of her time, everybody says so, but she cashed in by fallin' off a skate what didn't have no more ginger 'an a kitten. If you can beat that?" She gazed at him with her lips pressed tightly together, evidently expecting some startling expression of wonder.

"And your father?" Douglas asked rather lamely, being at a loss for any adequate comment upon a tragedy which the child before him was too desolate even to understand.

"Oh, DAD'S finish was all right. He got his'n in a lion's cage where he worked. There was nothing slow about his end." She looked up for his approval.

"For de Lord's sake!" Mandy groaned as the wonder of the child's conversation grew upon her.

"And now I'm down and out," Polly concluded with a sigh.

"But THIS is nothing serious," said the pastor, trying to cheer her.

"It's serious ENOUGH, with a whole show a'− dependin' on you. Maybe you don't know how it feels to have

to knock off work."

"Oh, yes, I do," Douglas answered quickly. "I was ill a while ago myself. I had to be in bed day after day, thinking of dozens of things that I ought to be doing."

"Was you ever floored?" Polly asked with a touch of unbelief as she studied the fine, healthy physique at the side of her bed.

" 'Deed he was, chile," Mandy cried, feeling that her opportunity had now arrived; "an' I had the wors' time a−keepin' him in bed. He act jes' like you did."

"Did he?" Polly was delighted to find that the pastor had "nothin' on her," as she would have put it.

"You ought to have heard him," continued Mandy, made eloquent by Polly's show of interest. " 'What will dose poor folks do?' he kept a−sayin'. 'yes' yo' lie where yo' is,' I tole him. 'Dem poor folks will be better off dan dey would be a−comin' to yoah funeral.' "

"Poor folks?" Polly questioned. "Do you give money to folks?" We are always itchin' to get it AWAY from 'em."

Before Douglas could think of words with which to defend his disapproved methods, Mandy had continued eagerly:

"An' den on Sunday, when he can't go to church and preach−−" She got no further. A sharp exclamation brought both Mandy and Douglas to attention.

"Preach!" Polly almost shouted. She looked at him with genuine alarm this time.

"That will do, Mandy," Douglas commanded, feeling an unwelcome drama gathering about his head.

"Great Barnum and Bailey!" Polly exclaimed, looking at him as though he were the very last thing in the world she had ever expected to see. "Are you a skypilot?"

"That's what he am, chile." Mandy slipped the words in slyly, for she knew that they were against the pastor's wishes, but she was unable to restrain her mischievous impulse to sow the seeds of curiosity that would soon bear fruit in the inquisitive mind of the little invalid.

"Will you get onto me a−landin' into a mix−up like this?" She continued to study the uncomfortable man at her side. "I never thought I'd be a−talkin'to one of you guys. What's your name?"

"Douglas." He spoke shortly.

"Ain't you got no handle to it?"

"If you mean my Christian name, it's John."

"Well, that sounds like a skypilot, all right. But you don't look like I s'posed they did."

"Why not?"

"I always s'posed skypilots was old and grouchy−like. You're a'most as good lookin' as our strong man."

"I done tole him he was too good−lookin' to be an unmarried parson," Mandy chuckled, more and more amused at the pastor's discomfort.

"Looks don't play a very important part in my work," Douglas answered curtly. Mandy's confidential snickers made him doubly anxious to get to a less personal topic.

"Well, they count for a whole lot with us." She nodded her head decidedly. "How long you been showin' in this town, anyhow?"

"About a year," Douglas answered, with something of a sigh.

"A year!" she gasped. "In a burg like this? You must have an awful lot of laughs in your act to keep 'em a−comin' that long." She was wise in the ways of professional success.

"Not many, I'm afraid." He wondered, for the first time, if this might be the reason for his rather indifferent success.

"Do you give them the same stuff, or have you got a rep?"

"A rep?" he repeated in surprise.

"Sure, repertory−−different acts−−entries, some calls 'em. Uncle Toby's got twenty−seven entries. It makes a heap of difference in the big towns where you have a run."

"Oh, I understand," Douglas answered in a tone of relief. "Well, I try to say something new each Sunday."

"What kind of spiels do you give 'em?" she inquired with growing interest.

"I try to help my people to get on better terms with themselves and to forget their week−day troubles." He had never had occasion to define his efforts so minutely.

"Well, that's jes' the same as us," Polly told him with an air of condescension; "only circuses draws more people 'an churches."

"YOURS does seem to be a more popular form of entertainment," Douglas answered drily. He was beginning to feel that there were many tricks in the entertainment trade which he had not mastered. And, after all, what was his preaching but an effort at entertainment? If he failed to hold his congregation by what he was saying, his listeners grew drowsy, and his sermon fell short of its desired effect. It was true that his position and hers had points of similarity. She was apparently successful; as for himself, he could not be sure. He knew he tried very hard and that sometimes a tired mother or a sad− faced child looked up at him with a smile that made the service seem worth while.

Polly mistook the pastor's revery 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 ye give 'em the rottenest kind of a thing, and they eat it up; the next year you hand 'em a knock−out, and 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 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 yer have ter do a ridin' act, there ain't never no two times alike. If your horse is feelin' good, the ground is stumbly; if the ground ain't on the blink the horse is wobbly. Ther's always somethin' wrong somewheres, and yer ain't never knowin' how it's goin' ter 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 o' mine. It's enough to make you sick o' art." She shook her head dolefully, then sat up with renewed interest.

"You see, mine is careful balancin' an' all that, an' you got ter know your horse an' your ground for that. Now you get wise ter what I'm a−tellin' yer, and don't you NEVER go into ANYTHIN' what depends on ANYTHIN' 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 anythin' 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 morning."

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

"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' ter spiel about to−day?"

"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 afore. 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 balful 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.

"We got a girl named Ruth in our 'Leap 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 o' 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 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 ought 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.

Chapter VI

WHEN John Douglas's uncle offered to educate his nephew for the ministry, the boy was less enthusiastic than his mother. He did not remonstrate, however, for it had been the custom of generations for at least one son of each Douglas family to preach the gospel of Calvinism, and his father's career as an architect and landscape gardener had not left him much capital.

Douglas, senior, had been recognised as an artist by the few who understood his talents, but there is small demand for the builder of picturesque houses in the little business towns of the Middle West, and at last he passed away, leaving his son only the burden of his financial failure and an ardent desire to succeed at the profession in which his father had fared so badly. The hopeless, defeated look on the departed man's face had always haunted the boy, who was artist enough to feel his father's genius intuitively, and 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 steal time from his athletics to devote to his art. He spent his vacations in a neighbouring 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 when at last 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 materialised. 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 half way 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 purposely 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 fer 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's enthusiasm. Here, at last, was a master who could do something besides find fault with her.

"I jest 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 yuh done see his jaw?" she whispered. "He look laughin' enough NOW, but jes' yuh wait till he done set dat'ere jaw a his'n and afar ain't nobody what's goin' ter unsot 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 to start

de new parson a−goin' proper?"

"Now, why you's always a−pickin' onto dat 'ere widow?" asked Hasty, already enjoying the explosion which he knew his defence of the widow was sure to excite.

"I don' 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's 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's 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.

Chapter VII

MANDY had secretly enjoyed the commotion caused by the little circus−rider being left in the parsonage, at first, because of her inborn love of mischief, and later, because Polly had become second in her heart only to the pastor. She went about her work, crooning softly during the days of Polly's convalescence. The deep, steady voice of the pastor reading aloud in the pretty window overhead was company. She would often climb the stairs to tell them some bit of village gossip, and leave them laughing at a quaint comment about some inquisitive sister of the church, who had happened to incur her displeasure.

As spring came on, Douglas carried Polly down to the sun−lit garden beneath the window; and Mandy fluttered about arranging the cushions with motherly solicitude.

More days slipped by, and Polly began to creep through the little, soft−leaved trees at the back of the church, and to look for the deep, blue, sweet−scented violets. When she was able, Douglas took her with him to visit some of the outlying houses of the poor. Her woman's instinct was quick to perceive many small needs in their lives that he had overlooked, and to suggest simple, inexpensive joys that made them her devoted friends.

Their evenings were divided between making plans for these unfortunates and reading aloud from the Bible or other books.

When Polly gained courage, Douglas sometimes persuaded her to read to him−−and the little corrections that he made at these times soon became noticeable in her manner of speech. She was so eager, so starved for knowledge, that she drank it as fast as he could give it. It was during their talks about grammar that Mandy generally fell asleep in her rocker, her unfinished sewing still in her lap.

When a letter came from Jim and Toby, it was always shared equally by Mandy and Hasty, Polly and the pastor. But at last a letter came from Jim only, and Douglas, who was asked to read it, faltered and stopped after the first few words.

"It's no use my tryin' to keep it from you any longer, Poll," the letter began, "we ain't got Toby with us no more. He didn't have no accident, it wasn't that. He just seemed kinder sick and ailin' like, ever since the night we had to leave you behind. I used to get him warm drinks and things, and try to pull 'im through, but he was always a−chillin' and a−achin'. If it wasn't one thing the matter, it was another. I done all I knowed you'd a−wanted me to, an' the rest of the folks was mighty white to him, too. I guess they kinder felt how lonesome he was. He couldn't get no more laughs in the show, so Barker had to put on another man with him. That kinder hurt him too−−I s'pose−−an' showed him the way that things was a−goin'. It was just after that, he wrote the parson a−tellin' him to never let you come back. He seemed to a' got an idee in his head that you was happier where you was. He wouldn't let me tell ye 'bout his feelin' so rocky, 'cause he thought it might mebbe make you come back. 'She's diff'runt from us,' he was allus a−sayin'. 'I never 'spected to keep 'er.' "

Douglas stopped. Polly was waiting, her face white and drawn. He had not told her of Toby's letter, because with it had come a request to "say nothin' to the kid."

He felt that Polly was controlling herself with an effort until he should reach the end of Jim's letter, so he hurried on.

"The parson's promise didn't get to him none too quick," he read. "That seemed to be what he was waitin' for. He give up the night it come, and I got him a little room in a hotel after the show, and let one of the other fellers get the stuff out o' town, so's I could stay with him up to the finish. It come 'round mornin'. There wasn't much to it−−he just seemed tired and peaceful like. 'I'm glad he wrote what he did,' he said, meanin' the parson. 'She knows, she allus knows,' he whispered, meanin' you, Poll, and then he was on his way. He'd already give me what was saved up for you, and I'm sendin' it along with this−−" A blue money order for two hundred and fifty dollars had fluttered from the envelope when Douglas opened it.

"I got everythin' ready afore I went on the next day, an' I went up and saw the little spot on the hill where they was goin' to stow him. It looked kinder nice and the digger's wife said she'd put some flowers on to it now and then. It was YOU what made me think o' that, Poll, 'cause it seemed to me what you would a' done; you was always so daffy about flowers, you and him.

"I guess this letter's too long for me to be a−sayin' much about the show, but the 'Leap− a−Death' girl got hern

last week. She wasn't strong enough for the job, nohow. I done what I could for her outside the show, 'cause I knowed how you was always a−feelin' 'bout her. I guess the 'Leap−a−Death's' husband is goin' to jump his job soon, if he gets enough saved up, 'cause him and Barker can't hit it off no more. We got a good deal o' trouble among the animals, too. None o' the snakes is sheddin' like they ought to, and Jumbo's a−carryin' a sixteen foot bandage around that trunk a' hisn, 'cause he got too fresh with Trixy's grub the other night, and the new giraffe's got the croup in that seven−foot neck o' his'n. I guess you'll think I got the pip for fair this time, so I'll just get onto myself now and cut this short. I'll be writin' you agin when we hit Morgantown.

"Your old Muvver Jim."

Douglas laid the letter gently on the table, his hand still resting upon it. He looked helplessly at the little, shrunken figure in the opposite chair. Polly had made no sound, but her head had slipped lower and lower and she now sat very quietly with her face in her hands. She had been taught by Toby and Jim never to whimper.

"What a plucky lot they are," thought Douglas, as he considered these three lonely souls, each accepting whatever fate brought with no rebellion or even surprise. It was a strange world of stoics in which these children of the amusement arena fought and lost. They came and went like phantoms, with as little consciousness of their own best interests as of the great, moving powers of the world about them. They felt no throes of envy, no bitterness. They loved and worked and "went their way."

For once the pastor was powerless in the presence of grief. Both he and Mandy left the room quietly, feeling that Polly wished to be spared the outburst of tears that a sympathetic word might bring upon her. They allowed her to remain alone for a time, then Mandy entered softly with a tender good night and Douglas followed her cheerily as though nothing at all had happened.

It was many weeks before Polly again became a companion to Douglas and Mandy, but they did not intrude upon her grief. They waited patiently for the time when youth should again assert itself, and bring back their laughing mate to them.

Chapter VIII

When Polly understood that Toby was ACTUALLY GONE, it seemed to her that she could never laugh again. She had been too young to realise the inevitableness of death when it came to her mother, and now she could scarcely believe that Toby would never, never come back to her. She felt that she must be able to DRAG him back, that she could not go on without him. She wanted to tell him how grateful she was for all his care of her. She thought of the thousand little things that she might have done for him. She longed to recall every impatient word to him. His gentle reproachful eyes were always haunting her. "You must come back, Toby!" she cried. "You must!"

It was only when body and mind had worn themselves out with yearning, that a numbness at last crept over her, and out of this grew a gradual consciousness of things about her and a returning sense of her obligation to others. She tried to answer in her old, smiling way and to keep her mind upon what they were saying, instead of letting it wander away to the past.

Douglas and Mandy were overjoyed to see the colour creeping back to her cheeks.

She joined the pastor again in his visits to the poor. The women of the town would often see them passing and would either whisper to each other, shrug their shoulders, or lift their eyebrows with smiling insinuations; but Polly and the pastor were too much absorbed in each other to take much notice of what was going on about them.

They had not gone for their walk to−day, because Mandy had needed Polly to help make ready for the social to be held in the Sunday− school−room to−night.

Early in the afternoon, Polly had seen Douglas shut himself up in the study, and she was sure that he was writing; so when the village children stopped in on the way from school for Mandy's new−made cookies, she used her customary trick to get them away. "Tag−−you're it!" she cried, and then dashed out the back door, pursued by the laughing, screaming youngsters. Mandy followed the children to the porch and stood looking after them, as the mad, little band scurried about the back yard, darted in and out amongst the trees, then up the side of the wooded hill, just beyond the church.

The leaves once more were red and yellow on the trees, but to−day the air was warm, and the children were wearing their summer dresses. Polly's lithe, girlish figure looked almost tall by comparison with the children about her. She wore a plain, simple gown of white, which Mandy had helped her to make. It had been cut ankle−length, for Polly was now seventeen. Her quaint, old−fashioned manner, her serious eyes, and her trick of knotting her heavy, brown hair low on her neck, made her seem older.

Mandy waited until the children had disappeared over the hill, then began bustling about looking for the step−ladder which Hasty had left under the vines of the porch. It had been a busy day at the parsonage. A social always meant perturbation for Mandy. She called sharply to Hasty, as he came down the path which made a short cut to the village:

"So's you'se back, is you?" she asked, sarcastically.

"Sure, I'se back," answered Hasty, good− naturedly, as he sank upon an empty box that had held some things for the social, and pretended to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

"Masse John done send you to de post office two hours ago," said Mandy, as she took the letters and papers from his hand. "Five minutes is plenty ob time for any nigger to do dat job."

"I done been detained," Hasty drawled.

"You'se always 'tained when dar's any work a−goin' on," Mandy snapped at him.

"Whar's Miss Polly?" Hasty asked, ignoring Mandy's reference to work.

"Nebber you mind 'bout Miss Polly. She don't want you. Jes' you done fetch that step−ladder into de Sunday−school−room."

"But I wants her," Hasty insisted. "I'se been on very 'ticular business what she ought to know 'bout."

"Business?" she repeated. "What kind ob business?"

"I got to fix de Sunday−school−room," said Hasty, as he perceived her growing curiosity.

"You come heah, nigger!" Mandy called, determined that none of the village doings should escape her. "Out wid it!"

"Well, it's 'bout de circus," Hasty answered? seating himself again on the box. "Dey's showin' in Wakefield to−night, and next month dey's comin' here."

"Dat same circus what Miss Polly used to be wid?" Mandy's eyes grew large with curiosity.

"De very same," and Hasty nodded mysteriously.

"How you know dat?" Mandy was uncertain whether to believe him.

" 'Cause da's a big, red wagon downtown wid de name ob de show painted on it. It's de advertisin' one what goes ahead wid all de pictures what dey pastes up."

"And you been hangin' 'roun' dat wagon?"

"I done thought Miss Polly might want to know."

"See here, lazy nigger, don' you go puttin' no circus notions into Miss Polly's head. She don' care no more 'bout dem things since her Uncle Toby done die. She done been satisfied right whar she am. Jes' you let her be."

"I ain't done nothin'," Hasty protested.

"Nebber do do nothin'," growled Mandy. "Go long now, and get a−work. Mos' four o'clock and dat Sunday−school−room ain't ready yet."

Hasty picked up the empty box and the step− ladder and went out through the gate. He had barely disappeared when a peal of laughter was heard from the hillside, and before Mandy could get out of the way, the youngsters came tumbling down the path again.

"Lawsy, lawsy," she gasped, as Polly circled around her, dodging the children. "You'se cheeks is red as pineys, honey."

"Tag! you're it!" Polly cried, as she touched the widow's auburn−haired offspring on the sleeve. There was much wailing when Willie passed the tag to little Jennie, the smallest girl in the crowd.

"I won't play no more," she sobbed; " 'cause I's always it."

To comfort her, Polly began to sing an old circus song that the children had learned to love; and the little ones huddled about her in a circle to hear of the wonderful "Van Amberg" who used to "walk right into the lion's cage and put his head in the lion's mouth." The children were in a state of nerves that did credit to Polly as an entertainer, when Hasty broke in upon the song.

"When you get a minute I want ter tell yer somethin'."

"I have one right now." And turning to the eager mites at her side, Polly told them to run along into the grove, and that she'd come pretty soon to teach them a new game.

The youngsters went screaming and laughing on their way, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she threw herself down on the rustic seat that encircled the elm tree.

"What is it, Hasty?" she asked, suspecting that he was in trouble with Mandy.

"It's 'bout de circus," Hasty informed her bluntly.

"The circus?" She rose and crossed to him quickly.

"It's in Wakefield−−en' nex' month it's a−comin' here."

"Here?" Polly gasped.

"I thought you'd want ter know," said Hasty, little surprised at her lack of enthusiasm.

"Yes, of course." She turned away and pretended to look at the flowers.

"Don' yous tell Mandy I been talkin' 'bout dat circus," said Hasty, uneasily. He was beginning to fear that he had made a mistake; but before Polly could answer, Mandy came out of the house, carrying baskets and food, which Hasty was to take to the Sunday−school−room. She looked at the girl's troubled face and drooping shoulders in surprise.

"What make you look so serious, Honey?"

"Just thinking," said Polly absently.

"My! Don' you look fine in your new dress!" She was anxious to draw the girl out of her reverie.

"Do you like it?" Polly asked eagerly, forgetting her depression of a moment before. "Do you think Mr. John will like it?"

"Masse John? Mercy me! He nebber takes no notice ob dem things. I done got a bran', spankin' new allapaca, one time, an' do you think HE ebber seed it? Lawsy, no! We might jes' well be goin' roun' like Mudder Eve for all dat man know." Polly looked disappointed. "But udder folks sees," Mandy continued, comfortingly, "an' you certainly look mighty fine. Why, you's just as good now as you was afore you got hurled!"

"Yes, I'm well now and able to work again." There was no enthusiasm in her tone, for Hasty's news had made her realise how unwelcome the old life would be to her.

"Work! You does work all de time. My stars! de help you is to Massa John."

"Do you think so? Do I help him?−− Do I?"

"Of course you does. You tells him things to do in Sunday−school what the chillun like, an' you learns him to laugh and 'joy himself, an' a lot of things what nobody else could a−learned 'im."

"You mustn't say 'learned him,' " Polly corrected; "you must say 'taught him.' You can't 'learn' anybody anything. You can only 'teach' them."

"Lordy sakes! I didn't know dat." She rolled her large eyes at her young instructress, and saw that Polly looked very serious. "She's gwine ter have anudder one a dem 'ticlar spells" thought Mandy, and she made ready to protest.

"See here, ain't you nebber−−−−"

She was interrupted by a quick "Have you never" from Polly.

"It dun make no difference what you say," Mandy snapped, "so long as folks understands you." She always grew restive under these ordeals; but Polly's firm controlled manner generally conquered.

"Oh, yes, it does," answered Polly. "I used to think it didn't; but it does. You have to say things in a certain way or folks look down on you."

"I's satisfied de way I be," declared Mandy, as she plumped herself down on the garden bench and began to fidget with resentment.

"The way I am," Polly persisted, sweetly.

"See here, chile, is day why you been a−settin' up nights an' keepin de light burnin'?"

"You mustn't say 'setting up;' you must say 'sitting up.' Hens set−−−−"

"So do I," interrupted Mandy; "I's doin' it NOW." For a time she preserved an injured silence, then turned upon Polly vehemently. "If I had to think ob all dat ere foolishness eber' time I open my mouth, I'd done been tongue−tied afore I was born."

"I could teach you in no time," volunteered Polly, eagerly.

"I don't want to be teached," protested Mandy, doggedly. "Hast Jones says I's too smart anyhow. Men don't like women knowin' too much−− it skeers 'em. I's good enough for my old man, and I ain't a−tryin' to get nobody else's," Mandy wound up flatly.

"But he'd like you all the better," persisted Polly, laughing.

"I don' WANT to be liked no better by NO nigger," snapped Mandy. "I's a busy woman, I is." She made for the house, then curiosity conquered her and she came back to Polly's side. "See here, honey, whose been l'arnin' you all dem nonsense?"

"I learn from Mr. Douglas. I remember all the things he tells me, and at night I write them down and say them over. Do you see this, Mandy?" She took a small red book from her belt and put it into Mandy's black chubby fists.

"I see some writin', if dat's what you mean," Mandy answered, helplessly.

"These are my don'ts," Polly confided, as she pointed enthusiastically to worn pages of finely written notes.

"You'se WHAT, chile?"

"The things I mustn't do or say."

"An' you'se been losin' yoah beauty sleep for dem tings?" Mandy looked incredulous.

"I don't want Mr. John to feel ashamed of me," she said with growing pride.

"Well, you'd catch Mandy a−settin' up for−−−−"

"Oh, oh! What did I tell you, Mandy?" Polly pointed reproachfully to the reminder in the little red book. It was a fortunate thing that Willie interrupted the lesson at this point, for Mandy's temper was becoming very uncertain. The children had grown weary waiting for Polly, and Willie had been sent to fetch her. Polly offered to help Mandy with the decorations, but Willie won the day, and she was running away hand in hand with him when Douglas came out of the house.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "My, how fine you look!" He turned Polly about and surveyed the new gown admiringly.

"He did see it! He did see it!" cried Polly, gleefully.

"Of course I did. I always notice everything, don't I, Mandy?"

"You suah am improvin' since Miss Polly come," Mandy grunted.

"Come, Willie!" called the girl, and ran out laughing through the trees.

"What's this?" Douglas took the small book from Mandy's awkward fingers, and began to read: 'Hens set−−' " He frowned.

"Oh, dem's jes' Miss Polly's 'don'ts,' " interrupted Mandy, disgustedly.

"Her 'don'ts'?"

"She done been set−−sit−−settin' up nights tryin' to learn what you done tole her," stuttered Mandy.

"Dear little Polly," he murmured, then closed the book and put it into his pocket.

Chapter IX

DOUGLAS was turning toward the house when the Widow Willoughby came through the wicker gate to the left of the parsonage, carrying bunting for the social. She was followed by Miss Perkins with a bucket of pickles, which Mandy promptly placed on top of Mrs. Elverson's ice cream. The women explained that they had come to put the finishing touches to the decorations. If anything was needed to increase Mandy's dislike of the widow, it was this announcement.

Mrs. Willoughby was greatly worried because her children had not been home since the afternoon school session. Upon learning that they were with Polly, she plainly showed her displeasure; and Douglas dispatched Mandy for them. She saw that her implied distrust of Polly had annoyed him, and she was about to apologise, when two of the deacons arrived on the scene, also carrying baskets and parcels for the social.

Strong led the way. He always led the way and always told Elverson what to think. They had been talking excitedly as they neared the parsonage, for Strong disapproved of the recent changes which the pastor had made in the church service. He and Douglas had clashed more than once since the baseball argument, and the deacon had realised more and more that he had met a will quite as strong as his own. His failure to bend the parson to his way of thinking was making him irritable, and taking his mind from his business.

"Can you beat that!" he would exclaim as he turned away from some disagreement with Douglas, his temper ruffled for the day.

Polly was utterly unconscious of the unfriendly glances cast in her direction as she came running into the garden, leading the widow's two children.

She nodded gaily to Julia Strong, who was coming through the gate, then hurried to Mrs. Willoughby, begging that the children be allowed to remain a little longer. She was making up a new game, she said, and needed Willie and Jennie for the set.

"My children do not play in promiscuous games," said the widow, icily.

"Oh, but this isn't pro−pro−pro"−−Polly stammered. "It's a new game. You put two here, and two here, and−−−−"

"I don't care to know." The widow turned away, and pretended to talk to Julia.

"Oh!" gasped Polly, stunned by the widow's rebuff.

She stood with bowed head in the centre of the circle. The blood flew from her cheeks, then she turned to go.

Douglas stepped quickly to her side. "Wait a minute," he said. She paused, all eyes were turned upon them. "Is this a game that grown− ups can play?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Good! Then I'll make up your set. I need a little amusement just now. Excuse me," he added, turning to the deacons. Then he ran with her out through the trees.

The deacons and the women stared at each other, aghast.

"Well, what do you think of that?" said Mrs. Willoughby, as the flying skirts of the girl and the black figure of the man disappeared up the path.

"I think it's scandalous, if you are talking to me," said Miss Perkins. "The idea of a full− grown parson a−runnin' off to play children's games with a circus ridin' girl!"

"She isn't such a child," sneered Julia.

"It's ENOUGH to make folks talk," put in Mrs. Willoughby, with a sly look at the deacons.

"And me a−waitin' to discuss the new church service," bellowed Strong.

"And me a−waiting to give him Mrs. Elverson's message," piped Elverson.

"The church bore all this in silence so long as that girl was sick," snapped Miss Perkins. "But now she's perfectly well, and still a−hanging on. No wonder folks are talking."

"Who's talking?" thundered Strong.

"Didn't you know?" simpered Mrs. Willoughby, not knowing herself nor caring, so long as the suspicion grew.

"Know what?" yelled the excited deacon. Mrs. Willoughby floundered. Miss Perkins rushed into the breach.

"Well, if _I_ was deacon of this church, it seems to me I'd know something about what's going on in it."

"What IS goin' on?" shrieked the now desperate deacon.

The women looked at him pityingly, exchanged knowing glances, then shook their heads at his hopeless stupidity.

Strong was not accustomed to criticism. He prided himself upon his acuteness, and was, above all, vain about his connection with the church. He looked from one woman to the other. He was seething with helpless rage. The little deacon at his side coughed nervously. Strong's pent up wrath exploded. "Why didn't YOU tell me, Elverson, that people was a−talkin'," he roared in the frightened man's ear.

Elverson sputtered and stammered, but nothing definite came of the sounds; so Strong again turned to Miss Perkins:

"What is going on?" he demanded.

The spinster shrugged her shoulders and lifted her eyes heavenward, knowing that nothing could so madden the deacon as this mysterious inference of things too terrible to mention. She was right. Strong uttered a desperate "Bah!" and began pacing up and down the garden with reckless strides.

Mrs. Willoughby watched him with secret delight, and when he came to a halt, she wriggled to his side with simpering sweetness.

"What COULD folks say?" she asked. "A minister and a young circus riding girl living here like this with no one to−−" She found no words at this point and Strong, now thoroughly roused, declared that the congregation should have no further cause for gossip, and went out quickly in search of Douglas.

When Strong was gone, Elverson looked at the set faces of the women, and attempted a weak apology for the pastor. "I dare say the young man was very lonely−−very−−before she came."

"Lonely?" snapped Miss Perkins. "Well, if HE was LONELY, _I_ didn't know it."

The deacon excused himself nervously, and went to join Strong.

The women gathered up their buntings, and retired with bland smiles to the Sunday−school− room, feeling that they had accomplished enough for the time being.

Strong and Elverson crossed the yard, still in search of the pastor. They turned at the sound of fluttering leaves and beheld Douglas, hatless, tearing down the path. Strong called to him, but Douglas darted quickly behind the hedge. The deacons looked at one another in speechless astonishment. Presently the silence was broken by the distant voice of Polly counting from one to one hundred. The secret was out! The pastor, a leader of the church, was playing hide−and−seek.

"Mr. Douglas!" shouted Strong, when his breath had returned.

"Hush, hush!" whispered Douglas, looking over the hedge. He peeped cautiously about him, then came toward the men with a sigh of relief. "It's all right. She has gone the other way."

"It'll be a good thing for you if she never comes back," said Strong, and Douglas's quick ear caught an unpleasant meaning in his tone.

"What's that?" the pastor asked, in a low, steady voice.

"We don't like some of the things that are going on here, and I want to talk to you about 'em."

"Very well, but see if you can't talk in a lower key."

"Never mind about the key," shouted Strong, angrily.

"But I DO mind." Something in his eyes made the deacon lower his voice.

"We want to know how much longer that girl is goin' to stay here?"

"Indeed! And why?" The colour was leaving Douglas's face, and his jaw was becoming very square.

"Because she's been here long enough."

"I don't agree with you there."

"Well, it don't make no difference whether you do or not. She's got to go."

"Go?" echoed Douglas.

"Yes, sir−e−bob. We've made up our minds to that."

"And who do you mean by 'we'?"

"The members of this congregation," replied Strong, impatiently.

"Am I to understand that YOU are speaking for THEM?" There was a deep frown between the young pastor's eyes. He was beginning to be perplexed.

"Yes, and as deacon of this church."

"Then, as deacon of this church, you tell the congregation for me that that is MY affair."

"Your affair!" shouted Strong. "When that girl is living under the church's roof, eating the church's bread!"

"Just one moment! You don't quite understand. I am minister of this church, and for that position I receive, or am supposed to receive, a salary to live on, and this parsonage, rent free, to live in. Any guests that I may have here are MY guests, and NOT guests of the church. Remember that, please."

There was an embarrassing silence. The deacons recalled that the pastor's salary WAS slightly in arrears. Elverson coughed meekly. Strong started.

"You keep out of this, Elverson!" he cried. "I'm running this affair and I ain't forgetting my duty nor the parson's."

"I shall endeavour to do MY duty as I see it," answered Douglas, turning away and dismissing the matter.

"Your duty is to your church," thundered Strong.

"You're right about that, Deacon Strong'" answered Douglas, wheeling about sharply, "and my duty to the church is reason enough for my acting exactly as I am doing in this case."

"Is your duty to the church the ONLY reason you keep that girl here?"

"No, there are other reasons."

"I thought so."

"You've heard her story−−you MUST have heard. She was left with me by an old clown who belonged in the circus where she worked. Before he died he asked me to look after her. She has no one else. I shall certainly do so."

"That was when she was hurt. She's well now, and able to go back where she came from. Do you expect us to have our young folks associatin' with a circus ridin' girl?"

"So, that's it!" cried the pastor, with a pitying look. "You think this child is unfit for your homes because she was once in a circus. For some reason, circus to you spells crime. You call yourself a Christian, Deacon Strong, and yet you insist that I send a good, innocent girl back to a life which you say is sinful. I'm ashamed of you, Strong−−I'm ashamed of you!"

"That talk don't do no good with me," roared Strong. He was desperate at being accused of an unchristian attitude.

"I ain't askin' you to send her back to the circus. I don't care WHERE you send her. Get her away from HERE, that's all."

"Not so long as she wishes to stay."

"You won't?" Strong saw that he must try a new attack. He came close to Douglas and spoke with a marked insinuation. "If you was a friend to the girl, you wouldn't want the whole congregation a−pointin' fingers at her."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're living here alone with her and it looks bad−−bad for the girl, and bad for YOU−−and folks is talkin'."

"Are you trying to tell me that my people are evil−minded enough to think that I−−" Douglas stopped. He could not frame the question. "I don't believe it," he concluded shortly.

"You'll be MADE to believe it if you don't get rid of that girl."

"Do YOU believe it?" He turned upon the little man at his side! "Do you believe it, Elverson?"

Elverson had been so accustomed to Strong monopolising the conversation, that he had become hopelessly lost as the discussion went on, and the sudden appeal to him all but paralysed his power of speech. He was still gurgling and sputtering when Strong interrupted, impatiently.

"It makes no difference whether we believe it or not. We're going to do our duty by the church, and that girl must leave or−−−−"

"Or I must." Douglas pieced out Strong's phrase for himself. "That threat doesn't frighten me at all, deacon. After what you have said, I should refuse to remain in this church"−− the deacon stepped forward eagerly−−"were it not that I realise more than ever before how much you need me, how much you ignorant, narrow− minded creatures need to be taught the meaning of true Christianity." The deacon was plainly disappointed.

"Is it possible?" gasped Elverson, weakly.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked Strong, when he could trust himself to speak again.

"I shall do what is best for Miss Polly," said the pastor quietly but firmly.

He turned away to show that the interview was at an end. Strong followed him. Douglas pointed to the gate with a meaning not to be mistaken. "Good afternoon, deacon."

Strong hesitated. He looked at the pastor, then at the gate, then at the pastor again. "I'll go," he shouted; "but it ain't the end!" He slammed the gate behind him.

"Quite so, quite so," chirped Elverson, not having the slightest idea of what he was saying. He saw the frigid expression on the pastor's face, he coughed behind his hat, and followed Strong.

Chapter X

Douglas dropped wearily onto the rustic bench. He sat with drooped head and unseeing eyes. He did not hear Polly as she scurried down the path, her arms filled with autumn leaves. She glanced at him, dropped the bright−coloured foliage, and slipped quickly to the nearest tree. "One, two, three for Mr. John," she cried, as she patted the huge, brown trunk.

"Is that you, Polly?" he asked absently.

"Now, it's your turn to catch me," she said, lingering near the tree. The pastor was again lost in thought. "Aren't you going to play any more?" There was a shade of disappointment in her voice. She came slowly to his side.

"Sit here, Polly," he answered gravely, pointing to a place on the bench. "I want to talk to you."

"Now, I've done something wrong," she pouted. She gathered up her garlands and brought them to a place near his feet, ignoring the seat at his side. "You might just as well tell me and get it over."

"You couldn't do anything wrong," he answered, looking down at her.

"Oh, yes, I could−−and I've done it−−I can see it in your face. What is it?"

"What have you there?" he asked, trying to gain time, and not knowing how to broach the subject that in justice to her must be discussed.

"Some leaves to make garlands for the social," Polly answered more cheerfully. "Would you mind holding this?" She gave him one end of a string of leaves.

"Where are the children?"

"Gone home."

"You like the children very much, don't you, Polly?" Douglas was striving for a path that might lead them to the subject that was troubling him.

"Oh, no, I don't LIKE them, I LOVE them." She looked at him with tender eyes.

"You're the greatest baby of all." A puzzled line came between his eyes as he studied her more closely. "And yet, you're not such a child, are you, Polly? You're quite grown up, almost a young lady." He looked at her from a strange, unwelcome point of view. She was all of that as she sat at his feet, yearning and slender and fair, at the turning of her seventeenth year.

"I wonder how you would like to go way?" Her eyes met his in terror. "Away to a great school," he added quickly, flinching from the very first hurt that he had inflicted; "where there are a lot of other young ladies."

"Is it a place where you would be?" She looked up at him anxiously. She wondered if his "show" was about to "move on."

"I'm afraid not," Douglas answered, smiling in spite of his heavy heart.

"I wouldn't like any place without you," she said decidedly, and seemed to consider the subject dismissed.

"But if it was for your GOOD," Douglas persisted.

"It could never be for my good to leave you."

"But just for a little while," he pleaded. How was she ever to understand? How could he take from her the sense of security that he had purposely taught her to feel in his house?

"Not even for a moment," Polly answered, with a decided shake of her head.

"But you must get ahead in your studies," he argued.

She looked at him anxiously. She was beginning to be alarmed at his persistence.

"Maybe I've been playing too many periscous games."

"Not periscous, Polly, promiscuous."

"Pro−mis−cuous," she repeated, haltingly. "What does that mean?"

"Indiscriminate." He rubbed his forehead as he saw the puzzled look on her face. "Mixed up," he explained, more simply.

"Our game wasn't mixed up." She was thinking of the one to which the widow had objected. "Is it promiscuous to catch somebody?"

"It depends upon whom you catch," he answered with a dry, whimsical smile.

"Well, I don't catch anybody but the children." She looked up at him with serious, inquiring eyes.

"Never mind, Polly. Your games aren't promiscuous." She did not hear him. She was searching for her book.

"Is this what you are looking for?" he asked, drawing the missing article from his pocket.

"Oh!" cried Polly, with a flush of embarrassment. "Mandy told you."

"You've been working a long time on that."

"I thought I might help you if I learned everything you told me," she answered, timidly. "But I don't suppose I could."

"I can never tell you how much you help me, Polly."

"Do I?" she cried, eagerly.

"I can help more if you will only let me. I can teach a bigger class in Sunday−school now. I got to the book of Ruth to−day."

"You did?" He pretended to be astonished. He was anxious to encourage her enthusiasm.

"Um hum!" She answered solemnly. A dreamy look came into her eyes. "Do you remember the part that you read to me the first day I came?" He nodded. He was thinking how care−free they were that day. How impossible such problems as the present one would have seemed then. "I know every bit of what you read by heart. It's our next Sunday−school lesson."

"So it is."

"Do you think now that it would be best for me to go away?" She looked up into his troubled face.

"We'll see, we'll see," he murmured, then tried to turn her mind toward other things. "Come now, let's find out whether you DO know your Sunday−school lesson. How does it begin?" There was no answer. She had turned away with trembling lips. "And Ruth said"−−he took her two small hands and drew her face toward him, meaning to prompt her.

"Entreat me not to leave thee," she pleaded. Her eyes met his. His face was close to hers. The small features before him were quivering with emotion. She was so frail, so helpless, so easily within his grasp. His muscles grew tense and his lips closed firmly. He was battling with an impulse to draw her toward him and comfort her in the shelter of his strong, brave arms. "They shan't!" he cried, starting toward her.

Polly drew back, overawed. Her soul had heard and seen the things revealed to each of us only once. She would never again be a child.

Douglas braced himself against the back of the bench.

"What was the rest of the lesson?" he asked in a firm, hard voice.

"I can't say it now," Polly murmured. Her face was averted; her white lids fluttered and closed.

"Nonsense, of course you can. Come, come, I'll help you." Douglas spoke sharply. He was almost vexed with her and with himself for the weakness that was so near overcoming them. "And Ruth said, 'Entreat me not to leave thee−−−−' "

" 'Or to return from following after thee.' " She was struggling to keep back the tears. " 'For whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my' "−− She stopped.

"That's right, go on," said Douglas, striving to control the unsteadiness in his own voice.

"Where thou diest, will I die' "−−her arms went out blindly.

"Oh, you won't send me away, will you?" she sobbed. "I don't want to learn anything else just−−except−−from you." She covered her face and slipped, a little, broken heap at his feet.

In an instant the pastor's strong arms were about her, his stalwart body was supporting her. "You shan't go away. I won't let you−−I won't! Do you hear me, Polly? I won't!"

Her breath was warm against his cheek. He could feel her tears, her arms about him, as she clung to him helplessly, sobbing and quivering in the shelter of his strong embrace. You are never going to leave me−−never!"

A new purpose had come into his life, the realisation of a new necessity, and he knew that the fight which he must henceforth make for this child was the same that he must make for himself.

Chapter XI

"I'se goin' into de Sunday−school−room to take off dat ere widow's finishin' touches," said Mandy, as she came down the steps.

"All right!" called Douglas. "Take these with you, perhaps they may help." He gathered up the garlands which Polly had left on the ground. His eyes were shining, he looked younger than Mandy had ever seen him.

Polly had turned her back at the sound of Mandy's voice and crossed to the elm tree, drying her tears of happiness and trying to control her newly awakened emotions. Douglas felt intuitively that she needed this moment for recovery, so he piled the leaves and garlands high in Mandy's arms, then ran into the house with the light step of a boy.

"I got the set−sit−settin' room all tidied up," said Mandy as she shot a sly glance at Polly.

"That's good," Polly answered, facing Mandy at last and dimpling and blushing guiltily.

"Mos' de sociable folks will mos' likely be hangin' roun' de parsonage to−night, 'stead ob stayin' in de Sunday−school−room, whar dey belongs. Las' time dat ere Widow Willoughby done set aroun' all ebenin' a−tellin' de parson as how folks could jes' eat off'n her kitchen floor, an' I ups an' tells her as how folks could pick up a good, squar' meal off'n MANDY'S floor, too. Guess she'll be mighty careful what she says afore Mandy to−night." She chuckled as she disappeared down the walk to the Sunday−school− room.

Polly stood motionless where Mandy had left her. She hardly knew which way to turn. She was happy, yet afraid. She felt like sinking upon her knees and begging God to be good to her, to help her. She who had once been so independent, so self−reliant, now felt the need of direction from above. She was no longer master of her own soul, something had gone from her, something that would never, never come again. While she hesitated, Hasty came through the gate looking anxiously over his shoulder.

"Well, Hasty?" she said, for it was apparent that Hasty had something important on his mind.

"It's de big one from de circus," he whispered, excitedly.

"The big one?"

"You know−− De one what brung you."

"You don't mean−−?" Polly's question was answered by Jim himself who had followed Hasty quickly through the gate. Their arms were instantly about each other. Jim forgot Hasty and every one in the world except Polly, and neither of them noticed the horrified Miss Perkins and the Widow Willoughby, who had been crossing the yard on their way from the Sunday− school−room with Julia.

"You're just as big as ever," said Polly, when she could let go of Jim long enough to look at him. "You haven't changed a bit."

"You've changed enough for both of us." He looked at the unfamiliar long skirts and the new way of doing her hair. "You're bigger, Poll; more grown up like."

"Oh, Jim!" She glanced admiringly at the new brown suit, the rather startling tie, and the neat little posy in Jim's buttonhole.

"The fellows said I'd have to slick up a bit if I was a−comin' to see you, so as not to make you ashamed of me. Do you like 'em?" he asked, looking down approvingly at his new brown clothes.

"Very much." For the first time Jim noticed the unfamiliar manner of her speech. He began to feel self−conscious. A year ago she would have said, "You bet!" He looked at her awkwardly. She hurried on: "Hasty told me you were showing in Wakefield. I knew you'd come to see me. How's Barker and all the boys?" She stopped with a catch in her throat, and added more slowly: "I suppose everything's different, now that Toby is gone."

"He'd a−liked to a−seen you afore he cashed in," Jim answered; "but maybe it was just as well he didn't. You'd hardly a−knowed him toward the last, he got so thin an' peeked like. He wasn't the same after we lost you, nobody was, not even Bingo."

"Have you still got Bingo?" she asked, through her tears.

"Yep, we got him," drawled Jim, "but he ain't much good no more. None of the other riders can get used to his gait like you was. There ain't nobody with the show what can touch you ridin', there never will be. Say, mebbe

you think Barker won't let out a yell when he sees yer comin' back." Jim was jubilant now, and he let out a little yell of his own at the mere thought of her return. He was too excited to notice the look on Polly's face. "Toby had a notion before he died that you was never a−comin' back, but I told him I'd change all that once I seed yer, and when Barker sent me over here to−day to look arter the advertisin', he said he guessed you'd had all you wanted a' church folks. 'Jes' you bring her along to Wakefield,' he said, 'an' tell her that her place is waitin' for her,' and I will, too." He turned upon Polly with sudden decision. "Why, I feel jes' like pickin' yer up in my arms and carryin' you right off now."

"Wait, Jim!" She put one tiny hand on his arm to restrain him.

"I don't mean−−not−−to−day−−mebbe"−−he stammered, uncertainly, "but we'll be back here a−showin' next month."

"Don't look at me now," Polly answered, as the dog−like eyes searched her face, "because I have to say something that is going to hurt you, Jim."

"You're comin', ain't yer, Poll?" The big face was wrinkled and care−worn with trouble.

"No, Jim," she replied in a tone so low that he could scarcely hear her.

"You mean that you ain't NEVER comin' back?" He tried to realise what such a decision might mean to him.

"No, Jim." She answered tenderly, for she dreaded the pain that she must cause the great, good−hearted fellow. "You mustn't care like that," she pleaded, seeing the blank desolation that had come into his face. "It isn't because I don't love you just the same, and it was good of Barker to keep my place for me, but I can't go back."

He turned away; she clung to the rough, brown sleeve. "Why, Jim, when I lie in my little room up there at night"−−she glanced toward the window above them−−"and everything is peaceful and still, I think how it used to be in the old days, the awful noise and the rush of it all, the cheerless wagons, the mob in the tent, the ring with its blazing lights, the whirling round and round on Bingo, and the hoops, always the hoops, till my head got dizzy and my eyes all dim; and then the hurry after the show, and the heat and the dust or the mud and the rain, and the rumble of the wheels in the plains at night, and the shrieks of the animals, and then the parade, the awful, awful parade, and I riding through the streets in tights, Jim! Tights!" She covered her face to shut out the memory. "I couldn't go back to it, Jim! I just couldn't!" She turned away, her face still hidden in her hands. He looked at her a long while in silence.

"I didn't know how you'd come to feel about it," he said doggedly.

"You aren't ANGRY, Jim?" She turned to him anxiously, her eyes pleading for his forgiveness.

"Angry?" he echoed, almost bitterly. "I guess it couldn't ever come to that a−tween 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' yer up, and 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, and nobody in 'em. But it's all right now, and I'll just be gettin' along to the wagon."

"But, 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 there 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, bull−headed. 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's 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 to−day."

"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 planning." 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 steps 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 staying 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−ridin' 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 ground.

"See here, deacon, if you've been browbeating that child, I may forget that I'm a minister." The knuckles on Douglas's large fists grew whiter.

"She's goin', I tell yer, and it ain't because of what I said either. She's goin' back to the circus."

"I don't believe you."

"You would a−believed me if you'd seen the fellow that was just a−callin' on her, and her a−huggin' and a−kissin' of him and a−promisin' 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 yer 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 yer, 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 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."

The deacons were slightly uneasy; the frown on Douglas's 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 didn't know HOW I felt until I saw Jim and heard all about my old friends, how Barker is keeping 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 waltzed about, humming the snatch of melody that Mandy had heard the morning that Polly first woke in the parsonage.

"Ting, ling. That's how the bells ring, Ting, ling, 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 doing," 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 wildly: "I want Bingo! I want to go round and round the ring! I want the lights and the music and the hoops! I want the shrieks of the animals, and the rumble 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 untasted food back to the kitchen.

She sometimes found a portfolio of drawings lying open upon his study table. She remembered the zeal 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 encouragement; 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, far−away 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 humdrum 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. "Would he try to see her? had he forgotten her? and what had he ever found 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 direct cause of his state. "How dare any man be happy without me?" has 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 oftener 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 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 abomination 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 and 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.

"Dey 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 wid 'em, all right," said Hasty.

"Yuh seed her?"

"Naw, I didn't done SEED her."

"What?"

"She want in de show."

"What you jes' tell me?"

"She's a−trabbelin' wid 'em, Mandy, but she didn't done ride."

"See heah, Hasty Jones, is dat ere chile sick?"

"I don' rightly know," said Hasty. "A great big man, what wored clothes like a gemmen, comed out wid a whip in his hand and 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 disappinted like, an' den out comes de udder gal on a hoss an' do tricks, an' I ain't heard no more 'bout Miss Polly."

"Why didn't you done ask somebody?"

"Warn't nobody ter ask but de man what wuz hurryin' ever'body to get out of de tent. I done ast him, but he say as 'didn't I git ma money's worth?' an' den ebberbody laugh, an' he shove me 'long wid de rest of de folks, an' here I is."

"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 fer 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−lamp, rearranged the cushions, and tried to make the room look cheery for his entrance. He stopped in the hall and hung up his hat. There was momentary silence. Would he shut himself in his room for the night, or would he come into the study? At last the door opened and Mandy hastened to place a chair for him.

"Ah's 'fraid you'se mighty tired," she said.

"Oh, no," answered Douglas, absently.

"Mebbe you'd like Mandy to be sarvin' your supper in here to−night. It's more cheerfuller."

The side−showman was already beginning his spiel in the lot below. The lemonade venders{sic} and the popcorn sellers were heard crying their wares. Douglas did not answer her. She bustled from the room, declaring "she was jes' goin' ter bring him a morsel."

He crossed to the window and looked out upon the circus lot. The flare of the 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."

Above the church steeple, the moon was battling its way through the clouds. His eyes travelled from heaven to earth. There was a spirit of unreality in it all. Something made him mistrust himself, his very existence. 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 buried 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 flare of red fire.

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

knew that he often neglected to chat with them now, and he made an effort to say something that might restore the old feeling of comradeship.

"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.

Hasty glanced uneasily at Mandy, afraid either to lie or tell the truth about the disposition she had made of his afternoon.

"Jes' you come eat yo' supper," Mandy called to Douglas. "Don' yous worry your head 'bout dat lazy husban' ob mine. He ain' goin' ter work 'nuff. to hurt hisself." 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.

"Dar'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 to−day." 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 to de circus," she blurted out. Douglas's face became suddenly grave. Mandy saw that she had touched an open wound.

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

"She didn't done ride to−day."

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

"Why DIDN'T she ride?" cried Douglas, in an agony of suspense.

"Dat's what I don' 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. He walked up and down the room, uncertain what to do.

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

"Leab me alone, you nigga!" 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's nerves were strained to a 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 behaviour 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 to−night. 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 absent−mindedly 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 to− night?"

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

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

"Your wagons is on the bum, that's what! Number thirty−eight carries the cook tent and the blacksmith has been tinkering 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 black− smiths, 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 you 'Muvver Jim.' "

"What have yer 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' ter see 'er."

"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 o' 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' ter 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, your bein' boss won't make no difference."

"You can't bluff me," shouted Barker.

"I ain't bluffin'; I'm only TELLIN' yer," said Jim, very quietly.

"Well, you TELL her to get onto 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 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 hands and wide, staring eyes, gazing into the distance.

The memory of these times made Jim helpless to−night. 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 {a}nd 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 coloured stones.

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

"The 'Leap o' Death.' " You got plenty a' time."

Polly's mind went back to the girl who answered that call a year ago. Her spirit seemed very near to−night. 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 to−night. 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 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 gazin', Poll?" he asked at length, dreading to disturb her revery.

"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 yer feelin' to−night?"

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

"Anythin' yer 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 anythin' 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 yer cut out the show to−day? Was it because you didn't want ter ride afore folks what knowed yer? 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 yer didn't want OTHER folks to see yer and 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. Yer 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. "Yer wasn't in HIS way, was yer, 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 yer away and spoiled it all. You oughtn't to a come. What made yer, after yer said yer 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 yer 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, unarmed. Jim looked at her helplessly, then shook his big, stupid head.

"Ain't that hell?"

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

"And he didn't care about you−−like that?" he asked, after a pause.

"No, not in that way." She was anxious to defend the pastor 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, never get me back."

He shuffled awkwardly to her side and reached apologetically for the little, clenched fist. 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 yer, 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 centre of the lot, frowning and anxious. The mere mention of the pastor's name had made it seem impossible for her to ride to−night. 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 to−night." 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 a−cause they knowed yer?"

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

"YER 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. Yer didn't stay there, and yer no use here. First thing yer know yer'll be out all 'round."

"Out?"

"Sure. Yer don't think I'm goin' ter 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."

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

"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 to−morrow."

"To−morrow?" echoed Barker. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I CAN'T go into that ring TO−NIGHT," she declared, "and I won't."

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

He looked at her with momentary indecision. 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 to−morrow, as far as her work was concerned, if he left her alone to−night.

"All right," he said, sullenly. "Yer can stay off to−night. I got the crowd in there, anyway, and I got their money. I'll let Eloise do a turn on Barbarian, but TO−MORROW 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' ter 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−−to−morrow!" 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.

"And 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 pastor, wrapped in his long, black cloak. The moonlight slipped through a rift in the clouds, and fell in a circle around them.

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

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

"What's that to you?"

"She ISN'T ill?" Douglas demanded anxiously, oblivious to the gruffness in the big fellow's voice.

"She's all right," Jim answered shortly as he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, and avoided the pastor's burning gaze.

"And she's happy? she's content?"

"Sure."

"I'm glad," said Douglas, dully. He tried to think of some way to prolong their talk. "I've never heard from her, you know."

"Us folks don't get much time to write." Jim turned away and began tinkering with one of the wagons.

Douglas had walked up and down in front of the tents again and again, fighting against a desire to do the very thing that he was doing, but to no purpose, and now that he was here, it seemed impossible that he should go away so unsatisfied. He crossed to Jim and came determinedly to the point.

"Can't I see her, Jim?"

"It's agin the rules." He did not turn.

There was another pause, then Douglas started slowly out of the lot.

"Wait a minute," called Jim, as though the words had been wrung from him. The pastor came back with a question in his eyes.

"I lied to you."

"She's NOT well, then?"

"Oh, yes, she's well enough. It ain't that; it's about her being happy."

"She isn't?" There was a note of unconscious exultation in his voice.

"No. She AIN'T happy here, and she WAS happy WITH YOU."

"Then, why did she leave me?"

"I don't know. She wasn't goin' ter do it at first. Somethin' must a−happened afterwards, somethin' that you an' me didn't know about."

"We WILL know about it, Jim. Where is she?" His quick eye searched the lot. His voice had regained it's old command. He felt that he could conquer worlds.

"You can't do no good that way," answered Jim. "She don't want ter see you again."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, but she told me she'd run away if I ever even talked to you about her."

"You needn't talk, Jim; I'll talk for myself. Where is she?"

"She'll be comin' out soon. You can wait around out here with me. I'll let you know in time." He led the way through a narrow passage between the wagons.

Jim and Douglas had barely left the lot when Deacon Elverson's small, round head slipped cautiously around the corner of the dressing tent. The little deacon glanced exultantly about him. He was monarch of all he surveyed. It was very thrilling to stand here, on this forbidden ground, smelling the saw− dust, gazing at the big red wagons, studying the unprotected circus properties, and listening to the lightening tempo of the band.

"Did you see him?" shouted Strong, who had followed closely upon Elverson's heels.

The little deacon started. Strong was certainly a disturbing factor at times.

"Yes, I−−I saw him."

"Well?"

"He−−he−−didn't see HER."

"What DID he do?" Strong was beside himself with impatience.

"He−−he just talked to the big 'un, and went out that way." Elverson nodded toward the wagons.

"I guess he ain't gone far," sneered Strong. "He come over to this lot to see her, and he ain't goin' ter give up till he does it. You wait here; I'll take a look round." He went quickly in the direction of the wagons.

Elverson needed no second invitation to wait. He was congratulating himself upon his good fortune, when he all but collided with a flying apparition, vanishing in the direction of the main tent. Sophisticated eyes would have seen only a rather stout acrobat clad in pink tights; but Elverson was not sophisticated, and he teetered after the flitting angel, even unto the forbidden portals of the "big top."

He was peeping through the curtains which had fallen behind her, and was getting his first glimpse of the great, sawdust world beyond, when one of the clowns dashed from the dressing tent on his way to the ring.

The clown was late. He saw the limp coat tails of the deacon, who was three−quarters in the tent. Here was a chance to make a funny entrance. He grabbed the unsuspecting little man from the rear. The terrified deacon struck out blindly in all directions, his black arms and legs moving like centipede, but the clown held him firmly by the back and thrust him, head foremost, into the tent.

Strong returned almost immediately from his unsuccessful search for the pastor. He looked about the lot for Elverson.

"Hey, there, Elverson!" he called lustily. There was no response.

"Now where's he got to," grumbled Strong. He disappeared quickly around the corner of the dressing tent, resolved to keep a sharp lookout for Douglas.

Elverson was thrust from the tent soon after, spitting sawdust and much discomfited by the laughing performers who followed him. His knees almost gave way beneath him when Barker came out of the ring, snapping his long, black whip.

"Get out of here, you bloke!" roared Barker. and Elverson "got."

No one had remembered to tell the groom that Polly was not to ride to−night. So Bingo was brought out as usual, when their "turn" approached.

"Take him back, Tom," Polly called from the entrance, when she learned that Bingo was waiting, "and bring Barbarian. I'm not going on to−night. Eloise is going to ride in my place."

This was the second time to−day that Bingo had been led away without going into the ring. Something in his big, wondering eyes made Polly follow him and apologise. He was very proud, was Bingo, and very conscientious. He felt uneasy when he saw the other horses going to their work without him.

"Never mind, Bingo," she said, patting his great, arched neck, "we'll show 'em to−morrow." He rubbed his satiny nose against her cheek. "We'll make them SIT UP again. Barker says our act's no good−−that I've let down. But it's not YOUR fault, Bingo. I've not been fair to you. I'll give you a chance to−morrow. You wait. He'll never say it again, Bingo! Never again!" She watched him go out of the lot, and laughed a little as he nipped the attendant on the arm. He was still irritated at not going into the ring.

Polly had nothing more to do to−night except to get into her street clothes. The wagons would soon be moving away. For a moment she glanced at the dark church steeple, then she turned to go inside the tent. A deep, familiar voice stopped her.

"Polly!"

She turned quickly. She could not answer. Douglas came toward her. He gazed at her in amazement. She drew her cape about her slightly clad figure. She seemed older to him, more unapproachable with her hair heaped high and sparkling with jewels. Her bodice of satin and lace shimmered through the opening of her cape. The moonlight lent mystery and indecision to her betinselled attire. The band was playing the andante for the balancing act.

She found strength at last to open her lips, but still no sound came from them. She and the pastor looked at each other strangely, like spirits newly met from far−apart worlds. She, too, thought her companion changed. He was older, the circles beneath his eyes were deeper, the look in their depths more grave.

"We were such close neighbours to−day, I−−I rather thought you'd call," he stammered. He was uncertain what he was saying−−it did not matter−−he was there with her.

"When you're in a circus there isn't much time for calling."

"That's why I've come to call on you." They might have been sheppherd and sheppherdess on a May−day wooing, for the halting way in which their words came.

"You're all right?" he went on. "You're happy?"

"Yes, very," she said. Her eyes were downcast.

He did not believe her, the effort in her voice, her drawn, white face belied her words. How COULD he get

the truth from her?

"Jim said you might not want to see me."

She started.

"Has Jim been talking to you?"

"Yes, but I didn't let him stop me, for you told me the day you left that you'd never change−− toward me. Have you, Poll?" He studied her, anxiously.

"Why, no, of course not," she said, evasively.

"And you'll be quite frank when I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course." She was growing more and more uneasy. She glanced about for a way of escape.

"Why did you leave me as you did?"

"I told you then." She tried to cross toward the dressing tent.

He stepped quickly in front of her.

"You aren't answering FRANKLY, and you aren't happy."

She was growing desperate. She felt she must get away, anywhere, anywhere.

He seized her small wrists and forced her to look at him.

"And _I_ am not happy without YOU, and I never, NEVER can be." The floodgates were open, his eyes were aglow, he bent toward her eagerly.

"Oh, you mustn't," she begged. "You MUSTN'T."

"You've grown so close," he cried. "So close!" She struggled to be free. He did not heed her. "You know−−you must know what I mean." He drew her toward him and forced her into his arms. "You're more precious to me than all else on this earth."

For the first time he saw the extreme pallor on her face. He felt her growing limp and lifeless in his arms. A doubt crossed his mind. "If I am wrong in thinking you feel as I do, if you honestly care for all this," he glanced about at the tents, "more than for any life that I can give you, I shan't interfere. You'll be going on your way in an hour. I'll say good−bye and God bless you; but if you do care for me, Polly," he was pleading now, "if you're NOT happy here−− won't you come back to me? Won't you, Polly?"

She dared not meet his eyes, nor yet to send him away. She stood irresolute. The voice of Deacon Strong answered for her.

"So! You're HERE, are you?"

"Yes, Deacon Strong, I'm here," answered the pastor, as he turned to meet the accusing eyes of the deacon, who had come quickly from behind the dressing tent.

"As for you, miss," continued Strong, with an insolent nod toward Polly, "I might have known how you'd keep your part of the bargain."

"Bargain?" echoed Douglas. "What bargain?"

"Oh, please, Deacon Strong, please. I didn't mean to see him, I didn't, truly." She hardly knew what she was saying.

"What bargain?" demanded Douglas sternly.

"She told me that you and her wasn't ever goin' ter see each other agin," roared Strong. "If I'd a−knowed she was goin' to keep on with this kind o' thing, you wouldn't er got off so easy."

"So! That's it!" cried Douglas. It was all clear to him now. He recalled everything, her hysterical behaviour, her laughter, her tears. "It was you who drove that child back to this." He glanced at Polly. The narrow shoulders were bent forward. The nervous little fingers were clasping and unclasping each other. Never before had she seemed so small and helpless.

"Oh, please, Mr. John, please! Don't make him any worse!"

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"It would have done no good," she sobbed. "Oh, why−−why won't you leave me alone?"

"It would have done all the good in the world. What right had he to send you back to this?"

"I had every right," said Strong, stubbornly.

"What?" cried Douglas.

"It was my duty."

"Your duty? Your narrow−minded bigotry!"

"I don't allow no man to talk to me like that, not even my parson."

"I'm NOT your parson any longer," declared Douglas. He faced Strong squarely. He was master of his own affairs at last. Polly clung to him, begging and beseeching.

"Oh, Mr. John! Mr. John!"

"What do you mean by that?" shouted Strong.

"I mean that I stayed with you and your narrow− minded congregation before, because I believed you needed me. But now this girl needs me more. She needs me to protect her from just such injustice as yours."

"You'd better be protectin' YOURSELF. That's my advice to you."

"I can do that WITHOUT your advice."

"Maybe you can find another church with that circus ridin' girl a−hangin' 'round your neck."

"He's right," cried Polly. "You couldn't." She clung to the pastor in terrified entreaty. "You COULDN'T get another church. They'd never, never forgive you. It's no use. You've got to let me go! you've GOT to!"

"Listen, Polly." He drew her toward him. "God is greater than any church or creed. There's work to be done EVERYWHERE−−HIS work."

"You'll soon find out about that," thundered Strong.

"So I will," answered Douglas, with his head thrown high. "This child has opened a new world to me; she has shown me a broader, deeper humanity; she and I will find the way together."

"It won't be an easy one, I'll promise you that." Strong turned to go.

"I'm not looking for the easy way!" Douglas called after him, then he turned to draw Polly's arm within his; but Polly had slipped from his side to follow the deacon.

"Oh, please, Deacon Strong, please!" she pleaded. "You won't go away like that. He'll be all right if you'll only wait. I'm NOT coming back. I'm not−−honestly. I'm going on with the show, to−night, and I'm going this time FOREVER."

"You are going to stay here with me," cried Douglas.

"No, no, Mr. John. I've made up my mind, and I won't be to blame for your unhappiness." She faced him firmly now. "I don't belong to your world, and I don't want to try any more. I'm what he called me−−I'm a circus riding girl. I was born in the circus, and I'll never change. That's my work−−riding, and it's yours to preach. You must do your work, and I'LL do MINE."

She started toward the ring. Eloise and Barbarian were already waiting at the entrance

"Eloise!" She took one step toward her, then stopped at the sound of Barker's voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he called. "Although we are obliged to announce that our star rider, Miss Polly, will not appear to−night, we offer you in her place an able substitute, Mademoiselle Eloise, on her black, untamed horse, Barbarian."

Eloise put her hands on the horse's back to mount.

"No! No!" cried Polly.

The other girl turned in astonishment at the agony in her voice.

"Polly!"

"Wait, Eloise! I'M going to ride!"

"You can't, not Barbarian! He don't know your turn."

"So much the better!" She seized the bridle from the frightened girl's hand.

"Polly!" shouted Douglas. He had followed her to the entrance.

"I must! I will!"

She flew into the ring before he could stop her. He took one step to follow her.

"You'd better let her alone and get out o' here," said Strong. His voice was like a firebrand to Douglas. He turned upon him, white with rage.

"You drove her to this." His fists were clenched. He drew back to strike.

Jim came from behind the wagons just in time to catch the uplifted arm.

"Leave HIM to ME, this ain't no parson's job." The pastor lowered his arm, but kept his threatening eyes on the deacon's face.

"Where's Poll?" asked Jim.

"In there! Douglas pointed toward the main tent without turning his head. He was still glaring at the deacon,

and breathing hard.

"What?" cried Jim, in alarm. He faced about and saw Eloise. He guessed the truth. A few quick strides brought him to the entrance curtains. He threw them back and looked into the ring.

"My God! Why don't Barker stop her?"

"What is it?" called Douglas. He forgot the deacon in his terror at Jim's behaviour, and Strong was able to slip away, unnoticed.

"She's goin' ter ride! She's goin' ter ride Barbarian!"

Douglas crossed to his side and looked.

Polly was springing onto the back of Barbarian. He was a poorly trained horse, used by the other girl for more showy, but less dangerous feats than Polly's.

"She's goin' through her regular turn with him, she's tryin' ter break her neck," said Jim. "She wants ter do it. It's your fault!" he cried, turning upon Douglas with bloodshot eyes. He was half insane, he cared little whom he wounded.

"Why can't we stop her?" cried Douglas, unable to endure the strain. He took one step inside the entrance.

"No, no; not that!" Jim dragged him back roughly. "If she sees you now, it will be the end." They watched in silence. "She's over the first part," Jim whispered, at last.

Douglas drew back, his muscles tense, as he watched the scene inside the ring. Eloise stood at the pastor's side, horror−stricken at Polly's reckless behaviour. She knew Barbarian. It was easy to guess the end.

"She's comin' to the hoops," Jim whispered, hoarsely.

"Barbarian don't know that part, I never trained him," the other girl said.

Polly made the first leap toward the hoops. The horse was not at fault; it was Polly. She plunged wildly, the audience started. She caught her footing with an effort. One, two, three hoops were passed. She threw herself across the back of the horse and hung, head downward, as he galloped around the ring. The band was playing loudly, the people were cheering. She rose to meet the last two hoops.

"She's swayin'," Jim shrieked in agony. "She's goin' to fall. He covered his face with his hands.

Polly reeled and fell at the horse's side. She mounted and fell again. She rose and staggered in pursuit.

"I can't bear it," groaned Douglas. He rushed into the ring, unconscious of the thousands of eyes bent upon his black, ministerial garb, and caught the slip of a girl in his arms just as she was about to sink fainting beneath the horse's hoofs.

Barker brought the performance to a halt with a crack of his whip. The audience stood on tiptoe. White−faced clowns and gaily attired acrobats crowded around Polly and the pastor.

Douglas did not see them. He had come into his own.

"He's bringin' her out," whispered Eloise, who still watched at the entrance. Jim dared not look up, his head was still in his hands.

"Is it over?" he groaned.

"I don't know. I can't tell yet." She stepped aside as Douglas came out of the tent, followed by a swarm of performers. He knelt on the soft grass and rested Polly's head upon his knee. The others pressed about them. It seemed to Douglas that he waited hours; then her white lids quivered and opened and the colour crept back to her lips.

"It's all right, Jim!" called one of the men from the crowd. "She's only fainted." The big fellow had waited in his tracks for the verdict.

Polly's eyes looked up into those of the parson −−a thrill shot through his veins.

"It was no use, was it?" She shook her head with a sad little smile. He knew that she was thinking of her failure to get out of his way.

"That's because I need you so much, Polly, that God won't let you go away from me." He drew her nearer to him, and the warm blood that shot to her cheeks brought back her strength. She rose unsteadily, and looked about her. Jim came toward her, white and trembling.

"All right, Poll?"

"Oh, Muvver Jim!" She threw herself into his arms and clung to him, sobbing weakly.

No one could ever remember just how the audience left the big top that night, and even Barker had no clear idea of how Jim took down the tents, loaded the great wagons, and sent the caravan on its way.

When the last wagon was beginning to climb the long, winding road of the moon−lit hill, Jim turned to Polly, who stood near the side of the deserted ring. His eyes travelled from her to the parson, who waited near her. She was in her street clothes now, the little brown Quakerish dress which she had chosen to wear so much since her return from the parsonage.

"I guess I won't be makin' no mistake this time," he said, and he placed her hand in that of the parson.

"Good−bye, Muvver Jim," faltered Polly.

He stooped and touched her forehead with his lips. A mother's spirit breathed through his kiss.

"I'm glad it's like this," he said, then turned away and followed the long, dotted line of winding lights disappearing slowly over the hill.

Her eyes travelled after him.

Douglas touched the cold, little hand at her side.

"I belong with them," she said, still gazing after Jim and the wagons.

"You belong with me," he answered in a firm, grave voice, and something in the deep, sure tones told her that he was speaking the truth. She lifted one trembling hand to his shoulder, and looked up into his face.

"Whither thou goest, will I go, where thou diest, will I die."

He drew her into his arms.

"The Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

THE END