

# Storm Country Polly

by Grace Miller White

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## "I JUST COULDN'T"

SYNOPSIS.—Occupying a dilapidated shack in the Silent City, a squatter settlement near Itasca, New York, Polly Hopkins lives with her father, small Jerry, and an old woman, Granny Hope. On an adjacent farm, Oscar Bennett, prosperous farmer, is a neighbor. He is secretly married to Evelyn Robertson, supposedly wealthy girl of the neighborhood. Marcus MacKenzie, who owns the ground the squatters occupy, is their determined enemy. Polly overhears a conversation between MacKenzie and a stranger, in which the former avows his intention of driving the squatters from his land. The stranger sympathizes with the squatters and earns Polly's gratitude. Evelyn Robertson discovers from her mother that they are not rich, but practically living on the bounty of Robert Percival, Eve's cousin. Polly learns from Evelyn that the sympathetic stranger is Robert Percival. Evelyn charges Polly with a message to Bennett, telling him she can give him no more money. She already bitterly regrets her marriage to the ignorant farmer. Polly conveys her message and Oscar makes threats. He insists Evelyn meet him that night. Polly has her father and Larry Bishop, a squatter, take an oath to do MacKenzie no injury. Evelyn unsuccessfully tries to get money from her mother with which to buy off Bennett and induce him to leave the country, giving her her freedom. She and MacKenzie avoid their love. At the arranged meeting that night Bennett threatens Evelyn with exposure unless she gives him money. Polly meets Robert Percival, and they are mutually attracted. Polly's feeling being adoration. Oscar kills Polly's lamb and Percival threatens Oscar. MacKenzie orders the squatters to leave. Evelyn plans to marry MacKenzie.

## CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

"Darling," he broke forth, "I'm just so happy. I can't have a row with Bob. Why don't you talk to him about the squatters? He'll listen to you, Eve! But, darling, that's a detail." He took one of her hands and kissed the tips of her slender fingers. "The most important thing to be considered now is when are you going to marry me? I can't, I simply can't wait much longer! Oh, Eve, Eve, I want you!"

Fiercely he drew her head against him; and the silence that followed was fraught with rapture for them both. Oh! She wanted to be his wife, to forget the past two wretched years. If Oscar did not stand in her way, how quickly she would give this man the happiness he craved and drink deep of it herself.

"When, my love?" breathed Marcus thickly, caressing her. "When, dear?" Gravely she lifted her head and looked into his eyes for a few seconds. "When you buy the Bennett farm," she ventured. "It—it—"

"And get rid of the squatters too, I suppose," he laughingly interrupted. "And get rid of the squatters too," nodded Evelyn. Then she kissed him softly and whispered, "My sweet-heart!"

A moment later she moved to release herself; and with another kiss he let her go. Then he smiled whimsically. "Now it's settled, dearest," he said, rising. "I won't give you a minute's peace until you begin on your pretties, though the way you've set the day



"Oh, Eve, Eve, I Want You!"

makes it rather indefinite." He waved his arm in a wide-open gesture, and finished: "But I'll see that it's mighty soon."

Mrs. Robertson's daughter was in a brown study before the fire when that lady came into the room, a few minutes later.

"Marc went early tonight, didn't he, Eve?" she questioned, as she dropped into a chair.

"He had to go and meet someone about those tiresome squatters," Eve explained. "I'm sick of the sound of

their names. Marcus says if he can't get rid of them, he'll leave Itasca."

A step in the hall closed the conversation for the time being, and a moment later Robert Percival joined them. In silence Mrs. Robertson studied his face. She wondered what had changed him so perceptibly in the last little while. He looked almost haggard to her searching eyes. She was about to question him as to his health when the young man turned to Evelyn.

"Eve, dear," he began hesitatingly. "I want something done very badly and perhaps you can accomplish it for me."

A lazy smile stole to Evelyn's lips. "And you know, Bob, I'll do it if I can," she responded. "Tell me what's on your mind, honey."

"Certainly; why, yes, indeed," interjected Mrs. Robertson. "You know, Bob, Eve and I will do anything we can for you!"

The expression of anxiety, which his face had worn since he had seen the last of Polly Hopkins, lifted a little. "That's fine!" he exclaimed heartily. "There's nothing like a fellow's own women folks, is there? And you're just as good to me as if I belonged to you."

Mrs. Robertson bridled concealously, pleased with her nephew and pleased with herself.

"Why, Robert, dear," she returned, "you do belong to us. God bless you, boy, you're my baby and Eve's little brother. Now tell us what's bothering you."

"It's Marc's row with the squatters! I can't get the poor devils out of my mind. Eve, can't you get him to leave the settlement people alone? I'd let them have some of my land, but it doesn't touch the lake, and they couldn't make a living on it."

Evelyn arose and crossed the room to the table. She had not expected this. Her promise to MacKenzie flashed into her mind!

"I don't like interfering with Marc's business, Bob," she demurred. "Besides, he wants to improve the property down there, and he can't while the fishermen stay on the shore!"

Gently, for Robert had always been like a younger brother to her, and she loved him dearly, Evelyn explained MacKenzie's plans and showed how impossible it was for her, under the circumstances, to interfere with them. Then she crossed to his side and bent over him.

"Robert, dear," she begged, "forget about the squatters. They aren't anything special to you!" To head off an objection that she saw in his eyes, she hurried on: "They're poor and unfortunate, I know. I'm sorry for them. We all are; but you can't deny they're worthless and filthy, and worst of all, they haven't any right to be where they are. You won't let them come between you and Marc and me, will you?"

Without giving the man a chance to answer, Mrs. Robertson interrupted: "Mercy, Eve, why of course he won't! Marc will soon be one of the family. People of our social standing don't wrangle over such cattle as the squatters." She turned smilingly to the young man and ended sweetly: "You feel that way, don't you, Bob?"

Disregarding both the lady and her question, Robert got up, his lips grim and his fine brow corrugated with lines. Evelyn and Marcus could do as they pleased; he would take his stand right there.

"Evelyn," he said slowly, "I should be sorry to have anything come between us. You've always been like a dear sister to me. I suppose it's natural and right for you to see this the way Marc does. You're engaged to him, but you can tell him for me I'm going to help the squatters any way and every way I can."

Too angry to listen to any more arguments, he pushed his chair to one side and left the room.

Mrs. Robertson looked daggers at her daughter and as soon as she could get her breath, broke out:

"Now, Evelyn, see what a storm you've stirred up! Why didn't you use a little diplomacy? That was the least you could have done. You get Marc and Bob by the ears, and where'll you be!"

"Oh! I don't know! I don't know!" moaned Evelyn. "Don't talk to me any more. I'm just about crazy. I'm going to bed! Good night!"

## CHAPTER IX.

In spite of the weight of apprehension that pressed upon the Silent City, Polly's soul insisted on singing with gladness. She found opportunity, even in the midst of her busy hours, to live over and over the adventures of that evening in the Robertson house. When she remembered how Robert had held her in his arms, her happiness made her almost faint.

She allowed Jerry's gingham blouse to fall neglected in her lap, as in imagination she dwelt on every incident of her visit. She recalled the thrilling tenderness in Robert's words, and her face grew soft in delightful reverie.

A sound at the door brought her thoughts back and she glanced up, startled. Unnoticed, the blouse dropped to the floor as Evelyn Robert-

son came in. Embarrassed and in silence, Pollyop arose and offered her a chair.

"You ain't feeling well, I bet," she burst out, wiping the dust from the rope seat of the rocker with her skirt. "You look white like the moon does before a rain. Go on, an' sit down!"

Sinking back, Evelyn looked steadily up at her. Then she caught at the hand resting on her shoulder.

"Pollyop, I've come to you because you're the only friend I have," she exclaimed, tears misting her eyes.

"I'm awful glad you come to me," Polly breathed softly. "You want me to run to Oscar again? I can't stand the sight of that duffer, but I'll go just the same. Have you got a letter?"

Wiping her eyes, Evelyn shook her head.

"No, but Oscar wants to see you," she replied. She paused and studied the girl. "Polly," she continued, "don't you want to do something for— for your people? There's a way, Pollyop, that you can—"

Impulsively Polly could not wait. "Do you mean help Daddy Hopkins an' the rest of 'em?" she interrupted. Evelyn nodded.

"Yes, every one in the settlement." A brilliant smile lit up Pollyop's countenance.

"I'd give inches out of my hide to do that," she declared. "Go on, an' yap it to me."

"Then sit down, dear," entreated Evelyn, "and don't stare at me so!"

To have saved her life, Pollyop could not drag her eyes away, but obediently she sat down on the floor. Evelyn hidged under the searching, honest gaze.

"You know, Polly," she stammered,



"I'm Awful Glad You Come to Me," Polly Breathed Softly.

"how it is between Mr. MacKenzie and me. I can make him do anything I say. Oh, if I were free from Oscar Bennett!"

"Then you could marry Old Marc, huh?" Polly interposed with a bob of the chestnut curls, "an' boss him, I bet."

"Something like that, Polly," Evelyn admitted. "That's why I've come to you. When I'm free, I can make Mr. MacKenzie let up on your people."

Anxiously weighing every word, Polly's quick mind ran on ahead.

"An' to do that," she threw in, "you got to get shut of Oscar! I don't blame you for wantin' to, but how be you goin' to work it, Miss Eve? I can't see no help for the squatters if your marryin' Old Marc's part of it."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Polly," was the quick retort, "but I want your promise. You help me, and I'll help you and your people. Oscar says he'll free me if—if you'll marry him."

For an instant Polly's head whirled as if it had been suddenly struck and over her came a weight almost unbearable. Then slowly she shook her curly head.

"I couldn't do that, ma'am," she choked. "I just couldn't."

"But you said you would," retorted Evelyn sharply. "You must. I can save the squatters, and I will; but only on condition that you help me get rid of Oscar Bennett. Mr. MacKenzie is going to buy the Bennett farm, and—"

"An' Oscar'll be goin' away somewhere else?" put in Polly. "Is that it? He'd take me away from Daddy Hopkins an' from—"

She caught herself just in time. She had it on the tip of her tongue to add the name of Robert Percival, but of course she did not.

"I couldn't ever do that," she ended. "Never, never!"

The blue eyes looked into the brown eyes seriously.

"Oh, yes, you can," insisted Mrs. Robertson. "Oscar's not the worst in the world, and he'll have a lot of money when he leaves Itasca. He loves you, Pollyop, and he'd make life easy and pleasant for you."

A thoughtful moment or two passed, while Polly Hopkins gazed at her hands locked together in her lap.

"You can't tell me nothin' about Oscar," she remarked at length. "I know the dirty duffer, an' I don't know nothin' good about him, you can bet your boots on that." She paused while through the open doorway her eyes were fixed upon a fleecy cloud, high up in the deep blue sky. "But that don't make no difference," she continued. "If I linked up with Oscar, would that pup, Old Marc, let the squatters stay in the Silent City?"

"Why, Polly, dear, of course he will! I talked with Oscar last night, and I'll speak to Mr. MacKenzie just as soon as you promise to do what Oscar wants."

Again the smiling face of Robert Percival cut across Polly Hopkins' mental vision, and through the silence of the shanty she heard his voice—deep, low and like music. Then the evil face of Bennett wormed itself into her mind. Her lids drooped, and she shuddered.

"I couldn't do it, ma'am," she wailed. "I just couldn't do that!"

Evelyn arose and stood over her.

"You must, Polly," she asserted again. "Good heavens, it's the chance of your life! Of course you'll do it, Polly Hopkins. Take a little time to think it over. I'll bring Oscar to see you some day when Mr. MacKenzie and my cousin Robert are away."

At the sound of that beloved name, Polly's head fell forward.

"Scout now," she said, her curls hiding her face. "I'll think about it."

After Evelyn had gone, Polly mechanically resumed her sewing. It seemed that her heart's joy had wholly died within her. Patiently she tried to turn her attention to the work in her hands, but again and again she caught herself sitting with idle fingers.

Finally, worried by the conflicting emotions that were crowding in upon her, Polly flung herself into the open and ran swiftly along the ragged rocks to a little glen where many a time she had been before. Here she waded through the brook and sank down beside it. Mind-picture after mind-picture passed before her. She saw Daddy Hopkins happy with Jerry in the shanty, no longer afraid to fish and hunt. Then she visioned the Silent City, safe at last, and saved by her. Her head sank into her hands; and sobs racked her slender body.

But it was not long before she sat up and tossed back her curls. It seemed as if she had heard a voice. She turned her head slowly; and lo, Robert Percival was standing across the creek, smiling at her.

"I followed you, Polly Hopkins," he called, and springing across the water, he added: "You ran so fast I lost you at the corner of the ragged rocks, and it's taken me all this time to find you."

He sat down beside her and took her hands; but Polly could not look up at him. Embarrassed beyond utterance, she withdrew her fingers, letting them fall listlessly. Robert laughed. Her lovely face, first white then scarlet, only told him that she was glad to see him, and spoke of girlish innocence, dear to all men.

"You went away so suddenly the other night," he ran on. "I didn't have a chance to say half I wanted to. I had something for you, too, but couldn't get away until today to bring it down."

He pulled a little roll of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. Wonderingly she opened it, and there was an exact reproduction of "The Greatest Mother in the World."

Polly was so overcome she continued silent.

"Don't you like it, little Pollyop?" queried Robert, putting his fingers under her chin and raising her face to his.

"Yep!" she whispered, blushing. "Sure, sure I do. I love it."

"Then why don't you smile?" he demanded; and as she shyly complied with his request, he ran on: "I've talked with MacKenzie, and he's so set— Confound it! He makes me so hot I can scarcely listen to him. But, Polly dear, I'll do everything I can. I've got money and friends, as well as he has, and I'll use 'em too. Will you trust me, sweet?"

She bowed her head in grateful assent. How she thrilled at the touch of the warm, white hand!

"Look at me, dearie," he begged, and when she did flash him a rosy glance, he caught her to him. "I love you, little girl," he whispered.

"An' love's the greatest thing in Itasca, ain't it?" she murmured in trembling confusion.

"Yes, yes," he breathed. "Little girl—oh, my littles dear—"

His voice trailed away, and his passionate kisses made Polly Hopkins forget everything but him. Primeval passion rose within her. She had found her man, and nothing should take him from her.

"I'll keep the baby an' the daddy darlin' till you get back, Daddy darlin'."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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AFTER EVERY MEAL

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An artist from New York was visiting an old Southern family in Alabama. One day while they were riding in their automobile, which their former coachman, an old negro, was driving, the hostess pointed out a majestic tree that stood alone in a meadow. The artist went into rapture over it and with hands clasped turned to her hostess. "Oh, isn't it superb!" she breathed. "A perfect example of a Corot!" "Scuse me, mistis," said the privileged old servant. "Dat ain't no Corot. Hit's jest one of dese hyuh sugarberry trees."—Youth's Companion.

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