

Storm Country Polly

by Grace Miller White

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CHAPTER XI—Continued.

Pollyop's sobbing voice penetrated into the young man's darkening sensibilities, and the ghost of a smile crept to his lips. Then slowly his eyes closed. The strained muscles relaxed from about his mouth, leaving it more boyish; and thus did the Storm country give back to Evelyn Robertson her freedom.

After that came dark days for Pollyop. Even the reproduction of The Greatest Mother in the World, which hung in its accustomed place on the shanty wall, failed to lift the heavy load that rested like a stone in her bosom. No more did she stand before it and dream—dream of a deep-toned voice telling her of love and a future, dream of Robert's arms about her and her head pressed against him.

Up and down she went through the Silent City, unable to smile, well nigh unable to speak a word of greeting to those she met. So sympathetic were her squatter friends that many a fish and pan of baked beans found their way into the Hopkins hut.

Several times Pollyop had made an effort to see Evelyn, but the rich girl never appeared as the little trill sounded just after nightfall in the Robertson garden.

In July came rumors that Evelyn Robertson was to marry Marcus MacKenzie; and that he had bought the Bennett farm of Oscar's heirs. Terrified whispers went from mouth to mouth in the settlement that he had boasted how he was going to clear the squatters from the Silent City before the coming of Christmas.

One night the dark messenger to whom no home is closed slipped into the Hopkins shanty and summoned Granny Hop. Although the absence of the old withered mouth made one less to feed, Pollyop missed the oft-repeated assurance that somehow, some time, love would make crooked things straight.

Late one day, she took Jerry and the billy goat and walked through the Silent City and on toward the Bad Man's Ravine. The picture she had grown to love in those long-ago spring days still gazed out at her from Marcus MacKenzie's fence.

There for a moment Polly halted and solemnly contemplated the beautiful face. When she had been happy, and that was ages past, she had not realized what the call in the mother-plex meant. But as one after another, her loved ones had dwindled away, and none but Jerry was left, a clearer understanding took possession of her. The same cruel force had attacked her and the woman there: They were living in a warring world, trying by might and main to cling to their own, Pollyop and this giant mother. The woman asked aid for her vast army of sick sons; and Polly's sorrow, touched by her broad compassion, lightened a little.

Behind her she heard footsteps. Slowly she turned her head; and almost at the same instant the person stopped. Pollyop could not move or force a word of greeting from her tongue, for Robert Percival was looking at her, his serious white face holding no hint of smile or welcome. For a long minute they stared at each other; then the young man swung about swiftly and strode away.

Crushed almost into insensibility, Pollyop sank lower and lower until Jerry slid away from her shoulders to the ground. Her beloved had not spoken, nor had the pained lines about his mouth softened even a little bit!

Afternoon shadows began to stretch long over the lake and crowd down upon the Silent City, and still the squatter girl knelt and wept out her sorrow and loneliness with no one near but the large-eyed, sad little child, leaning across the thin back of Billy-goat Hopkins.

At length Pollyop arose, wiping her worn face on her sleeve. Then she hoisted Jerry to her shoulders and turned for a last look at the lofty mother of the world.

For a minute she gazed steadily. And then, through the gathering gloom, she thought she saw a smile hovering about the beautiful mouth. Pollyop went nearer by two steps. The woman was smiling at her, and the squatter girl, overwhelmed with a joy that hurt keenly like a knife's blade, smiled back, the first smile since Granny Hope had left her.

Holding Jerry by one arm, she thrust the other hand upward. "Biggest an' beautifullest mammy in all the world," she faltered, "bless me an' Jerry an'—an' Daddy Hopkins away off up in Auburn prison."

Reverently she knelt with her clinging burden, and then, swiftly rising, went back to the shanty, her pale face radiant with a world-wide blessing.

Polly was happier. She could not have explained, if she had been asked, why the agony of doubt had given place to a warmer glow about her heart when she thought of Daddy Hopkins. Away off up there in the gloom of the prison, he had received a mother's benediction; Polly believed this with all her soul. Jerry and she too had come in for their share; and this new confidence lifted the shadow from her eyes a little and lessened the stabbing hurt in her side.

The thing that tormented her most was Jerry's constant mourning for his father. Day by day she had racked her brains for ways to amuse him, but as soon as the novelty of the play had worn off, the old-time cry would begin:

"Want to play horse wif my Daddy Hopkins! Wee Jerry wants Daddy Hopkins!"

She was looking at him one morning after one of his spells of weeping, and wistfully considering if there might be a way to hurry him off to Auburn for a day, when Evelyn Robertson suddenly appeared in the shanty door.

For a long time Evelyn's conscience had made her uncomfortable. Even though her days were exceedingly busy, the remembrance of the squatter girl's pale, pleading face tormented her, and she was fearful Pollyop might not keep the promise she had made, and Marcus MacKenzie would be lost forever.

So astounded was Polly Hopkins to see the girl that she neglected to ask her in. Overlooking this, Miss Robertson stepped into the room in embarrassment.

"Pollyop," she began, catching her breath, "I just had to speak to you. I'm going to be married to Mr. MacKenzie, and I came to talk to you about it—and to bring the baby some candy."

Her expression grave with surprise, Polly scrutinized her coldly. "Jerry'd rather have his Daddy Hopkins than candy," she retorted, frowning.

Miss Robertson drew back a little, shaking her head. "I couldn't manage that, I'm afraid," she said soberly, "but—"

Pollyop shifted uneasily. "Mebbe you could get Old Marc to say I could take Jerry to Auburn, then?" she ventured. "Jerry'll die if he don't see his daddy. He's gettin' thinner an' thinner every day. He's been yelling like mad all mornin'."

Evelyn pondered on this an instant. "Yes, I could do that, I'm sure," she answered, smiling broadly. "I'd love to do it, too."

The forlorn droop at the corners of Polly's mouth disappeared. "Mebbe, if I could get something to wear—," she hesitated.

It had never occurred to Miss Robertson how Pollyop managed for clothing. She had so much herself she was blind to another's need; but, as she had come to demand a favor, then perhaps she had better offer as much as she could.

"Polly," she ejaculated, "you've been awfully good to me, and you can have any one of my dresses you want, and keep it too. And I'll persuade Mr. MacKenzie to get you a permit to go to Auburn."

Polly felt her heart grow big. Then, after all, she could take Wee Jerry to his daddy.

"I s'pose—I s'pose," she hesitated, trembling, "you couldn't tell your cousin—?" Her throat caught in a sob but she cleared it, and went on, "Just tell 'in Oscar wasn't my man?"

played hide and go seek at the corners of her lovely mouth. The steely-blue glint faded from her eyes, leaving them the color of heavenly tints. She was certain her secret was as safe in the breast of Polly Hopkins as it was in the heart of the dead Oscar.

"You shall see your father," she said, dropping her hand, "and you can have any dress I have to wear. Come up tonight, at seven. The folks will be at dinner; and I'll slip out and bring you in."

Then she went away, leaving Polly Hopkins alternately plunged into the depths of despair when she thought of Robert Percival and singing with gladness over the joy in store for Wee Jerry and Daddy Hopkins.

It was still broad day when Polly Hopkins left Wee Jerry playing by the water's edge with some squatter youngsters and started for the Robertson home. True to her word, Evelyn met her in the grape arbor at seven and hastily led her up the back stairs to her bedroom.

"There are the closets," she said. "Take anything you like, Polly, but hurry. The cook's in the kitchen, and the other maids are busy. I'll go down for fear someone will come to find me. There's the dinner gong."

Once alone in the beautiful room, Polly's gaze swept its broad dimensions. It did not occur to her to covet the least of these gorgeous surroundings. She only wanted something to wear to Auburn, something to celebrate her visit and do Daddy Hopkins proud. She swung open a closet door and peered in.

The sound of laughter somewhere in the house sent a wave of terror over her. She snatched at the first gown under her hand, rolled it into a bundle and fled down the stairs. Until she was in the lane again, she did not breathe easily.

Once back in the shanty, Polly hid the dress beneath her bed without even daring to look at it. How Evelyn was to arrange the visit to Auburn, she did not know, but of one thing she was sure, she had a beautiful dress to wear.

After she had put the child to bed, and the door was securely locked, Polly drew the curtains tightly over the small windows. Even the corners of



As If She Had Been Handling Eggs, She Drew on the Beautiful Robe, Her Bare Neck and Forearms Gleaming White in the Candlelight.

the room lost their shadows; and "The Greatest Mother in the World" seemed to stand out more plainly than even when the sun shone.

Pollyop placed her warm cheek against the picture and smiled. She earnestly believed this wonder-mother was helping her to go and see Daddy Hopkins. She turned and looked longingly at the sick little man, then upward to the woman's face.

"You've done so much for me an' Jerry, ma'am," she whispered. "Mebbe sometime you'd make—him—smile just once at me."

Then she took the bundle from under her cot and spread out her treasure. It was a delicate shimmering silk, and in it was the color of the sun just before he sailed over the western hill on his journey around the earth. There could not be such another beautiful gown in all the world, Polly thought. Then she slowly slipped from her own ragged dress and stopped a moment, contemplating Daddy Hopkins' big boots. Even to Polly's primitive mind they did not seem to be just the thing to wear with such a dress. So the boots, too, came off.

As if she had been handling eggs, she drew on the beautiful robe, her bare neck and forearms gleaming white in the candlelight.

Then back and forth she walked, entranced with its voluptuous loveliness. But twist and turn as best she might, she could not see the whole of her

golden glory; so she took down Daddy Hopkins' cracked piece of mirror which he had used when pulling out his shaggy whiskers with the tweezers. By the aid of it, she could get glimpses of her slim young figure and the graceful sweep of the skirt. Holding the glass higher up, she studied her slender neck where the sun had tanned it. But tan did not matter, for Daddy Hopkins loved her in spite of it.

All at once she heard a knock against the side of the hut. Hastily slipping out of the dress and folding it, she shoved it under her pillow. Then she put on her old dress and opened the door.

Larry Bishop was there, extending her a letter. Taking the note in amazement, she smiled and thanked him.

"Ain't you comin' in, Larry?" she asked. "Kinda chilly tonight, huh?" The squatter stepped inside, his cap in his hand.

"Yep, too cold for summer, Poll," he returned. "Say, brat, how you gettin' on? Got 'nough beans left for a while?"

"Sure, more'n enough, Larry," she replied. "I writ Daddy in my letter yesterday how blessed good you'd all been to me. I bet, when I get face to face with 'im, I'll tell things I can't scribble. An' now you go bringin' me this."

She tapped the letter with her fingers as a mysterious smile touched her lips.

The man shook his head grimly. "You won't be seein' your dad very soon, Pollyop," he muttered, "not if I guess right!"

"Mebbe I will," she told him, fingering the letter.

She liked Larry Bishop very much, but she was eaten up with curiosity to know the contents of the envelope in her hand. Perhaps, oh, might it be—

"Where'd you get this, Larry?" she asked, holding it up.

"I was comin' down the lane," explained Bishop, "an' a feller asked me if I knowed where the Hopkins hut was. I says, 'Yep, I'm goin' there now.' He says, 'Take this letter to the Hopkins girl.' An' I says, 'Yep, an'—an' I bring it."

He paused, hoping she would open it in his presence. Being persuaded she did not intend to, he went out. His footsteps had no sooner died away than Polly sprang to the door and barred it. Then she turned the letter over and over and looked at it. Her name was on it; so it must be meant for her to read. A thrill of pleasure ran over her. Perhaps Robert had sent her a word of forgiveness. He might have written that some day he would come again.

With sparkling anticipation she cut open the envelope and by the light of the candle spelled out its contents.

"Dear Polly," she read. "I couldn't manage that trip to Auburn. So sorry. "E."

Polly looked dully at the paper, the words running into black smudgy lines. Then she could not go to Daddy Hopkins after all; and Jerry might die! Old Marc had once more laid his powerful hand upon her. Overcome with grief, she wept a while. Then she took the dress from under the pillow, rolled it carefully in a clean cloth and put it away.

The shock of Evelyn's cold note brought back the shadows to Pollyop's brown eyes. As the days passed slowly by, and the rich girl did not come to the shack again, Polly lost all hope of seeing her father.

Her decision to go to Auburn in spite of Old Marc followed a letter that she received from Daddy Hopkins. He was very lonely, he said. He was counting off each day as so many hours nearer the time when he could see his dear children. With the picture of Daddy's loneliness stamped in misery on her mind came the thought that no one had the right to keep Jerry from his father.

From the time she conceived this idea, it never left her thoughts. She had often stolen rides on the Lehigh Valley train from Ithaca to the Silent City and dropped off where the engine took a switch while the Buffalo Special dashed by. Why could she not steal a ride clear to Auburn?

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