

Storm Country Polly

by Grace Miller White
Illustrated by R.H. Livingstone.

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CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

—19—

The snow was still falling quietly into the dark lake, and the squatter, with a throb at his heart, caught the thread of light at the edge of the window blind of his home. Then his Polyp was still up.

"Cover your horses and wait here," directed Percival to the driver. Then to Hopkins he said: "As I told you, sir, your daughter's suffered frightfully. Poor girl, I am afraid, if you appeared without warning, the shock would be too much for her. Do as we agreed in town, and go to Bishop's shack until I come for you. I'll tell her you and the boy are home."

A long sigh slipped from the squatter's lips. He desired to rush in and hold his girl-brat to his overwrought heart. He had heard with suppressed emotion Robert's tale of his Polyp's trials, and now as he recollects them, he could scarcely restrain himself. Yet he realized the young man was right, so, pulling the child's bowed legs around his neck, he faded stolidly into the falling snow.

Inside the hut Polly Hopkins was sented, tensely silent, her slender fingers clasped together about her knees. Suddenly she heard voices other than the low hum of MacKenzie's questions and Evelyn's sobbing answers in the coop-hole.

She arose slowly, ready to spring at Larry Bishop or Lye Braeger if they appeared at the door. To send them away instantly was the decision that she made as she saw the latch lift and the door slowly swing in. A figure she recognized with startled eyes stepped across the threshold; she sat down, but was up again before he spoke.

The man she had so longed to see had come again. But now he was here, she did not dare let him stay a moment. Marcus MacKenzie might come out of the coop-hole even before she could send the newcomer away. While he was pressing his great coat collar down over his shoulders, she tiptoed to him and with uplifted hand whistled.

"Hush! Go away! Go away quick!" Making a backward gesture, she added: "There's some one in the coop-hole I don't want you to see."

His errand having completely left his mind, Robert, after a moment of startled inspection, stopped stiffly by the door. The resentment and jealousy he had nursed so long flared into active life and licked him like flames. Clothes such as she wore had never been paid for with squatter money! She was beautiful! So much his eyes told him, but he knew she was not honest!

She had said there was some one in the—

He fixed her with stern eyes and then shoved her aside.

"I'm going to see who he is," he snapped.

Polly's fingers caught him as he tried to pass her.

"No, you can't go in there," she cried. "Please don't do it."

The sound of their voices brought Marcus MacKenzie out into the kitchen in one stride. He halted at the sight of the squatter girl hanging desperately to Robert's arm. An exclamation broke from him; and with one wrench Percival was free and was at him.

"So it's you!" he said in a tone that told Polly Hopkins what was in his mind. "Damn you, you hypocrite—"

His voice broke off, and he brushed his eyes across with shaking fingers. There behind Marcus in the coop-hole doorway was his pale cousin.

"Evelyn!" he gasped thickly. "God, what's all this about? Every one of you look as if—as if—"

Bewildered and overcome, he could not finish his sentence.

Marcus had caught Evelyn to him; and Polyp, tearlessly ashamed, had sunk into the big chair to hide the misery which she knew had brought the hurt into Robert's eyes. She wished she was clothed in daddy's boots and her own calico dress!

"Shut the door, Bob," Marcus ordered as calmly as he could.

Mechanically Robert did as he was bidden. When he turned again, Marcus was seated, with Evelyn clinging to him, and Polyp's face was covered by one arm.

Evelyn began to cry weakly.

"Bob, dear," she broke out, looking up at her cousin with streaming eyes. "Polyp's been so good to me!"

That sounded to Polly as if some one else were to be punished for the night's work.

"No, I ain't," she protested, lifting her head. "I was awful bad! I were the only one to blame. I hated every one of you. Let me tell all of you about it."

She began at the beginning and repeated how she had concocted the plan to steal Mrs. MacKenzie. She spoke of Larry and Lye as her two friends, but did not mention their names.

tended to forgive his unhappy wife or not.

But Percival did not wait to find out. He sprang to the door, jerked it open and closed it behind with a bang. In fact, he did not even see Evelyn slip quietly into a faint, or Marcus snatched her into his arms as if he never intended to let her go.

It was only Polly who heard the passionate love words that came from lips that had so often flung out at her and her people. She watched Marcus dully, her heart aching and her muscles rigid with pain. Robert had not believed what Evelyn had said! He had gone away without a word to her! Of course, then, he did not love her any more!

Unnoticed by the MacKenzies, Polly Hopkins sat very quiet, while Evelyn, who had regained consciousness, was clinging to her husband's neck and listening to his assurances that she was forgiven. Then suddenly, through the low rumble of Marcus' voice and the sighs and sobs of Evelyn, Polyp heard a shrill squatter call. She rose slowly to her feet and stood rooted to the spot. The voice that had sounded was high, childish, like Wee Jerry's.

With the superstition of her kind, Polly was overcome by a great fear. Jerry was dying alone in a place of strangers! His little spirit had called to her in the grief of its going! She cast a glance at the man and the woman. They were wholly enveloped in themselves and paid no attention to the plaintive wail that broke from her lips. She struggled to the door and opened it, and there—right before her started eyes—was Daddy Hopkins, with Jerry astraddle his neck.

"Daddy!" came in one bewildered cry from her shaking lips.

Then they faded from her vision, and the brown eyes yielded to semi-consciousness, and semi-consciousness was lost in complete oblivion.

When Polly Hopkins again lifted her lids, she was surrounded by a group of people whom at first she did not recognize. Then Daddy Hopkins detached himself from the rest. He was seated very near her. That was nice, indeed! she thought dimly. She must have dreamed that Old Mare had sent him to prison. Wee Jerry was cuddled at her side. Then he, too, had never gone away!

What brought full remembrance to her was the sight of Larry Bishop

Polyp threw a short glance at the other man, standing white and silent. She cleared her throat, and leaned only the harder against the wall.

"On a sudden," she continued, as if eager to finish her tale, "I somehow remembered everything Granny Hope learned me when she was in the shack here. She always said, mister, when you was devilish enough to snake a squatter from the Silent City!"—Polyp paused and coughed, then proceeded in the dead silence: "Granny said you was the image and likeness of the good God up in the sky an' a brother to Jesus, the same as us squatters. But I said I didn't ever want to fly away to God if He looked like you!"

Leaving the wall she came forward and hurried on: "An' I meant it them times, an' much more after you rail-roaded my daddy and swiped Jerry away from me."

Marcus placed his wife in the chair and stood up. He started to speak to Polyp; but Evelyn's cry caused him to turn swiftly. The drahness of her face startled him.

"Marc! Robert!" she said. "I can't go back home until I've told you something. No, Marc, don't stop me. I will talk. Now, listen! Oh, honey!" This appeal was to her husband who had laid his fingers on her shoulder. "Won't you hold my hand while I tell it?"

Much moved, Marcus did as she requested. His firm clasp seemed to encourage Evelyn, and she went on: "Darling, I've always been—dreadful to—Polly Hopkins, and—she's been an angel to me."

She was going to tell it all, raged through Polly's mind. Was she going to bring to light her relations with the dead Oscar? Old Marc would never forgive it! Thinking more now of the baby coming next summer to the almost incoherent woman than of her own happiness, Polyp made a movement as if to contradict the statement; but Evelyn's impetuous rush words halted her.

"No, Polly, I'm going to put things right now, even if Marc leaves me to-night," she declared, clearing her throat. "Robert, dear boy, I lied to you. I lied to Polly and to you, Marcus. Oscar Bennett wasn't Polly's sweetheart at all. He—he was my husband!"

MacKenzie stiffened, but did not drop the cold fingers he held; and Evelyn wept bitterly, unable to go on.

A horse whinnied outside; but in the shanty no sound could be heard save the hysterical sobbing of Evelyn.

It seemed to Robert as if he must shake from his cousin the rest of the dark story, so impatient was he to hear it.

"Then—then when you came, my—my beloved," Evelyn raised her tired eyes to her husband, "I tried to get rid of him. I did my best to get Polly Hopkins to promise she'd marry Oscar after he had freed me. I wanted to get him out of the country!"

"Then how did he die?" came swiftly from MacKenzie.

"Oh, just as the doctor told you, Marc, dear," replied Evelyn. "He was struck by lightning and died from the shock. I was free then, and—and I made Polly swear over and over again she'd never tell any one! And—and I gave her the silk dress she wore that day in the Auburn car. I—I lied about that, too. But, Marc, dear love, I know you hated her and—"

Robert bounded to his feet as the girl's words trailed away into silence. Over MacKenzie's face were speeding so many different expressions that the searching brown eyes of Polly Hopkins could not tell whether he in-

stretched arms in a twinkling, weeping against his breast.

"This night's work," said MacKenzie, moved almost beyond speech, "won't pass outside the few who know it. And Polly—look up, child. I want to tell you something."

In silence she dared a timid glance at him.

"While you—you were—sleeping—just now, Mr. Percival and I made arrangements with your father to give him work," MacKenzie told her. "Does that please you?"

"Awful much," she sighed; then she turned and looked at Bishop, standing against the wall.

"What about Larry?" she murmured softly. "Poor, poor Larry."

"I'll help him, too," Marcus agreed eagerly.

Polly cogitated one small moment.

"There's Lye Braeger," she sighed again. "He ain't got many friends, Lye ain't."

MacKenzie's laugh sent a sense of relief over the gloomy group.

"Then Lye Braeger, too," he exclaimed, "and any other squatter who wants to work."

Polyp, overwhelmed with this generosity, stood up before him, curtsies showering each shoulder and framing her lovely, eager face.

"I guess mebbe you were an angel all the time, like Granny Hope said once," she said shyly. "I'm thanklin' you, sir, an' I—I'm hopin' the little one God's sendin' in the summ'r'll look just like—like"—smile touched her lips—"just like Jerry," she ended.

Because she was so simply natural, MacKenzie replied solemnly:

"If my child looks as much like me as Jerry looks like his father, I'll be satisfied."

Then he hurried his wife away, offering to carry Robert home with them.

"No, sir," said that young man stoutly. "I've got to talk to Polly Hopkins."

"I'm goin' now, too," grunted Larry Bishop. "Go to go an' see Lye Braeger. He's sick in bed with a stomach ache. Good night, Poil! See you tomorrow, Jerry Hopkins."

He made a gesture of farewell to Robert; and Polyp went to the door with him. There she brought a wry, twitching smile to his lips by throwing her arms about his neck and kissing him.

"It's all right now, Larry, dear!" she whispered. "Good-by."

When she turned slowly to Robert, her face was suffused with crimson blood.

"Ain't your horses gettin' cold, sir?" she queried. "It's worse outside than when you came!"

Jeremiah blinked at them, went to the cot and picked up the drowsy baby. To hide his embarrassment, he seated himself and rocked the child back and forth. He was almost afraid of his beautiful daughter, dressed so unlike herself, her hair hanging in glistening curls over Evelyn Robertson's exquisite clothes.

"The horses are well covered, Polly," answered Robert. "I'll make it worth the driver's while to wait a bit."

Then unable to bear the strain any longer, he burst out:

"Darling, can you ever forgive me?"

She gave him one melting glance and like a fluttering bird sped into his arms and stayed there. And thus the two young things, with nothing between them and long stretches of happiness, clung to each other until the tinkle-tinkle of the MacKenzie sleigh bells was lost in the night.

Then the squatter girl, disengaging herself from her sweetheart's arms, went to her father.

"Daddy," she breathed, bending over him, "ever since I mended the roof that day—the same day Old Marc came home, I've been lovin'—she reached back her hand, and Robert clasped it, "I've been lovin'—Chokin' she could get no farther in that important explanation.

Robert stepped beside her, and rested his hand on the down-bent head. He knew now that though she was a squatter, one of the despised of the earth, he loved her better than the whole world.

"Larry," she cried, struggling up. It was Marcus MacKenzie who shovelled himself in beside Jeremiah and bent over her.

"Larry didn't do it, Daddy; I did," she moaned. "Please, Mr. MacKenzie, please, believe me!"

She crawled wearily into Jeremiah's arms and hugged his bushy head.

"Oh, Daddy Hopkins, I got to go—to jail. I been—a wicked—bad!"

She was straining so to finish that Robert Percival was no longer able to keep quiet. He stepped forward so that Polly saw him over Daddy's shoulder. She glared at him wildly.

"Tell 'em—oh—tell 'em," she shuddered.

"It sure is," added Robert in her ear.

Then he looked at Jeremiah.

"May I have her some day, sir?" he asked in reverent tones. "I'll make her so happy you won't regret it."

Jeremiah's big frame shook, and Polyp, ever devoted to him, kissed him tenderly.

"I'll never leave you, Daddy darlin', precious old Daddy," she cried. "Mebbe—"

She looked up at the tall man standing by her. "Mebbe," she repeated, "you'd take Jerry an' Daddy too, huh? They're awful good an' never get in anybody's way."

"And Jerry and your father too, my darling," laughed Robert, in an outburst of happiness. "I can have your little girl, Mr. Hopkins, can't I?"

"Yep," whispered Jeremiah, sighing heavily.

Then while Robert was bidding Polly good-night, Jeremiah, with a faraway look upon his face, gathered the bow-legged child closer to him and rocked him gently to and fro.

[Title END.]

The Reason Why.
She—He's my best friend.
He—How long have you known him?
She—Since yesterday.

DAIRY FACTS

QUALITY OF MARKET BUTTER

Department of Agriculture Offers
Commission Man Court of
Last Resort.

(Prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture.)

In the past buttermakers have often been in the dark as to the real quality of the butter they put upon the market, and frequently they feel that they have not been fairly treated by commission men and others in the markets. But the creamery man is not without friends, for the United States Department of Agriculture offers him

an inspection service that stands almost as a court of last resort. Any person who wants this service may have it by applying for it. The government inspectors examine butter in cars, in storage, or in stores, and the certificates they issue stand in court, but they seldom get that far, as they are almost universally accepted.

At the National Dairy show, which was held in St. Paul, Minn., October 8 to 15, butter inspectors showed how they do their work, and exhibits that have been prepared by the department showed the great advantage that comes from marketing butter of a high grade. On the face of it butter that scores 88 would not seem to be much inferior to that which scores 92, but it was shown that the spread of price between those two grades is very large, far greater than the difference in cost of manufacture. As Poor Richard might have said: "A little better butter makes a much bigger bank balance."

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