

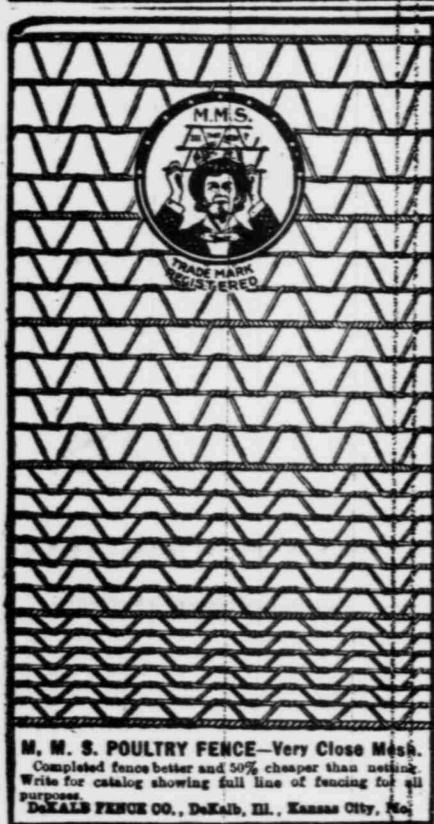
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Sample copies may be had by writing to the ENQUIRER COMPANY, Cincinnati, O.

Send in the news.

## POLLY of the CIRCUS

By MARGARET MAYO

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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 hearing 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 apologize 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 realized 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 gayly 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.

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

"An' me awaitin' to discuss the new church service," bellowed Strong.

"And me awaitin' 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-haunting on. No wonder folks are talking."

"Who's talkin'?" thundered Strong. "Didn't you know?" stammered 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



"My children do not play in promiscuous games," said the widow icily. She shook their heads at his hopeless stupidity.

Strong was not accustomed to criticism. He prided himself upon his autocracy 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 goin' on?" he demanded. The spinster shrugged her shoulders

and tried 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 slithering sweetness.

"What could folks say?" she asked. "A minister and a young circus 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 bunnings 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, talking

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 a 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' 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 goin' 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 color was leaving Douglas' 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."

"Got?" echoed Douglas.

"Yes, sir—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 livin' under the church's roof, eatin' 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 runnin' this affair, and I ain't forgettin' my duty nor the parson's."

"I shall endeavor 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 un-Christian 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."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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