

prisoned child was unable to proceed either one way or the other, he quickly cut the rope that bound the roll, and out popped a small girl of five or six. She slid to the ground at once, a mussed little figure in a soiled pink frock, with golden hair that had once been curled but which was now matted almost hopelessly. Her face was streaked with dirt and she stood a moment silently observing them and then broke forth again into a storm of sobbing and crying.

They saw at once that it was no child of the Bartlett's or of any other family in the immediate neighborhood. When they had taken her into the house, Cyrus carrying her part way and Nancy the rest, they discerned further that she wasn't a country child. Every item of her attire was the final word in luxury from the rich hair-bow and sash to the small patent-leather slippers with solid silver buttons.

"Must a' hopped on behind when I wasn't watchin'—" began Cyrus, while Nancy washed the child's face and smoothed her hair.

"I ain't got the least idea who she is. There ain't any visitors around that I know of. Whose little girl are you, dearie?"

But the little stranger only shook her head.

"I want my mamma, and my woolly dog," she said, gulping.

"Who is your mamma, dear?" asked Mrs. Hartman, kindly. "What's her name—Mrs. who?"

"Don't let's bother her, Nance, till she's et her supper. I bet she's hungry."

When she had eaten a bowl of bread and milk and two cookies she told them her name was Pauline.

"But everybody calls me Polly," she explained, gravely. "Oh, dear, I'm dreadful dirty. I guess I won't play any more tricks on mamma."

"Oh, you was playin' tricks, eh?" and Cyrus made a face at her which almost frightened her.

"I was playing hide," she admitted. "And your woolly dog? Was it a live one or—?"

The child's eye rounded in surprise, at Nancy.

"I guess it was pretty near alive, anyway. It could bark if you squeezed it. Mamma buyed me it in the big store."

Cyrus Hartman started violently. His mouth opened to speak, but refraining he closed it again quickly. (The woolly dog and also a crushed little silk hat were found in the wagon the next morning.)

Polly played with the two white kittens till she grew very sleepy, and Mrs. Hartman then took her upstairs and put her to bed in her son Jim's old crib. The only clue they had gotten as to the mother was that she was "boo'ful," and that Polly had played hide-and-seek often with her. In the store she had "cwallied in the big fat pipe" and could not get out. Nancy and Cyrus had concluded that she had then fallen asleep, and so had been carried away.

"An' a God's mercy you carried it sideways, Cyrus!" said his wife, as she dropped into the rocking-chair by the window and took up her knitting, after having put Polly asleep.

"It struck me at the time it was a gosh-blamed hefty thing," admitted Cyrus.

"Well, I'm thinkin' as how mebbe we'd best go to town first thing in the mornin' an' report—"

"Hold on, now Nance! What do you want to git into sech an all-fired rush for? Let the parents advertise."

Mrs. Hartman glanced sharply at her spouse.

"It strikes me you don't look near so surprised as you'd oughter 'bout this affair," she said, suspiciously. "I jest wouldn't put it past you, Cyrus Hartman, to abduct that young one!"

"Nance, you sure have got an awful suspicious nater," said Cyrus in an injured tone. "I ain't any foolisher over kids than you be."

Nancy sighed.

"She's a beautiful child," she remarked knitting away industriously in the semidarkness. "I reckon she comes o' nice folk, too, for her little underclothes are sheer an' all hand-embroidered. Her mother must be a refined person."

Cyrus cleared his throat. He was glad that the long prairie twilight made

it unnecessary for the lamp to be lighted yet.

"Her mother," he said, abruptly, "is an actress."

Nancy's rocking and her knitting ceased with a suddenness that was nothing short of startling.

"What!" she cried.

"Polly's ma is an actress."

Mrs. Hartman started over her "specks" at Cyrus's dim outline on the other side of the table. She looked as though she were petrified and might never resume any other position.

"An actress!" she said, at last. "An actress! Oh, my goodness gracious!"

"Yep, an actress—a stage woman," Cyrus maintained, and there was a stubbornness about his jaw which if she could have seen it would have warned Nancy that he was in one of his "determined fits."

"How—how do you know? I jest knew you had more in your head than a comb would take out!" she demanded.

"How do you know?"

In a few brief sentences Cyrus related the story of the abandoned child.

"An' so you see, Nance, she hadn't oughter go back to sech an onnatural mother," he ended. "We'll keep her."

The profession of acting was only a little less anathema to Nancy than to her husband. She was silent a long time. Finally, however, her latent sense of justice prevailed.

"Cyrus, we ain't got no right to that child. We don't know all the facts. You only got that saleswoman's word for it. Then, again, mebbe her ma is out o' a job an' despondent an' goin' to take poison an' she wanted to leave the child in a big store where she'd get a lot o' admiration an' run a better chance o' bein' adopted by wealthy people. You can't leave a child as old as that in a basket on someone's doorstep! It was the only way. An' now if the poor soul hasn't already done away with herself we'd mebbe be in time to do her some good an' mebbe give her a lift an' fix her so's she'd grow more encouraged an' perhaps even change into decent work an' make a home for her child."

Cyrus knew in his heart that his wife, whose motives were always clear and honest as daylight, would stand for no dishonesty.

"Well, have it your own way," he grudgingly admitted. "Only I wager you won't find the mother. She's prob'ly three hundred miles away by now—mebbe she's run off with some actor chap. Her sort don't take poison."

"Set the alarm for five, then. We'd oughter to get off by six. I only hope an' pray we ain't too late!" and motherly Mrs. Hartman drew a long sigh. "We'll do our best to restore the poor lamb to her poor ma. Actress or no actress, she's her ma, an' if you had the feelin's o' a mother Cyrus Hartman—"

"I've taken a right smart fancy to Polly," said Cyrus, with a wistful sigh. "I—kinda hope we don't find her ma. So there!"

And he stumped upstairs to bed.

The manager of the big store placed chairs for Mr. and Mrs. Hartman and little Pauline and listened attentively. The element of surprise had long since ceased to make an impression on him, but this tale was something quite out of the ordinary.

"An' so if you'll give us her ma's address—" Nancy concluded, cutting in upon a disquisition of her husband's anent "actor folk" and their curious ways.

"The mother is nearly prostrated with grief," the manager told them. "She'll be wild with joy. Take the fastest cab you can find and go to 127 Maitland street. What makes the affair so much more—what shall I say—so regrettable is that the child's father only got back from France this morning, and he is almost as grief-stricken as his wife. Of course, this will pick them both up at once. They've been telephoning us all morning, and a big army of searchers has been abroad in the city since yesterday afternoon. What a relief it is to us all!"

At 127 Maitland street they were shown into splendid drawing-room and left, apparently, forgotten. For as soon as Polly had been recognized by the maid servant who opened the door she had

been snatched up and carried off amid the girl's hysterical laughter and tears. They could hear sounds of joy from somewhere above, the glad cry of a woman and Polly's own silvery laughter. Cyrus shot a furtive glance at Nancy.

"Purty swell place, eh?" he whispered, cautiously.

"Sh-h!" returned Nancy.

She, too, had been visibly impressed by the house, which was a substantial brick one in its own grounds, and also by the interior, but she had no intention of allowing anyone to think she was overwhelmed by all this magnificence.

"Listen to 'em," said Cyrus, wonderingly. "I reckon she was mighty tickled to get her kid back jest the same. I—I wonder if we'd better give her that little lecture after all, Nance?"

For overnight they had made a resolve, and it was to give the silly young mother some wholesome advice. They would draw a picture of her criminal act and its consequences all down the years, with Polly growing up and asking questions about her parents which none could answer. They would show her the error of her ways, the responsibility that devolved upon any woman who brought a child into the world, the selfishness of deserting that child, of foisting her upon others to bring up as best they might, the heartlessness of casting a child off in the first place—the well, the unnaturalness of it—

Cyrus had slept but fitfully last night. There was something in the proposed lecture that bothered him. He could not help feeling that in his case it was the pot calling the kettle black! Nancy made no reply to Cyrus's observation, because at that very moment the swish of a silken skirt was heard on the stairs and in another instant Polly's mother had entered the room. They knew she was Polly's mother at the first glance. There was the same flower-like face with the blue eyes, the same expression of innocence and the identical golden hair with perhaps less curl to it. She paused a moment with one arm raised as she drew back the heavy green velvet portiere, and in that pose she made a striking picture. Cyrus and Nancy had always thought that an actress must of necessity be bold and forward, "a hussy," in fact, with but the superficial polish of polite manners which the world demands of even its favorites, that her face was always painted and her eyes filled with belladonna. They had pictured Polly's mother with numerous long strings of beads hanging from a very de-colate neck with a half-smoked cigarette in her fingers, and with an ever-present desire to make bold bad eyes at one. As a matter of fact, Cyrus had straightened his tie a dozen times in five minutes and smoothed what little hair he had in the expectation of the lady by taking a fancy to roll her eyes his way. He had gotten to the point where he was actually hoping she would! It made him feel young and spry again just to think of such a thing. But, of course, to his spouse he said nothing of his feelings in the matter.

But this slim girl in the plain blue morning frock, with her cheeks guiltless of rouge took him utterly by surprise and quite routed all his preconceived notions about her probable appearance. She came forward, looking from one to the other, and they saw that her eyes had dark rings around them and that her face was drawn and white from the sleepless night. Cyrus had risen awkwardly, twirling his hat about in his great brown hands.

"Oh, thank you for bringing Polly back!" said Polly's mother in a low vibrant tone that had just a suspicion of a sob in it. "What can I say—"

"Don't mention it Miss—Ma'am," Cyrus put in hurriedly. "We jest done what any person—"

"We nearly came to stealing 'Prize-Package Polly,'" Nancy confessed. "Set down here beside me, do. You sure look played out! I s'pose the child has told you she crawled into our roll o' linoleum. It must have been lyin' right on the floor near to the toy department there, where you had left her—but we might as well begin at the beginnin' an' tell it right. Where is the child's pa?"

"He just arrived to-day—early in the morning. (He's been in France for the past year). And he's neither eaten nor

slept since he came! He's been haunting the police-stations, but I've telephoned him the good news. But Polly—wasn't it a mercy she chose that roll, was able to breathe? Supposing the other end had been stopped up! Oh, it's dreadful just thinking of it! Yes, do tell me at once please. You kept her all night?"

"We live out o' town. That's why."

"We have a ranch fifteen miles west," "Don't—don't you kinda think Miss—Ma'am, that a home is better for a child than boardin' houses an' hotels an' sech?" Cyrus said after the tale was finished.

"I do indeed! That's why we've bought this house," replied Polly's mother, frankly. "You see, when my husband—he's the well-known tenor of the New York Operatic Society you know—cabled me that he was getting six months' leave I decided to cancel my engagements at the date when he would get back, so we could have a little taste of real home life for a time. Although I'm the head of my own company it didn't have to disband here for I provided a substitute for the next half-year. So since night before last I've been free and only awaiting my husband's arrival. The company has gone on to the Coast. Otherwise I'd be very much pleased to offer you complimentary tickets."

"That's real kind o' you, Ma'am. I guess neither the wife nor I has been to a show in a blue moon," said Cyrus.

"An' we'll take the will for the deed," added Nancy, hurriedly, and looking rather uncomfortable.

"Here he is now!" she exclaimed, breaking off suddenly.

The front door had opened, and now there entered the room a tall well-built young man of about twenty-six, though he looked much older than that. He was in officer's khaki, but the signs of strain upon his face had only recently begun to wear away and he was almost haggard from weariness.

"Where's Polly?" he demanded breathlessly of his wife.

"Upstairs getting into a fresh dress. Wait, Jim. First meet these good people who—"

"Jim—Jim! Is it you?" from Cyrus, hoarsely.

"Jim—our son!" from Nancy, weakly.

"Mother! father!" from the young man, wonderingly.

"No, we didn't come a-purpose! It's all a blessed accident!" said Cyrus, pumping his son's arm up and down.

"Do introduce me, Jim," at last spoke Jim's wife, demurely, smiling upon the three. "You see I didn't have sense enough to ask their name."

When the introductions were properly effected Mrs. Hartman put her motherly arm about her daughter-in-law and kissed her warmly while Cyrus with eyes blinking very rapidly and a tremble to his voice that he could scarcely control patted the actress's arm and said:

"Our son Jim's got purty good taste, anyway!"

"And how soon can you all come out to the Bar K?" asked Mrs. Hartman.

"Why as soon as you like," conceded Jim with a happy grin.

"And you must both remain with us till we go," insisted Jim's wife. There's the luncheon-gong now."

Cyrus fumbled in one of his capacious pockets and produced a large orange which he gave to his golden-haired grand-daughter.

"What do you say?" whispered her mother, in an aside.

"She says," remarked Cyrus adroitly, "that she's goin' to come an' give her old grand-dad a big hug an' a kiss."

And that was just what Prize-Package Polly did.

"How are you off for help on the ranch, Father?" asked Jim, suddenly. Could you use another hand?"

"Pshaw Jim! I ain't goin' to ask no celebrated tenor to stook grain. Any-way, I'd reckon you'd wilt in an hour!"

"I would eh? Wait till I tell you some of my experiences in France before you go making any bets about my just aching to learn cooking from mother. physiqe! And I know that Pauline is Oh, I think you'll find us a little help. We're both in dead earnest anyway if that's any recommendation."

Cyrus gazed half-incredulously at the young pair.

"All right!" he said at last, grinning. "It's a go—or I'm a goat!"