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Pollyanna



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CHAPTER I

MISS POLLY

Miss Polly Harrington entered her kitchen a little hurriedly this June morning. Miss Polly did not usually make hurried movements; she specially prided herself on her repose of manner. But today she was hurrying—actually hurrying.

Nancy, washing dishes at the sink, looked up in surprise. Nancy had been working in Miss Polly's kitchen only two months, but already she knew that her mistress did not usually hurry.

"Nancy!"

"Yes, ma'am." Nancy answered cheerfully, but she still continued wiping the pitcher in her hand.

"Nancy,"—Miss Polly's voice was very stern now—"when I'm talking to you, I wish you to stop your work and listen to what I have to say."

Nancy flushed miserably. She set the pitcher down at once, with the cloth still about it, thereby nearly tipping it over—which did not add to her composure.

"Yes, ma'am; I will, ma'am," she stammered, righting the pitcher, and turning hastily. "I was only keepin' on with my work 'cause you specially told me this mornin' ter hurry with my dishes, ye know."

Her mistress frowned.

"That will do, Nancy. I did not ask for explanations. I asked for your attention."

"Yes, ma'am." Nancy stifled a sigh. She was wondering if ever in any way she could please this woman. Nancy had never "worked out" before; but a sick mother suddenly widowed and left with three younger children besides Nancy herself, had forced the girl into doing

something toward their support, and she had been so pleased when she found a place in the kitchen of the great house on the hill—Nancy had come from “The Corners,” six miles away, and she knew Miss Polly Harrington only as the mistress of the old Harrington homestead, and one of the wealthiest residents of the town. That was two months before. She knew Miss Polly now as a stern, severe-faced woman who frowned if a knife clattered to the floor, or if a door banged—but who never thought to smile even when knives and doors were still.

“When you’ve finished your morning work, Nancy,” Miss Polly was saying now, “you may clear the little room at the head of the stairs in the attic, and make up the cot bed. Sweep the room and clean it, of course, after you clear out the trunks and boxes.”

“Yes, ma’am. And where shall I put the things, please, that I take out?”

“In the front attic.” Miss Polly hesitated, then went on: “I suppose I may as well tell you now, Nancy. My niece, Miss Pollyanna Whittier, is coming to live with me. She is eleven years old, and will sleep in that room.”

“A little girl—coming here, Miss Harrington? Oh, won’t that be nice!” cried Nancy, thinking of the sunshine her own little sisters made in the home at “The Corners.”

“Nice? Well, that isn’t exactly the word I should use,” rejoined Miss Polly, stiffly. “However, I intend to make the best of it, of course. I am a good woman, I hope; and I know my duty.”

Nancy colored hotly.

“Of course, ma’am; it was only that I thought a little girl here might—might brighten things up for you,” she faltered.

“Thank you,” rejoined the lady, dryly. “I can’t say, however, that I see any immediate need for that.”

“But, of course, you—you’d want her, your sister’s child,” ventured Nancy, vaguely feeling that somehow she must prepare a welcome for this lonely little stranger.

Miss Polly lifted her chin haughtily.

“Well, really, Nancy, just because I happened to have a sister who was silly enough to marry and bring unnecessary children into a world that was already quite full enough, I can’t see how I should

particularly WANT to have the care of them myself. However, as I said before, I hope I know my duty. See that you clean the corners, Nancy," she finished sharply, as she left the room.

"Yes, ma'am," sighed Nancy, picking up the half-dried pitcher—now so cold it must be rinsed again.

In her own room, Miss Polly took out once more the letter which she had received two days before from the faraway Western town, and which had been so unpleasant a surprise to her. The letter was addressed to Miss Polly Harrington, Beldingsville, Vermont; and it read as follows:

"Dear Madam:—I regret to inform you that the Rev. John Whittier died two weeks ago, leaving one child, a girl eleven years old. He left practically nothing else save a few books; for, as you doubtless know, he was the pastor of this small mission church, and had a very meagre salary.

"I believe he was your deceased sister's husband, but he gave me to understand the families were not on the best of terms. He thought, however, that for your sister's sake you might wish to take the child and bring her up among her own people in the East. Hence I am writing to you.

"The little girl will be all ready to start by the time you get this letter; and if you can take her, we would appreciate it very much if you would write that she might come at once, as there is a man and his wife here who are going East very soon, and they would take her with them to Boston, and put her on the Beldingsville train. Of course you would be notified what day and train to expect Pollyanna on.

"Hoping to hear favorably from you soon, I remain,
"Respectfully yours,
"Jeremiah O. White."

With a frown Miss Polly folded the letter and tucked it into its envelope. She had answered it the day before, and she had said she would take the child, of course. She HOPED she knew her duty well enough for that!—disagreeable as the task would be.

As she sat now, with the letter in her hands, her thoughts went back to her sister, Jennie, who had been this child's mother, and to the time when Jennie, as a girl of twenty, had insisted upon marrying the young minister, in spite of her family's remonstrances. There had been a man of wealth who had wanted her—and the family had much preferred him to the minister; but Jennie had not. The man of wealth had more years, as well as more money, to his credit, while the minister had only a young head full of youth's ideals and enthusiasm, and a heart full of love. Jennie had preferred these—quite naturally, perhaps; so she had married the minister, and had gone south with him as a home missionary's wife.

The break had come then. Miss Polly remembered it well, though she had been but a girl of fifteen, the youngest, at the time. The family had had little more to do with the missionary's wife. To be sure, Jennie herself had written, for a time, and had named her last baby "Pollyanna" for her two sisters, Polly and Anna—the other babies had all died. This had been the last time that Jennie had written; and in a few years there had come the news of her death, told in a short, but heart-broken little note from the minister himself, dated at a little town in the West.

Meanwhile, time had not stood still for the occupants of the great house on the hill. Miss Polly, looking out at the far-reaching valley below, thought of the changes those twenty-five years had brought to her.

She was forty now, and quite alone in the world. Father, mother, sisters—all were dead. For years, now, she had been sole mistress of the house and of the thousands left her by her father. There were people who had openly pitied her lonely life, and who had urged her to have some friend or companion to live with her; but she had not welcomed either their sympathy or their advice. She was not lonely, she said. She liked being by herself. She preferred quiet. But now—

Miss Polly rose with frowning face and closely-shut lips. She was glad, of course, that she was a good woman, and that she not only knew her duty, but had sufficient strength of character to perform it. But—POLLYANNA!—what a ridiculous name!

CHAPTER II
OLD TOM AND NANCY

In the little attic room Nancy swept and scrubbed vigorously, paying particular attention to the corners. There were times, indeed, when the vigor she put into her work was more of a relief to her feelings than it was an ardor to efface dirt—Nancy, in spite of her frightened submission to her mistress, was no saint.

“I—just—wish—I could—dig—out the corners—of—her—soul!” she muttered jerkily, punctuating her words with murderous jabs of her pointed cleaning stick. “There’s plenty of ‘em needs cleanin’ all right, all right! The idea of stickin’ that blessed child ‘way off up here in this hot little room—with no fire in the winter, too, and all this big house ter pick and choose from! Unnecessary children, indeed! Humph!” snapped Nancy, wringing her rag so hard her fingers ached from the strain; “I guess it ain’t CHILDREN what is MOST unnecessary just now, just now!”

For some time she worked in silence; then, her task finished, she looked about the bare little room in plain disgust.

“Well, it’s done—my part, anyhow,” she sighed. “There ain’t no dirt here—and there’s mighty little else. Poor little soul!—a pretty place this is ter put a homesick, lonesome child into!” she finished, going out and closing the door with a bang, “Oh!” she exclaimed, biting her lip. Then, doggedly: “Well, I don’t care. I hope she did hear the bang,—I do, I do!”

In the garden that afternoon, Nancy found a few minutes in which to interview Old Tom, who had pulled the weeds and shovelled the paths about the place for uncounted years.

“Mr. Tom,” began Nancy, throwing a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure she was unobserved; “did you know a little girl was comin’ here ter live with Miss Polly?”

“A—what?” demanded the old man, straightening his bent back with difficulty.

“A little girl—to live with Miss Polly.”

“Go on with yer jokin’,” scoffed unbelieving Tom. “Why don’t ye tell me the sun is a-goin’ ter set in the east ter-morrer?”

“But it’s true. She told me so herself,” maintained Nancy. “It’s her niece; and she’s eleven years old.”

The man’s jaw fell.

“Sho!—I wonder, now,” he muttered; then a tender light came into his faded eyes. “It ain’t—but it must be—Miss Jennie’s little gal! There wasn’t none of the rest of ‘em married. Why, Nancy, it must be Miss Jennie’s little gal. Glory be ter praise! Ter think of my old eyes a-seein’ this!”

“Who was Miss Jennie?”

“She was an angel straight out of Heaven,” breathed the man, fervently; “but the old master and missus knew her as their oldest daughter. She was twenty when she married and went away from here long years ago. Her babies all died, I heard, except the last one; and that must be the one what’s a-comin’.”

“She’s eleven years old.”

“Yes, she might be,” nodded the old man.

“And she’s goin’ ter sleep in the attic—more shame ter her!” scolded Nancy, with another glance over her shoulder toward the house behind her.

Old Tom frowned. The next moment a curious smile curved his lips.

“I’m a-wonderin’ what Miss Polly will do with a child in the house,” he said.

“Humph! Well, I’m a-wonderin’ what a child will do with Miss Polly in the house!” snapped Nancy.

The old man laughed.

“I’m afraid you ain’t fond of Miss Polly,” he grinned.

“As if ever anybody could be fond of her!” scorned Nancy.

Old Tom smiled oddly. He stooped and began to work again.

“I guess maybe you didn’t know about Miss Polly’s love affair,” he said slowly.

“Love affair—HER! No!—and I guess nobody else didn’t, neither.”

“Oh, yes they did,” nodded the old man. “And the feller’s livin’ ter-day—right in this town, too.”

“Who is he?”

“I ain’t a-tellin’ that. It ain’t fit that I should.” The old man drew himself erect. In his dim blue eyes, as he faced the house, there was the loyal servant’s honest pride in the family he has served and loved for long years.

“But it don’t seem possible—her and a lover,” still maintained Nancy.

Old Tom shook his head.

“You didn’t know Miss Polly as I did,” he argued. “She used ter be real handsome—and she would be now, if she’d let herself be.”

“Handsome! Miss Polly!”

“Yes. If she’d just let that tight hair of hern all out loose and careless-like, as it used ter be, and wear the sort of bunnits with posies in ‘em, and the kind o’ dresses all lace and white things—you’d see she’d be handsome! Miss Polly ain’t old, Nancy.”

“Ain’t she, though? Well, then she’s got an awfully good imitation of it—she has, she has!” sniffed Nancy.

“Yes, I know. It begun then—at the time of the trouble with her lover,” nodded Old Tom; “and it seems as if she’d been feedin’ on wormwood an’ thistles ever since—she’s that bitter an’ prickly ter deal with.”

“I should say she was,” declared Nancy, indignantly. “There’s no pleasin’ her, nohow, no matter how you try! I wouldn’t stay if ‘twa’n’t for the wages and the folks at home what’s needin’ ‘em.

But some day—some day I shall jest b'ile over; and when I do, of course it'll be good-bye Nancy for me. It will, it will."

Old Tom shook his head.

"I know. I've felt it. It's nart'ral—but 'tain't best, child; 'tain't best. Take my word for it, 'tain't best." And again he bent his old head to the work before him.

"Nancy!" called a sharp voice.

"Y-yes, ma'am," stammered Nancy; and hurried toward the house.

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