

The Mystery of Polly Lopp

OF OPIE READ

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CHAPTER I.

What was called a union revival was in progress at the principal meeting house in Broomfield, an old and gullied village in the southwestern part of Missouri, and the exhorters, vigorous advocates of a change of heart and purpose, were warm in their work when the slight flutter of a counter excitement arose amid the congregation. Old Bill Aimes, strong among the exhorters, and who, long had enjoyed the name of "Wheel Horse," looked toward the door and saw a strange young woman slowly and with long strides, walking down the aisle. She was exceedingly tall and with a complexion that seemed to darken as she drew near, but she was not ungraceful and neither was her face wanting in attractiveness. Her tailor-made gown was a mark of ultra fashion in this out-of-the-way place; and her air, her swing of motion bespoke the forced independence of city life. She paid not the slightest heed to the gazes bent upon her, but with easy freedom took a seat and modestly turned her eyes toward the altar where the mourners in split and shivered accents were pitifully begging that the old Adam born within them might be cast out into utter darkness. And now the whisper went round: "Who is she and where did she come from and what is she doing here?" Some of the children climbed upon the benches to stare at her, and old Bill Aimes, always a bold man, looked straight at her and shouted his exhortation as though he would have her believe that she had arrived just in time to escape the awful fury to come. But the woman sat there not the least disturbed; and when the services were brought to a close she got up without looking about her and walked straightway to the tavern, a short distance down the street. It appeared that she had already engaged a room, for she walked upstairs without halting, and a few moments later a boy came down with a note in his hand. Bill Aimes was standing near the door of the hallway, and as the boy came down the old man called to him and told him to stop a moment.

"Boy, what have you got there?" the fellow asked.

"A note, or something of the sort," he answered.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"She told me to take it to the editor of the Sentinel."

"Well, let me see it." The boy hesitated. "Let me see it, I tell you. Ain't I the mayor of this town, you young fellow, and ain't it my business to know if any underhand business goes on here? Give me that thing."

The idlers who stood about applauded the mayor and the boy handed him the note.

"Here, Alf," he said, speaking to a young fellow, "read this here thing. Left my buckskin at home and ain't got nothing to rub my glasses with. Read it."

There was a titter among the idlers.

"What are you fellows gigglin' at? Think I can't read? Hah? Is that what you think? Why, I gad—Lord forgive me for the expression—I read the Declaration of Independence at a muster before either of you was born. What does that thing say, Alf?"

Alf spelled and spluttered for a moment or two and then read the following:

"MY DEAR SIR: Meet me at once in the parlor at the hotel on important business. Respectfully,
POLLY LOPP."

The old man took the note, looked at it, turned it over, looked at it again, folded it and returned it to the boy. "I don't understand it, but I reckon it's all right," he said. "Take it to him, and say, you watch him when he reads it, and come back here and tell me how he looked."

It did not appear that the boy had more than reached the shanty where the paper was printed, when they saw the editor coming hastily toward the hotel. To him the prospect of an important business conference no doubt produced a strange sensation. Year after year he had "scrapped" for a living in that village, printing funeral tickets, horse bills, and through his sheet urging his party to organize and overthrow the political enemy of his country. The idlers about the door of the hall made way for him as he approached, but the mayor, showing a disposition to block his path, asked him to wait a moment. The editor gave him a look of strong reproof. "I have no time for gossip," he said. "I have important business."

The crowd stood about the door, waiting for him to come down, and when he did those who were best acquainted with his sad and careworn countenance agreed that he looked years younger. Now what could it all mean? The mystery was deepened.

"Just hold on a minute," old Aimes called after him. The editor faced about and said: "Well, what do you want?"

"We want to know something that we've got a right to know," Aimes replied. "There's something goin' on here and we want to know what it is. You never saw that woman before, and why should you have important business with her? We don't know but she's some female anarchist come here to blow up these here American institutions."

The editor laughed, and for the first time since his defeat as a candidate for the legislature. "She's nothing of the sort," he said. "To tell you the truth she has just leased my paper for a year with the privilege of buying, and she assures me that if

shall maintain its present high standard of morality and integrity. She takes charge to-morrow and you have nothing to fear from her."

"But where is she from?" Aimes asked.

"We don't want women comin' in here among our folks without we know where they are from."

"She came from Chicago."

"What, and you are sure she ain't an anarchist? Look here, colonel, you ought to have gone a little slower in this matter. She might hoist the red flag at the head of your paper and then where would the country be?"

"No danger of that," the editor laughed, and off he walked, leaving old Aimes to stand and wonder whether or not he should call on the woman and get a few points from her. He decided that he would, and upstairs he went. He looked in at the parlor door and saw the young woman sitting on the sofa with a book in her hand.

"Ahem, excuse me; but may I come in a moment?"

"Yes," the woman answered, putting aside the book. The old man entered, took a chair, moved it about and finally settled down near her.

"Putty hot," he ventured to remark.

"Yes, rather."

"Hotter than it was yistidy, I believe," he observed.

"Yes, or day before yesterday, either," she replied.

"I gad, I reckon you are right."

She stowed her book and looking straight at him said:

"You were exhorting in the church just a short while ago, I believe?"

"You are right. I always take an ac-

tive part in our revivals. But we hain't done much this time and the meetin' closed to-day."

"I thought you were the man, and I am therefore a little surprised to hear you say 'I gad' after hearing you so fervently urge people to turn from frivolous ways."

Old Aimes puffed and fanned himself with his straw hat. The woman took up her book and looked at it. "Miss, I knock under. You are right. But I don't mean no harm by usin' such words, and I want to say they are the strongest I ever use. Bleegee to you for callin' my attention to 'em. But I have come to see you to ask you a few questions, and I hope you won't think them out of place, or anything of that sort, for you see country people pride themselves on bein' more respectable than most any other folks are, and the truth is they have to be mighty particular and all that sort of thing, which I hope you will understand without any trouble, and the questions I want to ask you are simply these hers: How did you happen to come here and—"

"How did you happen to come here?" the woman broke in, raising her eyes from the book and mildly fixing them upon the old man. And she appeared to be making a study of him, his squint eyes, his purple cheeks, bushy eye-brows, fat nose; and she noticed that the bosom of his cotton shirt was unbuttoned at the top, revealing the grayish hairs on his chest. "But before you answer," she added, still looking at him, taking it seemed, an enjoyable measurement of his discomfiture, "let me ask you if you would mind buttoning your shirt."

"I gad, miss," the old man puffed, "you are somethin' of a T-a-r, I reckon. I've lived here all my life and have been mayor here for ten year and have worn my shirt this way every spell of hot weather, and you are the first one to tell me to button it; but dinged—excuse the expression, for it's the strongest I use—I say dinged if I don't do it. Now, miss, the shirt's buttoned, so go ahead with your rat killin', as the feller said."

"I have no rat killing to go on with. I merely asked you how you happened to come here."

"Miss, I tell you that I'm the mayor of this here town, but we'll let that pass. Would you mind tellin' me your name?"

"My father's name was Lopp and in remembrance of a great-aunt I was called Polly."

"Ah, hah, I reckon it was all right to recollect the old lady and all that sort of thing, but from what I can gather from the papers Lopp is a sort of anarchist name, ain't it?"

"I have never known an anarchist of that name," the young woman answered, smiling.

"They may be, miss, but I don't like the name any too well, but we'll let that pass, as the feller said when he seed the wild cat." He was silent long enough to unbutton the top button of his shirt and then he went on: "We understand that you have leased the paper here, and we'd like to know why, for when a paper is leased there is generally some sort of ax to be ground, so I would just like to ask you what sort of ax you have brought with you?"

The woman threw down the book, laughed at the old man, and, clasping her hands back of her head, leaned back, still laughing at him.

"Miss, you are as much tickled as I there was a bug on you? Hah, don't you think there's a bug on you? I have generally commanded a good deal of respect among women folks and you needn't laugh at me any more than you can help, even if there's a bug on you, but what I want to get at

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and I'm going to get at it, mighty sudden is this here: Before we can allow you to associate with us we must know somethin' about you, and it is as little as you can do to tell us what we want to know."

"You have asked me for my confidence," she said, looking at him with demure mockery, "the precious confidence of an unprotected woman, and oh, how willingly would I give it you but for the fact that I have not known you long enough. But I confess that you have invited my confidence by seeking to unbutton yourself." She looked at the old man's shirt and he puffed and buttoned it.

"Miss, I'll be slathered—now that is really the strongest expression I use—if you don't sorter git away with me. But won't you tell me somethin' about yourself?"

"Why, yes, I will give you my tenderest confidences."

"Oh, now, here, don't chaw me. I am the mayor of this town, I tell you, and if you are goin' to run a paper here you had better keep in with me. The city council takes ten copies and I could have them cut off at any time."

"What, the sentiment or the half price?"

"Why, the rag carpet, of course. I did not know but you might expect velvet on the floor."

"My dear child," said Miss Lopp, "it was not the thought of a carpet that brought me into this neighborhood, and to tell you the truth, I don't care whether the floor is covered with a rag or with sawdust."

"Oh, I just know that I shall like you, because you are not stupid with evenness of talk and kill-dried manners. So come on and we'll go over right now."

And so Miss Lopp was installed in a large room in an old-fashioned house. Her two front windows commanded the drowsy village, the town cow that looked as though she had been patched, having so often been scalded by housewives; the prowling hog, the sport of every dog that found himself without amusement; the hitching rack where farmers' nags squealed and bit at one another. But the two other windows looked upon a garden, rose-tinted here and there, the dark shade lying between rows of high peas, a tangle of plumb bushes a long slope and a creek.

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Nell soon learned to pick up type, and was therefore Polly's closest and most valued companion. They were rarely seen apart; they strolled in the woods like lovers, and together they begged contributions to the mite society.

One afternoon, as they were going home to enjoy the cool of the garden, Nell, swinging Polly's hand as they moved along, declared that she had never been so happy. "I feel that I am useful," she said; "I feel that I am the dearest friend of a woman who knows something. And do you know what I have been thinking of? I have been thinking that we ought to make a vow never to separate. I told father the other night that I should never marry, and if you will take up the same resolution why we will live together. There's the stage, and look, there are three passengers, men, and they are coming this way."

Polly made no reply, but, leaning forward, looked eagerly at the men. They had been looking about them, but upon seeing her they came quickly forward, and as they approached one of them called: "Hello, Polly!" and then each one said: "Hello, Polly!"

Several of the townspeople were within hearing, and they loitered near to see what might follow. Polly spoke to the strangers, and then requested Nell to walk on, that she would overtake her. Nell hesitated. "Won't you please walk on?" Polly insisted. "I'll soon catch up with you."

Nell obeyed, though not without muttering an objection, and Polly stood in the road, talking to the strangers. What could it mean? Why were they so familiar with her and why should she desire to see them alone? They turned and slowly walked toward the stage coach, which was to go out again at once, to take passengers to the railway ten miles distant, and Polly talked to them in low tones and then they all nodded and smiled. Nell and the villagers were watching them, and so was old man Aimes, and just as the three men had seated themselves in the coach, the old man, commanding the driver to wait a moment, walked up to the door and said: "I am the mayor of this town."

"Sorry for you," one of the men replied.

"Well, by Satan's hoofs, I like that, but excuse the expression for it's the strongest I ever did use; but what do you mean by sneakin' in here without lettin' anybody know you was comin' an' sneakin' out again without lettin' anybody know why you did come? Now what have you got to say?"

"Sput the door, old man. Tra loo."

"Wait!" the old man commanded.

"Who are you and what did you want with this young woman?"

"Go on, driver. So long, old top." And off they went.

"Miss Polly," said the old man, turning toward the editor, "what do you mean?"

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"But hold on and tell us somethin' about her," Alf insisted.

"I don't know a blessed thing about her except that she's all right, and that's all, anybody need to know."

Shortly afterward a young woman called at the hotel, introduced herself to the stranger and said that following the advice of her father she had come to ask Miss Lopp to board with her. "We have a great, big old-fashioned house," she said, "and you may have all the room you want, so don't say you won't. Will you please not say you won't?"

The visitor had taken a seat on the piano stool and not ungracefully was slowly turning herself half round and then back. She was a comely girl and it was evident that she was the belle of the neighborhood; and it was also evident that she cared nothing for this distinction, that she had studied and read herself beyond any companionship that the village might offer, and that simply to be admired, had long since grown tiresome to her. Miss Lopp never forgot that pleasing picture, the dark eyes half humorously pleading, the abundant hair caught up here and there as if by graceful and yet careless daps, the pleasing face and yet a countenance bespeaking strength of will—physical vigor and grace.

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actually hungry for some one to talk to."

"I don't see how I can resist so strong an appeal," Miss Lopp replied.

"There, I knew you couldn't say you wouldn't when you were brought to understand it all. And we'd better go now," she added, springing off the stool.

"You shall have a large front room, but it has a rag carpet, woven half sentimentally by a woman that lives not far from here—by half sentimentally I mean that she thought so much of me she wove it for half price. But you don't mind that, do you?"

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CHAPTER II.

That evening in the house of old man Aimes there was a sleep supper party. Nell's flowing friendship had been rudely checked and a sharp heel had been set upon the old man's dignity. And it looked as though a coolness must necessarily follow. The strangers had brought a mystery with them and had left it in the village, and in this mystery stood Polly Lopp.

Not a word had been spoken. Polly arose to leave the table. Nell looked up, and her countenance was sorrowful, not so much that there might be a compromising mystery, but that it was kept dark from her.

"Goin', Miss Polly?" Aimes asked.

and I'm going to get at it, mighty sudden is this here: Before we can allow you to associate with us we must know somethin' about you, and it is as little as you can do to tell us what we want to know."

"You have asked me for my confidence," she said, looking at him with demure mockery, "the precious confidence of an unprotected woman, and oh, how willingly would I give it you but for the fact that I have not known you long enough. But I confess that you have invited my confidence by seeking to unbutton yourself." She looked at the old man's shirt and he puffed and buttoned it.

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Nell soon learned to pick up type, and was therefore Polly's closest and most valued companion. They were rarely seen apart; they strolled in the woods like lovers, and together they begged contributions to the mite society.

One afternoon, as they were going home to enjoy the cool of the garden, Nell, swinging Polly's hand as they moved along, declared that she had never been so happy. "I feel that I am useful," she said; "I feel that I am the dearest friend of a woman who knows something. And do you know what I have been thinking of? I have been thinking that we ought to make a vow never to separate. I told father the other night that I should never marry, and if you will take up the same resolution why we will live together. There's the stage, and look, there are three passengers, men, and they are coming this way."

Polly made no reply, but, leaning forward, looked eagerly at the men. They had been looking about them, but upon seeing her they came quickly forward, and as they approached one of them called: "Hello, Polly!" and then each one said: "Hello, Polly!"

Several of the townspeople were within hearing, and they loitered near to see what might follow. Polly spoke to the strangers, and then requested Nell to walk on, that she would overtake her. Nell hesitated. "Won't you please walk on?" Polly insisted. "I'll soon catch up with you."

Nell obeyed, though not without muttering an objection, and Polly stood in the road, talking to the strangers. What could it mean? Why were they so familiar with her and why should she desire to see them alone? They turned and slowly walked toward the stage coach, which was to go out again at once, to take passengers to the railway ten miles distant, and Polly talked to them in low tones and then they all nodded and smiled. Nell and the villagers were watching them, and so was old man Aimes, and just as the three men had seated themselves in the coach, the old man, commanding the driver to wait a moment, walked up to the door and said: "I am the mayor of this town."

"Sorry for you," one of the men replied.

"Well, by Satan's hoofs, I like that, but excuse the expression for it's the strongest I ever did use; but what do you mean by sneakin' in here without lettin' anybody know you was comin' an' sneakin' out again without lettin' anybody know why you did come? Now what have you got to say?"

"Sput the door, old man. Tra loo."

"Wait!" the old man commanded.

"Who are you and what did you want with this young woman?"

"Go on, driver. So long, old top." And off they went.

"Miss Polly," said the old man, turning toward the editor, "what do you mean?"

"Your shirt collar is unbuttoned again," was all she said.

"YOUR SHIRT COLLAR IS UNBUTTONED AGAIN."

for him. "Don't put yourself to no uneasiness on her account, gentlemen," he said. "She can take care of herself, and if she can't, I gad, I can take care of her or come mighty blame high it; but I reckon that expression is a little too strong for a man that thinks as much of a revival as I do, and I ask the Lord to excuse me."

"But hold on and tell us somethin' about her," Alf insisted.

"I don't know a blessed thing about her except that she's all right, and that's all, anybody need to know."

Shortly afterward a young woman called at the hotel, introduced herself to the stranger and said that following the advice of her father she had come to ask Miss Lopp to board with her. "We have a great, big old-fashioned house," she said, "and you may have all the room you want, so don't say you won't. Will you please not say you won't?"

The visitor had taken a seat on the piano stool and not ungracefully was slowly turning herself half round and then back. She was a comely girl and it was evident that she was the belle of the neighborhood; and it was also evident that she cared nothing for this distinction, that she had studied and read herself beyond any companionship that the village might offer, and that simply to be admired, had long since grown tiresome to her. Miss Lopp never forgot that pleasing picture, the dark eyes half humorously pleading, the abundant hair caught up here and there as if by graceful and yet careless daps, the pleasing face and yet a countenance bespeaking strength of will—physical vigor and grace.

"You must not say you won't," the girl went on, giving Miss Lopp no time to answer, "until you know how much in need of a sensible companion I am. Father—and let me request you not to pay any attention to his strong expressions for he is really the best man you ever saw—well, he does everything he can to lighten my loneliness, but he can't do so very much, you know, being only a man, and I am

actually hungry for some one to talk to."

"I don't see how I can resist so strong an appeal," Miss Lopp replied.

"There, I knew you couldn't say you wouldn't when you were brought to understand it all. And we'd better go now," she added, springing off the stool.

"You shall have a large front room, but it has a rag carpet, woven half sentimentally by a woman that lives not far from here—by half sentimentally I mean that she thought so much of me she wove it for half price. But you don't mind that, do you?"

"What, the sentiment or the half price?"

"Why, the rag carpet, of course. I did not know but you might expect velvet on the floor."

"My dear child," said Miss Lopp, "it was not the thought of a carpet that brought me into this neighborhood, and to tell you the truth, I don't care whether the floor is covered with a rag or with sawdust."

"Oh, I just know that I shall like you, because you are not stupid with evenness of talk and kill-dried manners. So come on and we'll go over right now."

And so Miss Lopp was installed in a large room in an old-fashioned house. Her two front windows commanded the drowsy village, the town cow that looked as though she had been patched, having so often been scalded by housewives; the prowling hog, the sport of every dog that found himself without amusement; the hitching rack where farmers' nags squealed and bit at one another. But the two other windows looked upon a garden, rose-tinted here and there, the dark shade lying between rows of high peas, a tangle of plumb bushes a long slope and a creek.

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