

# The Black Cat



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## In Miss Polly's Pew.

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“YOU are an early riser, sir,” said the hotel clerk, glancing up from his books as he spoke. The stranger smiled. He was a tall, well-built man of some forty years, but his blue eyes gleamed boyishly.

“It is a bit early,” he replied, “seeing that I turned in rather late last night, but this town is my old home, and I’m going out to see what changes you have been making. Twenty years give time for a good many.”

“Twenty years,” the clerk said slowly. “Why, that was before I was out of dresses.”

“It’s a good while,” the older man admitted thoughtfully.

“What is your name?” he added, with that doubtful, searching look so common to the eyes of those who are looking backward into the years that are gone.

At the reply he thought a moment, then shook his head.

“One of the changes,” he said musingly; “I never knew any one by that name.”

“I’m luckier, then; we have a John Harrold here now. So your name is familiar to me. We call our John ‘Jack,’ however.”

“They used to call me Jack when I was younger. Yes, that must be one of my Cousin Andy’s sons. A likely fellow, if he takes after Andy. Named for me, I bet a sixpence. I’ll be glad to see the youngster. I came here partly to look Andy up.”

The man’s face softened as he spoke, and a tender light shone in his eyes. After all, it was very pleasant, this belated home-coming.

“Where does Andy live now?” he asked after a moment’s pause.

“He’s dead, sir; died when I was a little boy.”

The elder man cleared his throat, coughing a little.

“One should be prepared for a good many changes, as I remarked. Twenty years is a long time. I'll go out before breakfast and have a look at the old town.”

With head erect and shoulders well thrown back, he strode out into the echoing street. The town was still silent, for the sun was not yet up. Somewhere, far off, he heard a clock striking five. The sound seemed to drop from the purple sky.

“A good many changes along here,” he soliloquized presently, stopping to look about him. “Let's see, this used to be the Mims property,—no, it was near the creek. Let's see, what part of town is this, anyhow?”

A strained, puzzled look came into the man's eyes. His broad shoulders relaxed, and as he continued on his way along the unfamiliar street, his face settled into wistful lines. Whichever way he looked he could see nothing — absolutely nothing — that belonged to his past.

In the place of the homely, low-setting cottages that had once lined the village street were the plate glass and pressed brick of ambitious business blocks, or many gabled, varicolored houses, of a pretentious elegance undreamed of in his boyhood. Even the old oaks and elms were not the same, but had been replaced here and there by closely clipped shrubbery, and trees of foreign origin that had grown tall and stately in his absence.

As the converging lines of the long street opened out into parallels, the man's pace quickened, and presently a glimpse of open space and the soft ripple of water set his heart beating with suffocating force. Just what it was that he expected he had not clearly defined; but when, a moment later, his feet halted on the borders of a smug little park, all gravel walks and flower beds, that sloped to a tiny stream, his eyes darkened.

“Why, this used to be out in the country,” he said softly, “and now, even the creek is not the same; everything is changed —”

Suddenly, with a boyish laugh, he sprang forward. Ahead loomed the familiar outlines of a low stone bridge, under whose gray arch the stream gushed from the smug park into what was still the old woods. There were the same old oaks and maples, and — was it possible? Yes, there was the giant beech tree around which centered a thousand happy memories.

Still laughing boyishly, the stranger scrambled down the bank and flung himself at the roots of the old tree, his eyes fixed on the amber bubbling waters of the tiny creek. With the familiar sights and sounds, it seemed as though the flood-gates of his memory were suddenly forced wide open. All in a moment it flashed upon him that it was on the banks of this very stream he had builded the toy mill that first bent his thoughts in the direction of his present prosperous interests. He remembered, too, the fountain successfully constructed by him under the old beech tree by means of a tin pail and a lead pipe that conducted the water from the creek, but wiped out of existence by the owner of the woods after having spouted for only one glorious half hour.

Then there were other associations, memories of fishing excursions or nutting parties that somehow always ended under the old beech; of picnics that were never complete until the picnickers had carved their initials in its smooth bark. With a half-smothered ejaculation the man started up, exclaiming, "I wonder if mine are still there?" As he stood, his hands pressed almost affectionately against the old tree trunk, and began to read the initials and names carved upon it, he saw that some were quite fresh and new, evidently the work of the month or year at the farthest. But further up he spied certain familiar letters, linked often in pairs, and carved within clumsy, lop-sided hearts. He even fancied,—yes, there was surely a blackened "J. H.," his own initials, cut beneath "M. R.," —the whole surrounded by a very wide and generous heart. For a moment he studied wonderingly over these irregular, blackened lines. Then, by degrees, he recalled cutting the heart there one day when resting with a party of schoolfellows under the trees. But whose were the other initials? Of course, they belonged to some girl. He wouldn't have cut a boy's name in a heart, of course,—not when he was nineteen. But who was the girl? Now that he thought of it, he had known a great many nice, sweet girls in those days. What had become of all the womanly women, anyhow? He wondered that he never met that style of woman now. To be sure, his acquaintance with women was limited, but that did not prevent his passing judgment on the sex!

There was an actress or two, several professional women, and

the wives of some of his friends — women who lived in hotels and shuddered at the mere mention of housekeeping. What had become of all the gentle, home-loving women? It did not occur to him that possibly he had drifted away from the life in which such women are found.

His thoughts were away back in the old days. It was like groping in the darkness. Whom had he known in any special way? "M. R." Whose name was that? As he looked at the rude letters a face floated out of the shadows. A sweet face it was, with serene brown eyes, and red curving lips, and a broad, white forehead with soft, wavy brown hair parted daintily above it.

He pressed his hand over his eyes. The face grew more and more distinct. The lips seemed to be smiling, and there was a half fond, half timid look in the gentle eyes.

"Where — where did I get that face photographed on the thing they call my brain? It's there; I see it plainer every moment. Blessed if there isn't a little white, crimped ruffle beginning to show around the neck. Yes, and there's a blue bow under the pretty chin. It's all plain as day, but 'M. R.' — that somehow doesn't seem to go with the face. I should have thought the name was Polly. Why, yes," — with a sudden flash of recollection, — "so it was Polly, dear little Mary Rose!" For a moment the man stood tracing absently with his fingertip the initials in the smooth bark, while a red flush spread over his face.

Behind him the town was awakening with the rising sun. Its steady roar mingled with the twittering of the birds that trilled and fluttered about him; but the man heard nothing. His mind had leaped back twenty years to the time when, as a lad not yet out of his teens, he had sat and fished by this creek with Polly. She had been his first sweetheart, he thought tenderly. His first — why, yes, his first, last, and only sweetheart, the only girl he had ever loved! In a moment it was borne in upon him with a thrill of long dormant feeling, that through all these twenty years of material success his life had been really incomplete, — that it had always lacked something.

"Polly!" he exclaimed aloud, and then stared blankly around, like one awakened from a dream by the sound of his own voice. At the same moment a ground squirrel, startled by the unwonted

noise, scuttled across the log and up the tree, with a shrill "chip, chip," that at once turned the current of his thoughts. Just so the squirrels had run and chattered around him on that evening in early spring, the evening when he sat beneath this old beech for the last time for twenty years. Then, too, as now, he was thinking of Polly, thinking with all the reverence and tenderness of a boy's first love. Even now he could remember the letter that he wrote there, telling his love to the girl whom he worshiped,—the letter that never reached her. It all came back to him now,—the oozing away of his courage, the making and unmaking of his mind, the slow fading of the day as he sat listening to the squirrels and fingering the little sheet of paper. He could remember quite clearly how, overcome by a sense of his own unworthiness, he had wavered between fearing to send the boyish epistle and hesitating to destroy it, and how finally he had compromised by closing it up in a length of lead pipe, left by chance from his earlier abortive attempt at a fountain. He recalled, too, the reverence with which he laid the little sheet in its strange casket, the care with which he sealed it by hammering one end flat with a big rock and closing the other with a rough peg, whittled from the branch of a sapling; even the curious ache in his throat as he cut the initials "M. R." laboriously on the pipe's surface, preparatory to hiding it. Last of all, he recalled how then and there, in his youthful melancholy, he made up his mind to go out into the world that very day, never to return until he had made his fortune.

Moved by a sudden impulse, he hurried down the sloping bank towards the stone bridge—the new bridge it had been in that bygone evening of early springtime, with the mortar still fresh between the rough stones of its foundation. Why he had chosen a niche between those stones as a sort of dead letter office he could not imagine, but that he had, with his pocket-knife, dug out some of the soft mortar and filling, and, carefully depositing the lead pipe in a snug crevice, had walled it up again beyond the possibility of discovery, was as clear to his mind as if it had been a matter of days rather than years ago. Just why, now, he stooped and with his pocket-knife eagerly picked at that well-remembered joint in the foundation that entombed the old letter he under-

stood no better; but the thought that, after all, it might in some mysterious way have disappeared sent an actual chill to his heart. But no — it was there — he seized it — he had it in hands, — that little length of pipe, now black and discolored, with the peg rotting in the end, but still the same!

Still hardly knowing what he did, or why, he thrust the strange relic in his coat pocket, and, climbing the bank, crossed the bridge and turned to a road that cut the main street at right angles. The next moment he stopped short. This side street was unchanged except by a few touches of the paint brush! Yonder stood the old ivy-covered church; there was the tumble-down blacksmith shop; just beyond was the Ives place, and — yes, there before him was Polly's home! He had been in it twice. Once at a little evening party, when Polly gave him a rose, and once after school with his brother Tom, when Polly was making crullers and gave them some. He had always loved roses and crullers! His private greenhouses were noted for their roses, and he kept a cross cook because she made excellent crullers.

But why was he here, and what was it that he wished to do? Ask for Polly? Again that chill clutched his heart at the thought of what might have happened in twenty years. She had been such a sweet girl, it was not among the probabilities that some other man had not long since won her. Or, it might be that —

Something, he hardly knew what, turned his steps back again in the direction of the little blacksmith shop. But even after chatting several minutes with the young man who had just opened his shop and stood working the big bellows, he stammered absurdly over Polly's name.

“Know Miss Mary Rose?” said the blacksmith smilingly; “oh, yes, every one knows her. She's like an aunt to every child in town. Yes, sir, she lives along with her brother right in the same old place, over there —”

But the stranger had gone, with hasty thanks, and was walking swiftly up the shaded walk toward the well-remembered white-pillared house. Everything about the place was very quiet. The old knocker looked as if he had seen it but yesterday. How things were coming back to him! At the sight of all these familiar objects an inspiration flashed through his mind.

The old letter! He would deliver it now! Just what it contained he could not clearly remember; but, whatever its contents, this time he would deliver his letter to Polly.

A moment later he was asking the trim negro maid who opened the door if Miss Rose was at home.

"Miss Mary Rose? Yes, sir; walk right in, sir," said the maid, hospitably throwing open the door.

But the stranger hesitated; then shook his head. "No, I can't stay," he said hurriedly. "I just want to leave her a message," as he spoke, transferring the length of lead pipe from his pocket to the hand of the bewildered housemaid.

"A message for Miss Mary?" she said blankly.

"Yes, that is —" He hesitated again; then, hastily producing his card, he scribbled on it his hotel address, and across one end the words, "After twenty years."

"Give her that," he murmured. "She will understand." And thrusting the pasteboard into the maid's half reluctant fingers, he turned and strode off down the path.

"A message for me, Peggy?" said Miss Polly a moment later, as she set down the gem pans and looked dubiously at the curious object that Peggy laid before her on the kitchen table.

"Yessem. Er gemmen fotch hit himse'f, jes' now. Yere's his card. I'se goin' to see whut Miss Bessie want."

When Peggy returned she found the pans still unfilled and Miss Polly sitting gazing incredulously at a piece of paper on her lap.

"Look after the gems, Peggy," she said softly, "and, O Peggy, what did the gentleman look like?"

"He's tallish an' middlin' heavy built, Miss Ma'y, but ef de Lawd doe know him no bettern I does, der mane's los'. He's likely in de face, an' his hair's er dock pepper an' salt. I never have saw him befo', an' I'se seen mighty nigh —"

"Look after the gems and settle the coffee. Had he blue eyes, Peggy? Bright, deep blue, with a merry look like little Sol's, and black lashes that curl up like Kitty's, and —"

"Lor, Miss Ma'y, I didden tuck de mane down an' 'zamin him wive er microbe. Who's you 'spectin'? I reckon hit's him."

She stopped and looked at the woman whose flushed face was bent over the open letter. And then, somehow, she moved about



softly, closing the oven door without a sound, and handling dishes without the usual clatter. For the place seemed changed now, Miss Mary's face was shining so. And after awhile, when Miss Mary looked up, she seemed not to see Peggy.

"I didn't even know that he was here; but I always knew that, if it was best for him, God would send him back to me." And then she got up and went up to her room where she read the letter again, stopping to comb Flossie's hair, and again to button Tommie's shoes. For her room was only the nursery in her brother's house, and the children were her special charges.

Last night she had dreamed that she was a girl again. She, a middle-aged woman! And she had been very foolish and cried herself to sleep because Flossie told her that Mrs. Perkins had called her an old maid. But the sweet dream had come to her when the one lover of her girlhood, the handsome, bashful boy-lover had said nice things to her — the things he had left unsaid in the years gone by — and had looked tenderly into her eyes. She had not been able, all at once, to descend to practical everyday life, when she awoke from her dream.

Such a long time she had loved him, and dreamed about him, and thought of him, going over a thousand times every little word he had said to her, and seeing again every smile. And now he was at home again, and had asked her to marry him.

It was a somewhat flowery and impassioned epistle, that yellow old sheet, and curiously incongruous coming from a middle-aged man of business, but it was a very precious letter to the woman who read it, and kissed it, and bathed it with thankful tears. Before she left the room she knelt for a moment in thankfulness, and then she wrote her answer: —

"*Dear Jack*: — If you feel now as you did twenty years ago, come to see me to-morrow.

"I have been waiting for you.

"POLLY."

It was this letter, brought by the faithful Peggy to the hotel address written on his card, that John Harrold found on his table that evening, after a day spent in driving about town with Andy's son, the second Jack Harrold.

From his young namesake, who was secretly much astonished at his cousin's youthful buoyancy and intense interest in the affairs of his boyhood's home, he had learned that of Miss Polly's goodness and sweetness that set vibrating still more strongly those feelings of twenty years ago; and as he broke the seal of the little envelope, addressed in the well-known writing, his heart throbbed like that of a lad hardly out of his teens.

When he grasped the meaning of the womanly message his eyes dimmed.

"She cares for me still," he murmured. "She has been waiting for me. Even when I thought no one cared for me, when I felt friendless and all alone, she loved me. When I forgot her, she loved me, prayed for me. I always felt something tugging at my heart when I began anything extra bad, and I venture it was Polly's prayers. I wonder," with a sudden thought, "if she'll be at the old church to-morrow morning. Why, of course she will, and I will go and sit behind her, as I used to do, and —" The rest of his thoughts became inarticulate.

Dr. Rose and his wife attended a church farther up town; but Miss Mary was usually tired, and always easily pleased, and the old church suited her. And so when, upon his entrance into the old meeting-house the next morning, John Harrold glanced toward the Rose pew, he saw her sitting there all alone. She wore a little black bonnet, with a soft black plume against her brown, parted hair, and a black dress with a white, crimped ruffle at the neck. As, still watching her, he mechanically seated himself in what had once been his father's pew, some one touched his shoulder. He looked up, to find a very terrible old lady with an intensely black false front and intensely white false teeth glaring down at him.

"My pew, if you please," she said in a shrill whisper, and John Harrold stumbled out, wishing himself safely out of it all. And as his last calm moments had been spent in contemplating the lonely occupant of the Rose pew, he mechanically made his way to it and sat down. Polly looked up with a sweet smile and the tiniest of welcoming nods.

The music began just here, soft and low, and some one began to sing in a low, plaintive voice. John had not been inside of a

church for years, but now a heavy wave of feeling shook his strong frame, and there were tears on the black lashes that curled up like Kitty Harrold's. After all, he thought, what was he that he should hope to join his life to that of this sweet, unworldly woman?

There was a sudden sob and quiver in the music. He glanced at Polly. A faint smile was trembling on her lips. He saw the lines that lay about them, and all at once he acquired the skill of an expert deciphering hieroglyphics. He read in these faint lines of patience, sweetness, goodness, tenderness, — all that his life had sorely lacked. The rosy light from a stained-glass window transformed her shining hair into the halo of a saint. The music throbbed and trembled and then died away. He heard not a word of the sermon. A new glory had entered his soul. This woman who had loved him always was his own. He might stretch out his hand and fold her to his lonely heart. She had waited for him — for him.

It was over at last, and she turned to him and held out her hand, as she lifted her timid eyes to his face.

"Polly, darling," he said in his low, deep voice, taking her hand in both his own, and entirely missing the look of amazement on the faces about them.

But Polly was a woman, and not the smallest drop in her overflowing cup of bliss was the knowledge that Mrs. Perkins had heard those tender words!

