

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls' Careers



Margaret Vandercook

The Camp Fire Girls' Careers

«Public Domain»

Vandercook M.

The Camp Fire Girls' Careers / M. Vandercook — «Public Domain»,

© Vandercook M.
© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I – Success or Failure	5
CHAPTER II – “Belinda”	8
CHAPTER III – Friends and Enemies	12
CHAPTER IV – Farewell!	15
CHAPTER V – Other Girls	18
CHAPTER VI – The Fire-Maker’s Desire	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls' Careers

CHAPTER I – Success or Failure

The entire theater was in darkness but for a single light burning at one corner of the bare stage, where stood a man and girl.

“Now once more, Miss Polly, please,” the man said encouragingly. “That last try had a bit more life in it. Only do remember that you are supposed to be amusing, and don’t wear such a tragic expression.”

Then a stiff figure, very young, very thin, and with a tense white face, moved backward half a dozen steps, only to stumble awkwardly forward the next instant with both hands pressed tight together.

“I can’t – I can’t find it,” she began uncertainly, “I have searched – ”

Lifting her eyes at this moment to her companion’s, Polly O’Neill burst into tears.

“I am a hopeless, abject failure, Mr. Hunt, and I shall never, never learn to act in a thousand years. There is no use in your trying to teach me, for if we remain at the theater for the rest of the day I shall make exactly the same mistakes tonight. Oh, how can I possibly play a funny character when my teeth are positively chattering with fright even at a rehearsal? It is sheer madness, my daring to appear with you and Margaret Adams before a first-night New York audience and in a new play. Even if I have only a tiny part, I can manage to make just as great a mess of it. Why, why did I ever dream I wished to have a career, I wonder. I only want to go back home this minute to Woodford and never stir a step away from that blessed village as long as I live.”

“Heigho, says Mistress Polly,” quoted her companion and then waited without smiling while the girl dried her tears.

“But you felt very differently from this several years ago when you acted with me in *The Castle of Life*,” he argued in a reassuring tone. “Besides, you were then very young and had not had two years of dramatic training. I was amazed at your self-confidence, and now I don’t understand why you should feel so much more nervous.”

Polly squared her slender shoulders. “Yes you do, Mr. Hunt,” she insisted, bluntly. “However, if you really don’t understand, I think I can make you see in a moment. Four years ago when I behaved like a naughty child and without letting my friends or family know acted the part of the fairy of the woods in the Christmas pantomime, I had not the faintest idea of what a serious thing I was attempting. I did not even dream of how many mistakes I *could* make. Besides, that was only a school-girl prank and I never thought that any one in the audience might know me. But now, why at this moment I can hear dozens of people whispering: ‘See that girl on the stage there taking the character of the maid, Belinda; she is Polly O’Neill. You may remember that she is one of the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls and for years has been worrying her family to let her become an actress. I don’t believe she will ever make a success. Really, she is the worst stick I ever saw on the stage!’”

And so real had her imaginary critic become that Polly shuddered and then clasped her hands together in a tragic fashion.

“Then think of my poor mother and my sister, Mollie, and Betty Ashton and a dozen or more of my old Camp Fire friends who have come to New York to see me make my *début* tonight! Can’t you tell Miss Adams I am ill; isn’t there some one who can take my place? I really am ill, you know, Mr. Hunt,” Polly pleaded, the tears again starting to her eyes.

Since Polly’s return from the summer in Europe, two years of eager ambition and hard work had been spent in a difficult training. As a result she looked older and more fragile. This morning her face

was characteristically pale and the two bright patches of color usually burning on her cheek bones had vanished. Her chin had become so pointed that it seemed almost elfish, and her head appeared too small for its heavy crown of jet-black hair. Indeed, at this time in her life, in the opinion of strangers, only the blueness of her eyes with the Irish shadows underneath saved the girl from positive plainness. To her friends, of course, she was always just Polly and so beyond criticism.

Having finally through years of persuasion and Margaret Adams' added influence won her mother's consent to follow the stage for her profession, Polly had come to New York, where she devoted every possible hour of the day and night to her work. There had been hundreds of lessons in physical culture, in learning to walk properly and to sit down. Still more important had been the struggle with the pronunciation of even the simplest words, besides the hundred and one minor lessons of which the outsider never dreams. Polly had continued patient, hard-working and determined. No longer did she give performances of Juliet, draped in a red tablecloth, before audiences of admiring girls.

Never for a moment since their first meeting at the Camp Fire play in Sunrise Hill cabin had Margaret Adams ceased to show a deep interest in the wayward, ambitious and often unreliable Polly. She it was who had recommended the school in New York City and the master under whom Polly was to make her stage preparations. And here at the first possible moment Margaret Adams had offered her the chance for a *début* under the most auspicious conditions.

The play was a clever farce called *A Woman's Wit*, and especially written for the celebrated actress, who was to be supported by Richard Hunt, Polly's former acquaintance, as leading man.

Of course the play had been in rehearsal for several weeks; but Polly had been convinced that her own work had been growing poorer and poorer as each day went by.

"Look here, Miss O'Neill," a voice said harshly, and Polly stopped shaking to glance at her companion in surprise. During the last few months she and Richard Hunt had renewed their acquaintance and in every possible way Mr. Hunt had been kind and helpful. Yet now his manner had suddenly grown stern and forbidding.

"You are talking wildly and absurdly and like a foolish child instead of a woman," he said coldly. "Surely you must know that you are having a rare chance tonight because of Miss Adams' friendship and you must not disappoint her. If you fail to succeed, that will be unfortunate, but if you run away –" Suddenly Richard Hunt laughed. What a ridiculous suggestion! Of course Polly had only been talking in a silly school-girl fashion without any idea of being taken seriously.

"Good-by, Miss Polly, and cheer up," Richard Hunt finally said, holding out his hand, his manner friendly once more; for after all she was only a frightened child and he was at least ten years her senior. "Doubtless you'll put us all to shame tonight and Belinda will be the success of the evening." Then as he moved away toward the stage door he added, "It was absurd of me to be so annoyed, but do you know, for a moment you made me believe you really thought of running away. What about the Camp Fire law of that famous club to which you once belonged? Did it not tell you to be trustworthy and not to undertake an enterprise rashly, but, having undertaken it, to complete it unflinchingly. Do go home now and rest, child, things are sure to turn out splendidly." And with a smile of sympathy the man walked away.

So in another moment Polly was standing alone on an otherwise empty stage, torn with indecision and dread. Was Mr. Hunt right in believing that she had uttered only an idle threat in saying that she meant to run away? Yet would it not be wiser to disappear than to make an utter failure of her part tonight and be unable either to move or speak when the eyes of the audience were fixed expectantly upon her?

Slowly the girl walked toward the door, her face scarlet one moment, then like chalk the next. She could hear the scene-shifters moving about and realized that she would soon be in their way. But what should she do? Polly realized that if she went to her boarding place her mother and Mollie would be there waiting for her and then there could be no possible chance of escape.

Always Polly O'Neill had permitted herself to yield to sudden, nearly uncontrollable impulses. Should she do so now? In the last few years she believed she had acquired more self-control, better judgment. Yet in this panic of fear they had vanished once more. Of course Miss Adams would never forgive her, and no one would have any respect for her again. All this the girl realized and yet at the moment nothing appeared so dreadful as walking out on the stage and repeating the dozen or more sentences required of her. Rather would she have faced the guillotine.

“Finvarra and their land of heart's desire,” Polly quoted softly and scornfully to herself. Well, she had been hoping that she was to reach the land of her heart's desire tonight. Was this not to be the beginning of the stage career for which she had worked and prayed and dreamed?

Out on the street Polly was now walking blindly ahead. She had at last reached her decision, and yet how could she ever arrange to carry it out?

CHAPTER II – “Belinda”

It was twenty-five minutes past eight o'clock and at half-past eight the curtain was to rise on the first performance of *A Woman's Wit*, written especially for Margaret Adams. And because of her popularity and that of her leading man, the house had been sold out weeks in advance.

The action of the play was to take place in a small town in Colorado, where a man and his wife were both endeavoring to be elected to the office of Mayor. Polly was to play the part of a clever little shop-girl, whom the heroine had brought into her home, supposedly as a parlor maid. But in reality the girl was to do all that was in her power to assist her mistress in gaining a victory over her husband. She was to watch his movements and to suggest any schemes that she might devise for their success.

In the act which Polly had recently been rehearsing she was engaged in trying to discover a political speech written by the hero, so that the wife might read it beforehand and so answer it in a convincing fashion before the evening meeting of the Woman's Club. The play was a witty farce, and Belinda was supposedly one of the cleverest and most amusing characters. Yet whether Polly could succeed in making her appear so was still exceedingly doubtful.

With this idea in mind Richard Hunt left his dressing room, hoping to see Polly for a few moments if possible before the play began. Perhaps her fright had passed. For already the man and girl were sufficiently intimate friends for him to understand how swiftly her moods changed.

Polly had apparently left her dressing room, since there was no answer to repeated knockings. She could not have carried out her threat of the morning? Of course such a supposition was an absurdity. And yet the man's frown relaxed and his smile was one of unconscious relief when a tall, delicate figure in a blue dress came hurrying toward him along the dimly-lighted passage-way. The girl did not seem aware of anything or anybody, so great was her hurry and nervousness. However, this was not unreasonable, for instead of having on her maid's costume for the performance, she was wearing an evening gown of shimmering silk and in the coiled braids of her black hair a single pink rose.

“You are late, Miss Polly; may I find some one to help you dress?”

Instantly a pair of blue eyes were turned toward him in surprise and reproach. They were probably not such intensely blue eyes as Polly O'Neill's and they had a far gentler expression, though they were of exactly the same shape. And the girl's hair was equally black, her figure and carriage almost similar, except that she was less thin. But instead of Polly's accustomed pallor this girl's cheeks were as delicately flushed as the rose in her hair. “Could an evening costume so metamorphose a human being?” Richard Hunt wondered in a vaguely puzzled, uncertain fashion.

A small hand was thrust forward without the least sign of haste, although it trembled a little from shyness.

“I'm not Polly, Mr. Hunt,” the girl said smiling. “I am Mollie, her twin sister. But you must not mistake us, because even if we do *look* alike, we are not in the least alike in other ways. For one thing, I wouldn't be in Polly O'Neill's shoes tonight, not for this whole world with a fence around it. How can she do such a horrible thing as to be an actress? Polly considers that I haven't a spark of ambition, but why on earth should a sensible girl want a career?”

Suddenly Mollie blushed until her cheeks were pinker than before. “Oh, I am so sorry! I forgot for the moment that you were an actor, Mr. Hunt. Of course things are very different with you. A man *must* have a career! But I ought to apologize for talking to you without our having met each other. You see, Polly has spoken of you so many times, saying how kind you had been in trying to help her, that I thought for the instant I actually did know you. Forgive me, and now I *must* find Polly.”

Mollie was always shy, but realizing all at once how much she had confided to a stranger, she felt overwhelmed with embarrassment. How the other girls would laugh if they ever learned of what she had said. Yet Mr. Hunt was not laughing at her, nor did he appear in the least offended. Mollie was

sure he must be as kind as Polly had declared him, although he did look older than she had expected and must be quite thirty, as his hair was beginning to turn gray at the temples and there were heavy lines about the corners of his mouth. As Mollie now turned the handle of her sister's dressing-room door she was hoping that her new acquaintance had not noticed how closely she had studied him.

However, she need not have worried, for her companion was only thinking of how pretty she was and yet how oddly like her twin sister. For Mollie seemed to possess the very graces that Polly lacked. Evidently she was more amiable, better poised and more reliable, her figure was more attractive, her color prettier and her manner gracious and appealing.

"I am afraid you won't find your sister in there, Miss O'Neill. I have knocked several times without an answer," Richard Hunt finally interposed.

"Won't find her?" Mollie repeated the words in consternation. "Then where on earth is she? Miss Adams sent me to tell Polly that she wished to speak to her for half a moment before the curtain went up. Besides, Miss Ashton has already searched everywhere for her for quite ten minutes and then came back to her seat in the theater, having had to give up."

Forcibly Mollie now turned the handle of the door and peered in. The small room was unoccupied, as the other two members of the company who shared it with Polly, having dressed some time before, had also disappeared.

But Richard Hunt could wait no longer to assist in discovering the wanderer. Five minutes had passed, so that his presence would soon be required upon the stage. Surely if Polly had failed to appear at the theater her sister would be aware of it. Yet there was still a chance that she had sent a hurried message to the stage director so that her character could be played by an understudy. Even Polly would scarcely wreck the play by simply failing at the last moment.

He was vaguely uneasy. He had been interested in Polly, first because of their chance acquaintance several years before when they both acted in *The Castle of Life*, and also because of Miss Adams' deep affection for her protégé. The man had been unable to decide whether Polly had any talent for the career which she professed to care for so greatly.

Now and then during the frequent rehearsals of their new play she had done very well. But the very day after a clever performance she was more than apt to give a poor one until the stage manager had almost despaired. Nevertheless Richard Hunt acknowledged to himself that there was something about the girl that made one unable to forget her. She was so intense, loving and hating, laughing and crying with her whole soul. Whatever her fate in after years, one could not believe that it would be an entirely conventional one.

His cue had been called and Miss Adams was already on the stage. In a quarter of an hour when Belinda was summoned by her mistress, he would know whether or not Polly had feigned illness or whether she had kept her threat and ignominiously run away.

The moment came. A door swung abruptly forward at the rear of the stage and through it a girl entered swiftly. She was dressed in a tight-fitting gray frock with black silk stockings and slippers. There was a tiny white cap on her head and she wore a small fluted apron. She looked very young, very clever and graceful. And it was Polly O'Neill, and Polly at her best!

For the briefest instant Richard Hunt and Margaret Adams exchanged glances. It was obvious that Margaret Adams had also been uneasy over her favorite's début. For her eyes brightened and she nodded encouragingly as the little maid set down the tray she was carrying with a bang and then turned saucily to speak to her master. A laugh from the audience followed her first speech.

The Polly of the morning had completely vanished. This girl's cheeks were crimson, her eyes danced with excitement and vivacity. She was fairly sparkling with Irish wit and grace and, best of all, she appeared entirely unafraid.

It was not alone Polly O'Neill's two comparatively new friends upon the stage with her, who now felt relieved from anxiety by her clever entrance. More than a dozen persons in the audience

forming a large theater party occupying the sixth and seventh rows in the orchestra chairs, breathed inaudible sighs of relief.

There sat Betty Ashton and Dick and Esther, who had come down from Boston to New York City for Polly's *début*. Next Betty was a handsome, grave young man, who had only a few days before been elected to the New Hampshire Legislature by the residents of Woodford and the surrounding country, Anthony Graham. On his other side sat his sister, Nan, a dark-eyed, dark-haired girl with a quiet, refined manner. Near by and staring straight ahead through a pair of large, gold-rimmed spectacles was another girl with sandy hair, light blue eyes, a square jaw and a determined, serious expression. Nothing did Sylvia Wharton take lightly, and least of all the success or failure tonight of her adored step-sister. For Sylvia's ardent affection for Polly had never wavered since the early Camp Fire days at Sunrise Hill. And while she often disapproved of her and freely told her so, as she had then, still Polly knew that Sylvia could always be counted on through good and ill.

So far as the younger girl's own work was concerned there was little doubt of her success. Each year she had been at the head of her class in the training school for nurses and had since taken up the study of medicine. For Sylvia had never cared for frivolities, for beaux or dancing or ordinary good times. Polly often used to say that she would like to shake her younger step-sister for her utter seriousness, yet Sylvia rarely replied that she might have other and better reasons for administering the same discipline to Polly.

Back of this party of six friends Mr. and Mrs. Wharton, Polly's mother and stepfather, her sister Mollie and Billy Webster were seated. Billy, however, was no longer called by this youthful title except by his most intimate friends. He had never since the day Polly had teased him concerning it, asking him how it felt to be a shadowy imitation of a great man, used the name of Daniel. He was known to the people in Woodford and the neighborhood as William Webster, since Billy's father had died a year before and he now had the entire management of their large and successful farm. Indeed, the young man was considered one of the most expert of the new school of scientific farmers in his section of the country. And although Billy undoubtedly looked like a country fellow, there was no denying that he was exceedingly handsome. He was six feet tall, with broad shoulders and an erect carriage; his skin was tanned by the sun and wind, making his eyes appear more deeply blue and his hair almost the color of copper. Now seated next to Mollie he was endeavoring to make her less nervous, although any one could have seen he was equally nervous himself.

Frank Wharton and Eleanor Meade, who were to be married in a few months, were together, and next came yellow-haired Meg and her brother, John. Then only a few places away Rose and Dr. Barton and Faith, the youngest of the former group of Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls, who had been adopted by her former guardian and now was known by Dr. Barton's name. Faith was an unusual-looking girl, with the palest gold hair which she wore tied back with a black velvet ribbon. She had a curious, far-away expression in her great blue eyes and the simplicity of a little child. For Faith had never ceased her odd fashion of living in dreams, so that the real world was yet an unexplored country to her. Indeed, in her quaint short-waisted white muslin frock, with a tiny fan and a bunch of country flowers in her hand, she might have sat as one of the models for Arthur Rackham's spiritual, half-fairy children. Tonight she was even more quiet than usual, since this was the first time she had ever been inside a theater in her life. And had it not been for the reality of Polly O'Neill's presence, one of her very own group of Camp Fire girls, she must have thought herself on a different planet.

Herr and Frau Krippen had not been able to leave Woodford for this great occasion, since they boasted a very small and very new baby, with hair as red as its father's and as Esther's. But otherwise it looked singularly like the first of the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire guardians, the Miss Martha, whom the girls had then believed fore-ordained to eternal old-maidenhood.

So on this eventful night in her career, Polly O'Neill's old friends and family were certainly well represented. Fortunately, however, she had so far given no thought to their presence.

Now Belinda must rush frantically about on the stage, making a pretext of dusting the while she is eagerly listening to the conversation taking place between her master and mistress. Then in another moment they both leave the stage and Polly at last has her real opportunity. For with Margaret Adams present, naturally the chief attention of the audience would be concentrated upon her with her talent, her magnetism and her great reputation.

Yet as Miss Adams slipped away with a fleeting and encouraging lifting of her eyebrows toward her little maid, suddenly Polly O'Neill felt that the hour of her final reckoning had come. Curiously, until now she had not been self-conscious nor frightened; not for an instant had she been pursued by the terrors that had so harassed her all day that she had made a dozen plans to escape. Yet with the attention of the large audience suddenly riveted upon her alone, they were returning like a thousand fiends.

Polly felt like an atom surrounded by infinite space, like a spot of light in an eternity of darkness. Her voice had gone, her limbs were stiff, yet automatically she continued her dusting for a moment longer, hoping that a miracle might turn her into a human being again. Useless: her voice would never return, her legs felt as if they belonged to a figure in Mrs. Jarley's waxworks.

One could not devote the entire evening polishing the stage furniture! Already she could hear the agonized voice of the prompter whispering her lines, which he naturally supposed her to have forgotten.

In some fashion Polly must have dragged herself to the spot on the stage where she had been previously instructed to stand, and there somehow she must have succeeded in repeating the few sentences required of her, although she never knew how she did the one or the other; for soon the other players made their proper entrances and the unhappy Belinda was allowed to withdraw.

Yet although Polly could never clearly recall the events on the stage during these few moments, of one thing she was absolutely conscious. By some wretched accident she had glanced appealingly down, hoping to find encouragement in the face of her mother, sister, or Betty Ashton. Instead, however, she had caught the blue eyes of her old antagonist, Billy Webster, fixed upon her with such an expression of consternation, sympathy and amusement that she was never to forget the look for the rest of her life.

In the final scene, the one so diligently rehearsed during the morning, Belinda did not make such a complete failure. But, as she slipped away to her dressing room at the close of the performance, Polly O'Neill knew, before tongue or pen could set it down, the verdict that must follow her long-desired stage début. Alas, that in this world there are many of us unlike Cæsar: we come, we see, but we do not conquer!

CHAPTER III – Friends and Enemies

Standing outside in the dark passage for a moment, Polly hesitated with her hand on the door-knob, having already opened the door a few inches. From the inside she could plainly hear the voices of the two girls who shared the dressing room with her. Neither one of them had an important place in the cast. They merely came on in one of the scenes as members of a group and without speaking. However, they were both clever, ambitious girls whom Polly liked. Now her attention had been arrested by hearing the sound of her own name.

“Polly O’Neill was a dreadful failure, wasn’t she?” one of them was saying. “Well, I am not in the least surprised. Indeed, it was just what I expected. Of course, she was only given the part of Belinda because of favoritism. Miss Adams is such a great friend of hers!”

Then before Polly could make her presence known the second girl replied:

“So far as I can see, Polly O’Neill has never shown a particle of ability at any of the rehearsals that would justify her being placed over the rest of us. I am sure that either you or I would have done far better. But never mind; perhaps some day we may be famous actresses and she nothing at all, when there is no *Miss Adams* to help her along.”

But at this same instant Polly walked into the room.

“I am so sorry I overheard what you said, but it was entirely my fault, not yours,” she began directly. “Only please don’t think I intended to be eavesdropping. It was quite an accident my appearing just at the wrong moment. Of course I am hurt by your thinking I acted Belinda so poorly. Perhaps one of you *would* have been more successful. But do please understand that I realize perfectly that I had the chance given me because of Miss Adams’ friendship and not because of my own talents.” Then, though Polly’s cheeks were flaming during her long speech and her tones not always steady, she smiled at her companions in entire good fellowship.

Immediately the older girl, walking across the floor, laid her hand on Polly’s shoulder. “I am not going to take back *all* I said a while ago, for I meant a part of it,” she declared half apologetically and half with bravado. “Honestly, I don’t think you were very good as Belinda. But I have seen you act rather well at rehearsals now and then. I think you failed tonight because you suddenly grew so frightened. Don’t be discouraged; goodness knows it has happened to many an actor before who afterwards became famous,” she ended in an effort to be comforting.

“Yes, and it is all very well for us to talk here in our dressing rooms about being more successful than you were,” the second girl added, “but there is no way of our proving that we would not have had even worse cases of stage fright.” She gave Polly’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Of course, you must know we are both jealous of Miss Adams’ affection for you or we would never have been such horrid cats.” The girl blushed. “Do try and forget what we said, it was horrid not to have been kinder and more sympathetic. You may have a chance to pay us back with interest some day. Anyhow, you are a splendid sport not to be angry. I am sure it is the people who take things as you have this who will win out in the end.”

Then no one referred to the subject again. For it was plain that Polly was exhausted and that her nerves had nearly reached the breaking point. Instead, both girls now did their best to assist her in taking off the costume of the ill-fated Belinda and in getting into an ordinary street costume. For Polly was to meet her family and friends in a small reception room adjoining Miss Adams’ dressing room, five minutes after the close of the play. She would have preferred to have marched up to the cannon’s mouth, and she was much too tired at present either for congratulations or censure. She heard Mollie and Betty Ashton coming toward the door to seek for her.

Of course they were both immediately enthusiastic over Polly’s début and were sure that she had been a pronounced success. For in the minds of her sister and friend, Polly was simply incapable of failure. And perhaps they did succeed in making the rest of the evening easier for her. But then

all of her old Camp Fire and Woodford friends were as kind as possible. To have one of their own girls acting on a real stage seemed fame enough in itself.

But from two of her friends, from Sylvia Wharton and from Billy Webster, Polly received the truth as they saw it. Sylvia's came with spoken words, and Billy's by a more painful silence.

As Polly entered the room, Sylvia came forward, and kissed her solemnly. The two girls had not seen each other for a number of weeks. Sylvia had only arrived in New York a few hours before.

"You were dreadfully nervous, Polly, just as I thought you would be," Sylvia remarked quietly, holding her step-sister's attention by the intensity and concentration of her gaze behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. "Now I am afraid you are fearfully tired and upset. I do wish you would go home immediately and go to bed instead of talking to all these people. But I suppose you have already decided because you did not act as well as you expected this evening that you will never do any better. Promise me to be reasonable this one time, Polly, and may I see you alone and have a talk with you tomorrow?"

Then there was only time for the older girl to nod agreement and to place her hot hand for an instant into Sylvia's large, strong one, that already had a kind of healing touch.

For Mrs. Wharton was now demanding her daughter's attention, wishing to introduce her to friends. Since she had finally made up her mind to allow Polly to try her fate as an actress, Mrs. Wharton had no doubt of her ultimate brilliant success.

Five minutes afterwards, quite by accident, Richard Hunt found himself standing near enough to Polly to feel that he must also say something in regard to her début.

"I am glad Belinda did not run away today, Miss Polly," he whispered. "Do you know I almost believed she intended to for a few moments this morning?" And the man smiled at the absurdity of his idea.

Polly glanced quickly up toward her companion, a warm flush coloring her tired face. "It might have been better for the play if I had, Mr. Hunt, I'm a-thinking," she answered with a mellow Irish intonation in the low tones of her voice. "But you need not think I did not mean what I said. Don't tell on me, but I had a ticket bought and my bag packed and all my plans made for running away and then at the last even I could not be quite such a coward." The girl's expression changed. "Perhaps, after all, I may yet be forced into using that ticket some day," she added, half laughing and half serious, as she turned to speak to some one else who had joined them.

For another idle moment the man still thought of his recent companion. How much or how little of her rash statements did the child mean? Yet he might have spared himself the trouble of this reflection, for this question about Polly was never to be satisfactorily answered.

Although by this time the greater number of persons in Margaret Adams' reception room had spoken to Polly either to say kind things or the reverse, there was, however, one individual who had devoted his best efforts to avoiding her. Yet there had never been such an occasion before tonight. For whether he chanced to be angry with her at the moment or pleased, Billy Webster had always enjoyed the opportunity of talking to Polly, since she always stirred his deepest emotions, no matter what the emotions chanced to be. Tonight he had no desire to repeat the fatal words, "I told you so."

Of course he had always known that Polly O'Neill would never be a successful actress; she was far too erratic, too emotional. If only she had been sensible for once and listened to him that day in the woods long ago! Suddenly Billy squared his broad shoulders and closed his firm young lips. For, separating herself from every one else, Polly was actually marching directly toward him, and she had ever an uncanny fashion of guessing what was going on in other people's heads.

Underneath his country tan Billy Webster blushed furiously and honestly.

"You think I was a rank failure, don't you?" Polly demanded at once.

Still speechless, the young man nodded his head.

"You don't believe I ever will do much better?" Again Billy nodded agreement.

“And that I had much better have stayed at home in Woodford and learned to cook and sew and – and – well, some day try to be somebody’s wife?” the girl ended a little breathlessly.

This time Billy Webster did not mince matters. “I most assuredly do,” he answered with praiseworthy bluntness.

Now for the first time since her fiasco as Belinda, Polly’s eyes flashed with something of their old fire. And there in the presence of the company, though unheeded by them, she stamped her foot just as she always had as a naughty child.

“I will succeed, Billy Webster, I will, I will! I don’t care how many failures I may make in learning! And just because I want to be a good actress is no reason why I can’t marry some day, if there is any man in the world who could both love and understand me and who would not wish to make me over according to his own particular pattern.” Then Polly smiled. “Thank you a thousand times, though, Billy, for you are the solitary person who has done me any good tonight. It is quite like old times, isn’t it, for us to start quarreling as soon as we meet. But, farewell, I must go home now and to bed.” Polly held out her hand. “You are an obstinate soul, Billy, but I can’t help admiring you for the steadfast way in which you disapprove of me.”

CHAPTER IV – Farewell!

Margaret Adams was in her private sitting room in her own home, an old-fashioned red brick house near Washington Square. She had been writing letters for more than an hour and had just seated herself in a big chair and closed her eyes. She looked very young and tiny at this instant to be such a great lady. Her silk morning dress was only a shade lighter than the rose-colored chair.

Suddenly ten fingers were lightly laid over her eyes.

“Guess who I am or I shall never release you,” a rich, soft voice demanded, and Margaret Adams drew the fingers down and kissed them.

“Silly Polly, as if it could be any one else? What ever made you come out in this rain, child? You had a cold, anyway, and it is a perfectly beastly day.”

Instead of replying, Polly sat down in front of a small, open fire, putting her toes up on the fender.

“You are a hospitable lady,” she remarked finally, “but I am not wet specially. I left my damp things down stairs so as not to bring them into this pretty room. It always makes me think of the rose lining to a cloud; one could never have the blues in here.”

The room was charming. The walls were delicately pink, almost flesh color, with a deeper pink border above. A few original paintings were hung in a low line – one of an orchard with apple trees in spring bloom. The mantel was of white Italian marble with a bust of Dante’s Beatrice upon it and this morning it also held a vase of roses. Over near the window a desk of inlaid mahogany was littered with letters, papers, writing materials and photographs. On a table opposite the newest magazines and books were carefully arranged, together with a framed photograph of Polly and Margaret Adams’ taken when they were in London several years before. There was also a photograph of Richard Hunt and several others of distinguished men and women who were devoted friends of the famous actress.

A big, rose-colored divan was piled with a number of silk and velvet cushions of pale green and rose. Then there were other odd chairs and tables and shaded lamps and curtains of rose-colored damask hung over white net. But the room was neither too beautiful nor fanciful to be homelike and comfortable. Two or three ugly things Margaret Adams still kept near her for old associations’ sake and these alone, Polly insisted, made it possible for her to come into this room. For she, too, was an ugly thing, allowed to stay there now and then because of past association.

Polly was not looking particularly well today. She had been acting for ten days in *A Woman’s Wit*, though that would scarcely explain her heavy eyelids, nor her colorless cheeks. Polly’s eyes were so big in her white face and her hair so black that actually she looked more like an Irish pixie than an ordinary every-day girl.

“You’ll stay to lunch with me, Polly, and I’ll send you home in my motor,” Margaret Adams announced authoritatively. “I suppose your mother and Mollie have gone back to Woodford? I know Betty has returned to Boston, she came in to say good-by and to tell me that she is spending the winter in Boston with her brother, Dr. Ashton, and his wife. Betty is really prettier than ever, don’t you think so? I believe it was you, Polly, who really saved Betty from marrying her German princeling, but what will the child do now without you to look after her?”

Margaret Adams arose and walked across the room, presumably to ring for her maid, but in reality to have a closer look at her visitor. For Polly had not yet answered her idle questions; nor did she even show the slightest interest in the mention of her beloved Betty’s name. Something most unusual must be the matter with her.

“I *should* like to stay to lunch if no one else is coming,” Polly returned a moment later. “I did not like to disturb you earlier. There is something I want to tell you and so I might as well say it at once. I am not going to try to act Belinda any longer. I am going away from New York tomorrow. Yet you must not think I am ungrateful, even though I am not going to tell you where I am going nor

what I intend to do.” Polly clasped her thin arms about her knees and began slowly rocking herself back and forth with her eyes fastened on the fire, as though not daring to glance toward her friend.

At first Margaret Adams made no reply. Then she answered coldly and a little disdainfully: “So you are playing the coward, Polly! Instead of trying each night to do better and better work you are running away. If for an instant I had dreamed that you had so little courage, so little backbone, I never should have encouraged you to enter one of the most difficult professions in the whole world. Come, dear, you are tired and perhaps ill. I ought not to scold you. But I want you to forget what you have just said. Goodness knows, I have not forgotten the bitterly discouraged days I used to have and do still have every now and then. Only somehow I hoped a Camp Fire girl might be different, that her club training might give her fortitude. Remember ‘Wohelo means work. We glorify work because through work we are free. We work to win, to conquer and be masters. We work for the joy of working and because we are free.’ Long ago I thought you and I decided that the Camp Fire rules would apply equally well to whatever career a girl undertook, no matter what she might try to do or be.”

“Oh, I have not forgotten; I think of our old talks very often,” was Polly’s unsatisfactory reply.

A little nearer the fire Margaret Adams now drew her own big chair. It was October and the rain was a cold one, making the blaze comforting. The whole atmosphere of the room was peculiarly intimate and cozy and yet the girl did not appear any happier.

“I wonder if you would like to hear of my early trials, Polly?” Margaret asked. “Not because they were different from other people’s, but perhaps because they were so like. I believe I promised to tell you my history once several years ago.”

The older woman did not glance toward her visitor, as she had no doubt of her interest. Instead she merely curled herself up in her chair like a girl eager to tell a most interesting story.

“You see, dear, I made my *début* not when I was twenty-one like you are, but when I was exactly seven. Of course even now one does not like to talk of it, but I never remember either my father or mother. They were both actors and died when I was very young, leaving me without money and to be brought up in any way fate chose. I don’t know just why I was not sent at once to an orphan asylum, but for some reason or other a woman took charge of me who used to do all kinds of odd work about the theater, help mend clothes, assist with the dressing, scrub floors if necessary. She was frightfully poor, so of course there is no blame to be attached to her for making me try to earn my own bread as soon as possible. And bread it was *actually*.” Margaret Adams laughed, yet not with the least trace of bitterness. “A child was needed in a play, one of the melodramas that used to be so popular when I was young, a little half-starved waif. I dare say I had no trouble in looking the part. You see I’m not very big now, Polly, so I must have been a ridiculously thin, homely child, all big staring eyes and straight brownish hair. I was engaged to stand outside a baker’s shop window gazing wistfully in at a beautiful display of shiny currant buns until the heroine appeared. Then, touched by my plight, she nobly presented me with a penny with which I purchased a bun. Well, dear, that piece of bread was all the pay I received for my night’s performance, and it was all the supper I had. One night – funny how I can recall it all as if it were yesterday – coming out of the shop I stumbled, dropped my bun and at the same instant saw it rolling away from me down toward the blazing row of footlights. I had not a thought then of where I was or of anything in all the world but that I was a desperately hungry child, losing my supper. So with a pitiful cry I jumped up and ran after my bread. When I picked it up I think I hugged it close to me like a treasure and kissed it. Well, dear, you can imagine that the very unconsciousness, the genuineness of the little act won the audience. I know a good many people cried that night and afterwards. The reason I still remember the little scene so perfectly was because after that first time I had to do the same thing over and over again as long as the play ran. It was my first ‘hit,’ Polly, though I never understood what it meant for years and years afterwards.”

“Poor baby,” Polly whispered softly, taking her friend’s hand and touching it with her lips. “But I don’t care how or why the thing happened I have always known that you must have been a genius from the very first.”

“Genius?” The older woman smiled, shaking her head. “I don’t think so, Polly; I may have had some talent, although it took me many years to prove it. Mostly it has all been just hard work with me and beginning at seven, you see I have had a good many years. Do you think I became famous immediately after I captured the audience and the bun? My dear, I don’t believe I have ever known another girl as impossible as I was as an actress after I finally grew up. I did not continue acting. My foster mother married and I was then sent to school for a number of years. Finally, when I was sixteen, I came back to the stage, though I did not have a speaking part till five years later. You see, I was not pretty, and I never got very big in spite of the buns. It was not until I played in *The Little Curate* years after that I made any kind of reputation.”

Margaret Adams leaned over and put both hands on Polly’s thin shoulders.

“Don’t you see, dear, how silly, how almost wicked you will be if you run away from the opportunity I am able to give you. I never had any one to help me. It was all nothing but hard, wearing work and few friends, with almost no encouragement.”

“I see, Margaret,” Polly returned gravely. Then, getting up, she sat for a few moments on the arm of her friend’s chair. “Yet I *must* give up the chance you have given me just the same, dear, and I *must* go away from New York tomorrow. I can’t tell you why I am going or where because I am afraid you might dissuade me. Oh, I suppose it is foolish, even mad, of me, but I would not be myself if I were reasonable, and I am doing what seems wisest to me. I have written to mother and made her understand and to Sylvia because she almost forced me into promising her that I would keep her informed this winter where I was and what I was doing. I am not confiding in any one else in the whole world. But if you think I am ungrateful, Margaret, you think the very wrongest thing in the whole world and I’ll prove it to you one day, no matter what it costs. The most dreadful part is that I am not going to be able to see you for a long time. That is the hardest thing. You will never know what you have meant to me in these last few years when I have been away from home and my old friends. But I believe you are lonely too, dear, now and then in spite of your reputation and money and all the people who would like to know you.” Polly got up now and began walking restlessly about the room, not knowing how to say anything more without betraying her secret.

She glanced at the photograph of Richard Hunt.

“Are you and Mr. Hunt very special friends, Margaret?” Polly asked, an idea having suddenly come into her mind. “I think he is half as nice as you are and that is saying a great deal.”

For a perceptible moment Margaret Adams did not reply and then she seemed to hesitate, perhaps thinking of something else. “Yes, we have been friends for a number of years, sometimes intimate ones, sometimes not,” she returned finally. “But I don’t want to talk about Mr. Hunt. I still want to be told what mad thing Polly O’Neill is planning to do next.”

“And if she can’t tell you?” Polly pleaded.

“Then I suppose I will have to forgive her, because friendship without faith is of very little value.”

And at this instant Margaret Adams’ maid came in to announce luncheon.

CHAPTER V – Other Girls

“No, I am not in the least unhappy or discontented either, Esther; I don’t know how you can say such a thing,” Betty Ashton answered argumentatively. “You talk as though I did not like living here with you and Dick. You know perfectly well I might have gone south with mother for the winter if I had not a thousand times preferred staying with you.” Yet as she finished her speech, quite unconsciously Betty sighed.

She and Esther were standing in a pretty living room that held a grand piano, shelves of books, a desk and reading table; indeed, a room that served all purposes except that of sleeping and dining. For Dick and Esther had taken a small house on the outskirts of Boston and were beginning their married life together as simply as possible, until Dr. Ashton should make a name and fame for himself.

Esther was now dressed for going out in a dark brown suit and hat with mink furs and a muff. Happiness and the fulfilling of her dreams had given her a beauty and dignity which her girlhood had not held. She was larger and had a soft, healthy color. With the becoming costumes which Betty now helped her select her red hair had become a beauty rather than a disfigurement and the content in her eyes gave them more color and depth, while about her always beautiful mouth the lines were so cheerful and serene that strangers often paused to look at her the second time and then went their way with a new sense of encouragement.

Betty had no thought of going out, although it was a brilliant December day. She had on a blue cashmere house dress and her hair was loosely tucked up on her head in a confusion of half-tangled curls. She had evidently been dusting, for she still held a dusting cloth in her hand. Her manner was listless and uninterested, and she was pale and frowning a little. Her gayety and vitality, temporarily at least, were playing truant.

“Still I know perfectly well, Betty dear, that you came to be with Dick and me this winter not only because you wanted to come, but because you knew your board would help us along while Dick is getting his start. So it is perfectly natural that you should be lonely and miss your old friends in Woodford. Of course, Meg isn’t far away here at Radcliffe, but she is so busy with Harvard students as well as getting her degree that you don’t see much of each other. Suppose you come now and take a walk with me, or else you ride with Dick and I’ll go on the street car. I am only going to church for a rehearsal. You know I am to sing a solo on Sunday,” Esther continued in a persuasive tone.

“Yes, and of course Dick would so much prefer taking his sister to ride than taking his wife,” the other girl returned rather pettishly, abstractedly rubbing the surface of the mahogany table which already shone with much polishing.

Esther shook her head. “Well, even though you won’t confess it, something is the matter with you, Betty. You have not been a bit like yourself since you were in Woodford last fall. Something must have happened there. I don’t wish your confidence unless you desire to give it me. But even while we were in New York, you were cold and stiff and unlike yourself, especially to Anthony Graham, and I thought you used to be such good friends.”

There was no lack of color now in Betty Ashton’s face, although she still kept her back turned to her older sister.

“We are not special friends any longer,” she returned coldly, “though I have nothing in the world against Anthony. Of course, I consider that he is rather spoiled by his political success, being elected to the Legislature when he is so young, but then that is not my affair.” Betty now turned her face toward her sister. “I suppose I need something to do – that is really what is the matter with me, Esther dear. Lately I have been thinking that I am the only one of the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls who amounts to nothing. And I wanted so much to be loyal to our old ideals. There is Meg at college, Sylvia and Nan both studying professions, Edith married and Eleanor about to be. You have Dick, your music and your house, Mollie is relieving her mother of the responsibility of their big

establishment and even little Faith had a poem published in a magazine last week. It is hard to be the only failure. Then of course there is Polly!”

“Never a word from her in all this time?”

“Not a line since the note I received from her last October asking me not to be angry if I did not hear from her in a long time. No one has the faintest idea what has become of her – none of her friends, not even Mollie knows. I suppose she is all right though, because her mother is satisfied about her. Yet I can’t help wondering and feeling worried. What on earth could have induced Polly O’Neill to give up her splendid chance with Miss Adams, a chance she has been working and waiting for these two years?” Betty shrugged her shoulders. “It is stupid of me to be asking such questions. No one yet has ever found the answer to the riddle of Polly O’Neill. Perhaps that is why she is so fascinating. I always do and say exactly what people expect, so no wonder I am uninteresting. But there, run along, Esther, I hear Dick whistling for you. Don’t make him late. Perhaps I’ll get over having ‘the dumps’ while you are away.”

Esther started toward the door. “If only I could think of something that would interest or amuse you! I can’t get hold of Polly to cheer you up, but I shall write Mrs. Wharton this very evening and ask her to let Mollie come and spend Christmas with us. I believe Dick has already asked Anthony Graham. You won’t mind, will you, Betty? We wanted to have as many old friends as possible in our new house.”

Once again Betty flushed uncomfortably, although she answered carelessly enough. “Certainly I don’t mind. Why should I? Now do run along. Perhaps I’ll make you and Dick a cake while you are gone. An old maid needs to have useful accomplishments.”

Esther laughed. “An old maid at twenty-one! Well, farewell, Spinster Princess. I know you are a better cook and housekeeper than I am.” In answer to her husband’s more impatient whistling Esther fled out of the room, though still vaguely troubled. Betty was not in good spirits, yet what could be the matter with her? Of course, she missed the stimulus of Polly’s society; however, that in itself was not a sufficient explanation. What could have happened between Betty and Anthony? Actually, there had been a time when Dick had feared that they might care seriously for each other. Thank goodness, that was a mistake!

Left alone Betty slowly drew out a letter from inside her blue gown. It had previously been opened; but she read it for the second time. Then, lighting a tall candle on the mantel, she placed the letter in the flame, watching it burn until finally the charred scraps were thrown aside.

Betty had evidently changed her mind in regard to her promise to her sister. For instead of going into the kitchen a very little while later she came downstairs dressed for the street. Opening the front door, she went out into the winter sunshine and started walking as rapidly as possible in the direction of one of the poorer quarters of the city.

CHAPTER VI – The Fire-Maker's Desire

Outside the window of a small florist's shop Betty paused for an instant. Then she stepped in and a little later came out carrying half a dozen red roses and a bunch of holly and fragrant cedar. Curiously enough, her expression in this short time had changed. Perhaps the flowers gave the added color to her face. She was repeating something over to herself and half smiling; but, as there were no people on the street except a few dirty children who were playing cheerfully in the gutter, no one observed her eccentric behavior.

“As fuel is brought to the fire

So I purpose to bring
My strength,
My ambition,
My heart's desire,
My joy
And my sorrow
To the fire
Of humankind.
For I will tend,
As my fathers have tended,
And my father's fathers,
Since time began,
The fire that is called
The love of man for man,
The love of man for God.”

Betty's delicate, eyebrows were drawn so close together that they appeared almost heart shaped. “I fear I have only been tending the love of a girl for herself these past few months, so perhaps it is just as well that I should try to reform,” she thought half whimsically and yet with reproach. “Anyhow, I shall telephone Meg Everett this very afternoon, though I am glad Esther does not know the reason Meg and I have been seeing so little of each other lately, and that the fault is mine, not hers.”

By this time the girl had arrived in front of a large, dull, brown-stone building in the middle of a dingy street, with a subdued hush about it. Above the broad entrance hung a sign, “Home For Crippled Children.” Here for a moment Betty Ashton's courage seemed to waver, for she paused irresolutely, but a little later she entered the hall. A week before she had promised an acquaintance at the church where Esther was singing to come to the children's hospital some day and amuse them by telling stories. Since she had not thought seriously of her promise, although intending to fulfill it when she had discovered stories worth the telling. This morning while worrying over her own affair it had occurred to her that the best thing she could do was to do something for some one else. Hence the visit to the hospital.

Yet here at the moment of her arrival Betty had not the faintest idea of what she could do or say to make herself acceptable as a visitor. She had a peculiar antipathy to being regarded as a conventional philanthropist, one of the individuals with the instinct to patronize persons less fortunate.

Long ago when through her wealth and sympathy Betty had been able to do helpful things for her acquaintances, always she had felt the same shrinking sense of embarrassment, disliking to be thanked for kindnesses. Yet actually in his last letter Anthony Graham had dared remind her of their first meeting, an occasion she wished forgotten between them both.

The matron of the children's hospital had been sent for and a little later she was conducting Betty down a broad, bare hall and then ushering her into a big sunlit room, not half so cheerless as its visitor had anticipated.

There were two large French windows on the southern side and a table piled with books and magazines. Near one of these windows two girls were seated in rolling chairs reading. They must have been about fourteen years old and did not look particularly frail. Across from them were four other girls, perhaps a year or so younger, engaged in a game of parchesi. On the floor in the corner a pretty little girl was sewing on her doll clothes and another was hopping merrily about on her crutches, interfering with every one else. Only two of the cot beds in the room were occupied, and to these Betty's eyes turned instinctively. In one she saw a happy little German maiden with yellow hair and pale pink cheeks propped up on pillows, busily assorting half a dozen colors of crochet cotton. In the other a figure was lying flat with the eyes staring at the ceiling. And at the first glance there was merely an effect of some one indescribably thin with a quantity of short, curly dark hair spread out on the white pillow.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.