

CHAPTER XII FORBIDDEN FRUIT

"I 'M perfectly aching for some fun," said Polly to herself as she opened her window one morning and the sunshine and frosty air set her blood dancing and her eyes sparkling with youth, health, and overflowing spirits. "I really must break out somewhere and have a good time. It 's quite impossible to keep steady any longer. Now what will I do?" Polly sprinkled crumbs to the doves, who came daily to be fed, and while she watched the gleaming necks and rosy feet, she racked her brain to devise some unusually delightful way of enjoying herself, for she really had bottled up her spirits so long, they were in a state of uncontrollable effervescence.

"I 'll go to the opera," she suddenly announced to the doves. "It 's expensive, I know, but it 's remarkably good, and music is such a treat to me. Yes, I 'll get two tickets as cheap as I can, send a note to Will, poor lad, he needs fun as much as I do, and we 'll go and have a nice time in some corner, as Charles Lamb and his sister used to."

With that Polly slammed down the window, to the dismay of her gentle little pensioners, and began to fly about with great energy, singing and talking to herself as if it was impossible to keep quiet. She started early to her first lesson that she might have time to buy the tickets, hoping, as she put a five-dollar bill into her purse, that they would n't be very high, for she felt that she was not in a mood to resist temptation. But she was spared any struggle, for when she reached the place, the ticket office was blocked up by eager purchasers and the disappointed faces that turned away told Polly there was no hope for her.

"Well, I don't care, I 'll go somewhere, for I will have my fun," she said with great determination, for disappointment only seemed to whet her appetite. But the playbills showed her nothing inviting and she was forced to go away to her work with the money burning her pocket and all manner of wild schemes floating in her head. At noon, instead of going home to dinner, she went and took an ice, trying to feet very gay and festive all by herself. It was rather a failure, however, and after a tour of the picture shops she went to give Maud a lesson, feeling that it was very hard to quench her longings, and subside into a prim little music teacher.

Fortunately she did not have to do violence to her feelings very long, for the first thing Fanny said to her was: "Can you go?"

"Where?"

"Did n't you get my note?"

"I did n't go home to dinner."

"Tom wants us to go to the opera to-night and " Fan got no further, for Polly uttered a cry of rapture and clasped her hands.

"Go? Of course I will. I 've been dying to go all day, tried to get tickets this morning and could n't, been fuming about it ever since, and now oh, how splendid!" And Polly could not restrain an ecstatic skip, for this burst of joy rather upset her.

"Well, you come to tea, and we 'll dress together, and go all comfortable with Tom, who is in a heavenly frame of mind to-day."

"I must run home and get my things," said Polly, resolving on the spot to buy the nicest pair of gloves the city afforded.

"You shall have my white cloak and any other little rigging you want. Tommy likes to have his ladies a credit to him, you know," said Fanny, departing to take a beauty sleep.

Polly instantly decided that she would n't borrow Becky's best bonnet, as she at first intended, but get a new one, for in her present excited state, no extravagance seemed too prodigal in honor of this grand occasion. I am afraid that Maud's lesson was not as thorough as it should have been, for Polly's head was such a chaos of bonnets, gloves, opera-cloaks and fans, that Maud blundered through, murdering time and tune at her own sweet will. The instant it was over Polly rushed away and bought not only the kids but a bonnet frame, a bit of illusion, and a pink crape rose, which had tempted her for weeks in a certain shop window, then home and to work with all the skill and speed of a distracted milliner.

"I 'm rushing madly into expense, I 'm afraid, but the fit is on me and I 'll eat bread and water for a week to make up for it. I must look nice, for Tom seldom takes me and ought to be gratified when he does. I want to do like other girls, just for once, and enjoy myself without thinking about right and wrong. Now a bit of pink ribbon to tie it with, and I shall be done in time to do up my best collar," she said, turning her boxes topsy-turvy for the necessary ribbon in that delightful flurry which young ladies feel on such occasions.

It is my private opinion that the little shifts and struggles we poor girls have to undergo beforehand give a peculiar relish to our fun when we get it. This fact will account for the rapturous mood in which Polly found herself when, after making her bonnet, washing and ironing her best set, blacking her boots and mending her fan, she at last, like Consuelo, "put on a little dress of black silk" and, with the smaller adornments pinned up in a paper, started for the Shaws', finding it difficult to walk decorously when her heart was dancing in her bosom.

Maud happened to be playing a redowa up in the parlor, and Polly came prancing into the room so evidently spoiling for a dance that Tom, who was there, found it impossible to resist catching her about the waist, and putting her through the most intricate evolutions till Maud's fingers gave out.

"That was splendid! Oh, Tom, thank you so much for asking me to-night. I feel just like having a regular good time," cried Polly, when she stopped, with her hat hanging round her neck and her hair looking as if she had been out in a highwind.

"Glad of it. I felt so myself and thought we 'd have a jolly little party all in the family," said Tom, looking much gratified at her delight.

"Is Trix sick?" asked Polly.

"Gone to New York for a week."

"Ah, when the cat's away the mice will play."

"Exactly. Come and have another turn."

Before they could start, however, the awful spectacle of a little dog trotting out of the room with a paper parcel in his mouth, made Polly clasp her hands with the despairing cry: "My bonnet! Oh, my bonnet!"

"Where? what? which?" And Tom looked about him, bewildered.

"Snip's got it. Save it! save it!"

"I will!" And Tom gave chase with more vigor than discretion.

Snip, evidently regarding it as a game got up for his special benefit, enjoyed the race immensely and scampered all over the house, shaking the precious parcel like a rat while his master ran and whistled, commanded and coaxed, in vain. Polly followed, consumed with anxiety, and Maud laughed till Mrs. Shaw sent down to know who was in hysterics. A piteous yelp from the lower regions at last announced that the thief was captured, and Tom appeared bearing Snip by the nape of the neck in one hand and Polly's cherished bonnet in the other.

"The little scamp was just going to worry it when I grabbed him. I'm afraid he has eaten one of your gloves. I can't find it, and this one is pretty well chewed up," said Tom, bereaving Snip of the torn kid, to which he still pertinaciously clung.

"Serves me right," said Polly with a groan. "I 'd no business to get a new pair, but I wanted to be extra gorgeous to-night, and this is my punishment for such mad extravagance."

"Was there anything else?" asked Tom.

"Only my best cuffs and collar. You 'll probably find them in the coal-bin," said Polly, with the calmness of despair.

"I saw some little white things on the dining-room floor as I raced through. Go get them, Maud, and we 'll repair damages," said Tom, shutting the

culprit into the boot closet, where he placidly rolled himself up and went to sleep.

"They ain't hurt a bit," proclaimed Maud, restoring the lost treasures

"Neither is my bonnet, for which I 'm deeply grateful," said Polly, who had been examining it with a solicitude which made Tom's eyes twinkle.

"So am I, for it strikes me that is an uncommonly 'nobby' little affair," he said approvingly. Tom had a weakness for pale pink roses, and perhaps Polly knew it.

"I 'm afraid it 's too gay," said Polly, with a dubious look.

"Not a bit. Sort of bridal, you know. Must be becoming. Put it on and let 's see."

"I would n't for the world, with my hair all tumbling down. Don't look at me till I 'm respectable, and don't tell any one how I 've been acting. I think I must be a little crazy to-night," said Polly, gathering up her rescued finery and preparing to go and find Fan.

"Lunacy is mighty becoming, Polly. Try it again," answered Tom, watching her as she went laughing away, looking all the prettier for her dishevelment.

"Dress that girl up, and she 'd be a raving, tearing beauty," added Tom to Maud in a lower tone as he look her into the parlor under his arm.

Polly heard it and instantly resolved to be as "raving and as tearing" as her means would allow, "just for one night," she said as she peeped over the banisters, glad to see that the dance and the race had taken the "band-boxy" air out of Tom's elegant array.

I deeply regret being obliged to shock the eyes and ears of such of my readers as have a prejudice in favor of pure English by expressions like the above, but, having rashly undertaken to write a little story about Young America, for Young America, I feel bound to depict my honored patrons as faithfully as my limited powers permit. Otherwise, I must expect the crushing criticism, "Well, I dare say it 's all very prim and proper, but it is

n't a bit like us," and never hope to arrive at the distinction of finding the covers of "An Old-Fashioned Girl" the dirtiest in the library.

The friends had a social "cup o' tea" upstairs, which Polly considered the height of luxury, and then each took a mirror and proceeded to prink to her heart's content. The earnestness with which Polly made her toilet that night was delightful to behold. Feeling in a daring mood, she released her pretty hair from the braids in which she usually wore it and permitted the curls to display themselves in all their brown abundance, especially several dangerous little ones about the temples and forehead. The putting on of the rescued collar and cuffs was a task which absorbed her whole mind. So was the settling of a minute bit of court-plaster just to the left of the dimple in her chin, an unusual piece of coquetry in which Polly would not have indulged, if an almost invisible scratch had not given her an excuse for doing it. The white, down-trimmed cloak, with certain imposing ornaments on the hood, was assumed with becoming gravity and draped with much advancing and retreating before the glass, as its wearer practised the true Boston gait, elbows back, shoulders forward, a bend and a slide, occasionally varied by a slight skip. But when that bonnet went on, Polly actually held her breath till it was safely landed and the pink rose bloomed above the smooth waves of hair with what Fanny called "a ravishing effect." At this successful stage of affairs Polly found it impossible to resist the loan of a pair of gold bands for the wrists and Fanny's white fan with the little mirror in the middle.

"I can put them in my pocket if I feel too much dressed," said Polly as she snapped on the bracelets, but after a wave or two of the fan she felt that it would be impossible to take them off till the evening was over, so enticing was their glitter.

Fanny also lent her a pair of three-button gloves, which completed her content, and when Tom greeted her with an approving, "Here 's a sight for gods and men! Why, Polly, you 're gorgeous!" she felt that her "fun" had decidedly begun.

"Would n't Polly make a lovely bride?" said Maud, who was revolving about the two girls, trying to decide whether she would have a blue or a white cloak when she grew up and went to operas.

"Faith, and she would! Allow me to congratulate you, Mrs. Sydney," added

Tom, advancing with his wedding-reception bow and a wicked look at Fanny.

"Go away! How dare you?" cried Polly, growing much redder than her rose.

"If we are going to the opera to-night, perhaps we 'd better start, as the carriage has been waiting some time," observed Fan coolly, and sailed out of the room in an unusually lofty manner.

"Don't you like it, Polly?" whispered Tom, as they went down stairs together.

"Very much."

"The deuce you do!"

"I 'm so fond of music, how can I help it?"

"I 'm talking about Syd."

"Well, I 'm not."

"You 'd better try for him."

"I 'll think of it."

"Oh, Polly, Polly, what are you coming to?"

"A tumble into the street, apparently," answered Polly as she slipped a little on the step, and Tom stopped in the middle of his laugh to pilot her safely into the carriage, where Fanny was already seated.

"Here 's richness!" said Polly to herself as she rolled away, feeling as Cinderella probably did when the pumpkin-coach bore her to the first ball, only Polly had two princes to think about, and poor Cinderella, on that occasion, had not even one. Fanny did n't seem inclined to talk much, and

Tom would go on in such a ridiculous manner that Polly told him she would n't listen and began to hum bits of the opera. But she heard every word, nevertheless, and resolved to pay him for his impertinence as soon as possible by showing him what he had lost.

Their seats were in the balcony, and hardly were they settled, when, by one of those remarkable coincidences which are continually occurring in our youth, Mr. Sydney and Fanny's old friend Frank Moore took their places just behind them.

"Oh, you villain! You did it on purpose," whispered Polly as she turned from greeting their neighbors and saw a droll look on Tom's face.

"I give you my word I did n't. It 's the law of attraction, don't you see?"

"If Fan likes it, I don't care."

"She looks resigned, I think."

She certainly did, for she was talking and laughing in the gayest manner with Frank while Sydney was covertly surveying Polly as if he did n't quite understand how the gray grub got so suddenly transformed into a white butterfly. It is a well-known fact that dress plays a very important part in the lives of most women and even the most sensible cannot help owning sometimes how much happiness they owe to a becoming gown, gracefully arranged hair, or a bonnet which brings out the best points in their faces and puts them in a good humor. A great man was once heard to say that what first attracted him to his well-beloved wife was seeing her in a white muslin dress with a blue shawl on the chair behind her. The dress caught his eye, and, stopping to admire that, the wearer's intelligent conversation interested his mind, and in time, the woman's sweetness won his heart. It is not the finest dress which does the most execution, I fancy, but that which best interprets individual taste and character. Wise people understand this, and everybody is more influenced by it than they know, perhaps. Polly was not very wise, but she felt that every one about her found something more attractive than usual in her and modestly attributed Tom's devotion, Sydney's interest, and Frank's undisguised admiration, to the new bonnet or, more likely, to that delightful combination of cashmere, silk, and swan's-down, which, like Charity's mantle, seemed to cover a multitude of sins in

other people's eyes and exalt the little music teacher to the rank of a young lady.

Polly scoffed at this sort of thing sometimes, but to-night she accepted it without a murmur rather enjoyed it in fact, let her bracelets shine before the eyes of all men, and felt that it was good to seem comely in their sight. She forgot one thing, however: that her own happy spirits gave the crowning charm to a picture which every one liked to see a blithe young girl enjoying herself with all her heart. The music and the light, costume and company, excited Polly and made many things possible which at most times she would never have thought of saying or doing. She did not mean to flirt, but somehow "it flirted itself" and she could n't help it, for, once started, it was hard to stop, with Tom goading her on, and Sydney looking at her with that new interest in his eyes. Polly's flirting was such a very mild imitation of the fashionable thing that Trix & Co. would not have recognized it, but it did very well for a beginner, and Polly understood that night wherein the fascination of it lay, for she felt as if she had found a new gift all of a sudden, and was learning how to use it, knowing that it was dangerous, yet finding its chief charm in that very fact.

Tom did n't know what to make of her at first, though he thought the change uncommonly becoming and finally decided that Polly had taken his advice and was "setting her cap for Syd," as he gracefully expressed it. Sydney, being a modest man, thought nothing of the kind, but simply fancied that little Polly was growing up to be a very charming woman. He had known her since her first visit and had always liked the child; this winter he had been interested in the success of her plans and had done what he could to help them, but he never thought of falling in love with Polly till that night. Then he began to feel that he had not fully appreciated his young friend; that she was such a bright and lovable girl, it was a pity she should not always be gay and pretty, and enjoy herself; that she would make a capital wife for somebody, and perhaps it was about time to think of "settling," as his sister often said. These thoughts came and went as he watched the white figure in front, felt the enchantment of the music, and found everybody unusually blithe and beautiful. He had heard the opera many times, but it had never seemed so fine before, perhaps because he had never happened to have had an ingenuous young face so near him in which the varying emotions born of the music, and the romance it portrayed, came and went so eloquently that it was impossible to help reading them. Polly did not know that this was why he leaned down so often to speak to her, with an expression which she did not understand but liked very much

nevertheless.

"Don't shut your eyes, Polly. They are so full of mischief to-night, I like to see them," said Tom, after idly wondering for a minute if she knew how long and curly her lashes were.

"I don't wish to look affected, but the music tells the story so much better than the acting that I don't care to look on half the time," answered Polly, hoping Tom would n't see the tears she had so cleverly suppressed.

"Now I like the acting best. The music is all very fine, I know, but it does seem so absurd for people to go round telling tremendous secrets at the top of their voices. I can't get used to it."

"That 's because you 've more common-sense than romance. I don't mind the absurdity, and quite long to go and comfort that poor girl with the broken heart," said Polly with a sigh as the curtain fell on a most affecting tableau.

"What's-his-name is a great jack not to see that she adores him. In real life we fellows ain't such bats as all that," observed Tom, who had decided opinions on many subjects that he knew very little about, and expressed them with great candor.

A curious smile passed over Polly's face and she put up her glass to hide her eyes, as she said: "I think you are bats sometimes, but women are taught to wear masks, and that accounts for it, I suppose."

"I don't agree. There 's precious little masking nowadays; wish there was a little more sometimes," added Tom, thinking of several blooming damsels whose beseeching eyes had begged him not to leave them to wither on the parent stem.

"I hope not, but I guess there 's a good deal more than any one would suspect."

"What can you know about broken hearts and blighted beings?" asked

Sydney, smiling at the girl's pensive tone.

Polly glanced up at him and her face dimpled and shone again, as she answered, laughing: "Not much; my time is to come."

"I can't imagine you walking about the world with your back hair down, bewailing a hard-hearted lover," said Tom.

"Neither can I. That would n't be my way."

"No; Miss Polly would let concealment prey on her damask cheeks and still smile on in the novel fashion, or turn sister of charity and nurse the heartless lover through small-pox, or some other contagious disease, and die seraphically, leaving him to the agonies of remorse and tardy love."

Polly gave Sydney an indignant look as he said that in a slow satirical way that nettled her very much, for she hated to be thought sentimental.

"That 's not my way either," she said decidedly. "I 'd try to outlive it, and if I could n't, I 'd try to be the better for it. Disappointment need n't make a woman a fool."

"Nor an old maid, if she 's pretty and good. Remember that, and don't visit the sins of one blockhead on all the rest of mankind," said Tom, laughing at her earnestness.

"I don't think there is the slightest possibility of Miss Polly's being either," added Sydney with a look which made it evident that concealment had not seriously damaged Polly's damask cheek as yet.

"There 's Clara Bird. I have n't seen her but once since she was married. How pretty she looks!" and Polly retired behind the big glass again, thinking the chat was becoming rather personal.

"Now, there 's a girl who tried a different cure for unrequited affection from any you mention. People say she was fond of Belle's brother. He did n't

reciprocate but went off to India to spoil his constitution, so Clara married a man twenty years older than she is and consoles herself by being the best-dressed woman in the city."

"That accounts for it," said Polly, when Tom's long whisper ended.

"For what?"

"The tired look in her eyes."

"I don't see it," said Tom, after a survey through the glass.

"Did n't expect you would."

"I see what you mean. A good many women have it nowadays," said Sydney over Polly's shoulder.

"What's she tired of? The old gentleman?" asked Tom.

"And herself," added Polly.

"You 've been reading French novels, I know you have. That 's just the way the heroines go on," cried Tom.

"I have n't read one, but it 's evident you have, young man, and you'd better stop." "I don't care for 'em; only do it to keep up my French. But how came you to be so wise, ma'am?"

"Observation, sir. I like to watch faces, and I seldom see a grown-up one that looks perfectly happy."

"True for you, Polly; no more you do, now I think of it. I don't know but one that always looks so, and there it is."

"Where?" asked Polly, with interest.

"Look straight before you and you 'll see it."

Polly did look, but all she saw was her own face in the little mirror of the fan which Tom held up and peeped over with a laugh in his eyes.

"Do I look happy? I 'm glad of that," And Polly surveyed herself with care.

Both young men thought it was girlish vanity and smiled at its naive display, but Polly was looking for something deeper than beauty and was glad not to find it.

"Rather a pleasant little prospect, hey, Polly?"

"My bonnet is straight, and that 's all I care about. Did you ever see a picture of Beau Brummel?" asked Polly quickly.

"No."

"Well, there he is, modernized." And turning the fan, she showed him himself.

"Any more portraits in your gallery?" asked Sydney, as if he liked to share all the nonsense going.

"One more."

"What do you call it?"

"The portrait of a gentleman." And the little glass reflected a gratified face for the space of two seconds.

"Thank you. I 'm glad I don't disgrace my name," said Sydney, looking down

into the merry blue eyes that thanked him silently for many of the small kindnesses that women never can forget.

"Very good, Polly, you are getting on fast," whispered Tom, patting his yellow kids approvingly.

"Be quiet! Dear me, how warm it is!" And Polly gave him a frown that delighted his soul.

"Come out and have an ice, we shall have time."

"Fan is so absorbed, I could n't think of disturbing her," said Polly, fancying that her friend was enjoying the evening as much as she was a great mistake, by the way, for Fan was acting for effect, and though she longed to turn and join them, would n't do it, unless a certain person showed signs of missing her. He did n't, and Fanny chatted on, raging inwardly over her disappointment, and wondering how Polly could be so gay and selfish.

It was delicious to see the little airs Polly put on, for she felt as if she were somebody else, and acting a part. She leaned back, as if quite oppressed by the heat, permitted Sydney to fan her, and paid him for the service by giving him a flower from her bouquet, proceedings which amused Tom immensely, even while it piqued him a little to be treated like an old friend who did n't count.

"Go in and win, Polly; I 'll give you my blessing," he whispered, as the curtain rose again.

"It 's only part of the fun, so don't you laugh, you disrespectful boy," she whispered back in a tone never used toward Sydney.

Tom did n't quite like the different way in which she treated them, and the word "boy" disturbed his dignity, for he was almost twenty-one and Polly ought to treat him with more respect. Sydney

at the same moment was wishing he was in Tom's place young, comely, and such a familiar friend that Polly would scold and lecture him in the

delightful way she did Tom; while Polly forgot them both when the music began and left them ample time to look at her and think about themselves.

While they waited to get out when all was over Polly heard Fan whisper to Tom: "What do you think Trix will say to this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, the way you 've been going on to-night."

"Don't know, and don't care; it 's only Polly."

"That 's the very thing. She can't bear P."

"Well, I can; and I don't see why I should n't enjoy myself as well as Trix."

"You 'll get to enjoying yourself too much if you are n't careful. Polly 's waked up."

"I 'm glad of it, and so 's Syd."

"I only spoke for your good."

"Don't trouble yourself about me; I get lecturing enough in another quarter and can't stand any more. Come, Polly."

She took the arm he offered her, but her heart was sore and angry, or that phrase, "It 's only Polly," hurt her sadly. "As if I was n't anybody, had n't any feelings, and was only made to amuse or work for people! Fan and Tom are both mistaken and I 'll show them that Polly is awake," she thought, indignantly. "Why shouldn't I enjoy myself as well as the rest? Besides, it 's only Tom," she added with a bitter smile as she thought of Trix.

"Are you tired, Polly?" asked Tom, bending down to look into her face.

"Yes, of being nobody."

"Ah, but you ain't nobody, you 're Polly, and you could n't better that if you tried ever so hard." said Tom, warmly, for he really was fond of Polly, and felt uncommonly so just then.

"I 'm glad you think so, anyway. It 's so pleasant to be liked." And she looked up with her face quite bright again.

"I always did like you, don't you know, ever since that first visit."

"But you teased me shamefully, for all that."

"So I did, but I don't now."

Polly did not answer, and Tom asked, with more anxiety than the occasion required: "Do I, Polly?"

"Not in the same way, Tom," she answered in a tone that did n't sound quite natural.

"Well, I never will again."

"Yes, you will, you can't help it." And Polly's eye glanced at Sydney, who was in front with Fan.

Tom laughed, and drew Polly closer as the crowd pressed, saying, with mock tenderness: "Did n't she like to be chaffed about her sweethearts? Well, she shan't be if I can help it. Poor dear, did she get her little bonnet knocked into a cocked hat and her little temper riled at the same time?"

Polly could n't help laughing, and, in spite of the crush, enjoyed the slow journey from seat to carriage, for Tom took such excellent care of her, she was rather sorry when it was over.

They had a merry little supper after they got home, and Polly gave them a burlesque opera that convulsed her hearers, for her spirits rose again and she was determined to get the last drop of fun before she went back to her humdrum life again.

"I've had a regularly splendid time, and thank you ever so much," she said when the "good-nights" were being exchanged.

"So have I. Let 's go and do it again to-morrow," said Tom, holding the hand from which he had helped to pull a refractory glove.

"Not for a long while, please. Too much pleasure would soon spoil me," answered Polly, shaking her head.

"I don't believe it. Good-night, 'sweet Mistress Milton,' as Syd called you. Sleep like an angel, and don't dream of I forgot, no teasing allowed." And Tom took himself off with a theatrical farewell.

"Now it 's all over and done with," thought Polly as she fell asleep after a long vigil. But it was not, and Polly's fun cost more than the price of gloves and bonnet, for, having nibbled at forbidden fruit, she had to pay the penalty. She only meant to have a good time, and there was no harm in that, but unfortunately she yielded to the various small temptations that beset pretty young girls and did more mischief to others than to herself.

Fanny's friendship grew cooler after that night. Tom kept wishing Trix was half as satisfactory as Polly, and Mr. Sydney began to build castles that had no foundation.