

The Story of Pollyanna

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Chapter 1 Miss Polly

You may sometimes wonder what difference your life can make in our world. After all, you wonder, I am just one person, and the world is so big.

Let me tell you a story about one child, a child who let her light shine in a town with sad and angry and lonesome people. Then you can decide: how much difference can one person make?

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

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

"Nancy!"

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

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

Nancy flushed miserably. She set the pitcher down at once, nearly tipping it over, which did not add to her composure.

"Yes, ma'am. I will, ma'am," she answered, righting the pitcher and turning hastily. "I was only keeping on with my work because you told me this morning to hurry with my dishes."

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

"Yes, ma'am." Nancy stifled a sigh. She was wondering if she could ever please this woman. Nancy had never worked away from home before, but her sick mother had been suddenly widowed. There were three children younger than Nancy, so she now must help with their support. She had been so pleased when she found a job in the kitchen of the great house on the hill. Nancy came from The Corners, six miles away, and she knew Miss Polly Harrington only as the mistress of the old Harrington estate, and one of the wealthiest residents of the town. That was two months ago. Now she knew Miss Polly as a stern, severe-faced woman who frowned if a knife clattered to the floor or if a door banged, but who never thought to smile even when knives and doors were quiet.

"When you've finished your morning work, Nancy," Miss Polly was saying now, "you may prepare the little room at the top of the stairs in the attic and make the bed. Sweep the room and clean it, of course, after you clear out the trunks and boxes."

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

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

“A little girl coming here, Miss Harrington? Oh, won’t that be nice!” cried Nancy, thinking of the sunshine her own little sisters brought to her home.

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

Nancy colored hotly. “Of course, ma’am. It was only that I thought a little girl here might brighten things up for you,” she faltered.

“Thank you,” answered Miss Polly dryly. “I can’t say, however, that I see any immediate need for that.”

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

Miss Polly lifted her chin haughtily. “Well, really, Nancy, just because I happened to have a sister who was silly enough to marry and bring unnecessary children into a world that was already quite full enough, I can’t see how I should particularly want to have the care of them myself. However, as I said before, I hope I know my duty. See that you clean the corners, Nancy,” she finished sharply, as she left the room.

“Yes, ma’am,” sighed Nancy.

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

Dear Madam:

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

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

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

Hoping to hear favorably from you soon, I remain,

Respectfully yours,

Jeremiah O. White

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

As she sat now, with the letter in her hands, her thoughts went back to her sister, Jennie, who had been this child's mother, and to the young minister that Jennie had married so many years ago. Of course, it was wrong of Aunt Polly, but she had never liked Pollyanna's father. He had married her sister and taken her a thousand miles west. Travel was very slow and very difficult, and Aunt Polly had never seen her sister again.

Jennie had written a letter to her sister and told her of the birth of Pollyanna, named in part for her sister Polly. This had been the last time that Jennie had written, and in a few years there had come the news of her death, told in a short, but heartbroken little note from the minister himself, from the little town in the West.

And now Pollyanna was alone. Her father and her mother had both died, and she had no brothers or sisters.

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

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

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