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[Authors](#)
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This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 17 - The Woman Who Did Not Dare

POLLY wrote enthusiastically, Ned answered satisfactorily, and after much corresponding, talking, and planning, it was decided that Tom should go West. Never mind what the business was; it suffices to say that it was a good beginning for a young man like Tom, who, having been born and bred in the most conservative class of the most conceited city in New England, needed just the healthy, hearty, social influences of the West to widen his views and make a man of him.

Of course there was much lamentation among the women, but every one felt it was the best thing for him; so while they sighed they sewed, packed visions of a brilliant future away with his new pocket handkerchiefs, and rejoiced that the way was open before him even in the act of bedewing his boots with tears. Sydney stood by him to the last, "like a man and a brother" (which expression of Tom's gave Fanny infinite satisfaction), and Will felt entirely consoled for Ned's disappointment at his refusal to go and join him, since Tom was to take the place Ned had kept for him.

Fortunately every one was so busy with the necessary preparations that there was no time for romance of any sort, and the four young people worked together as soberly and sensibly as if all sorts of emotions were not bottled up in their respective hearts. But in spite of the silence, the work, and the hurry, I think they came to know one another better in that busy little space of time than in all the years that had gone before, for the best and bravest in each was up and stirring, and the small house was as full of the magnetism of love and friendship, self-sacrifice and enthusiasm, as the world outside was full of spring sunshine and enchantment. Pity that the end should come so soon, but the hour did its work and went its way, leaving a clearer atmosphere behind, though the young folks did not see it then, for their eyes were dim because of the partings that must be.

Tom was off to the West; Polly went home for the summer; Maud was taken to the seaside with Belle; and Fanny left alone to wrestle with housekeeping, "help," and heartache. If it had not been for two things, I fear she never would have stood a summer in town, but Sydney often called, till his vacation came, and a voluminous correspondence with Polly beguiled the long days. Tom wrote once a week to his mother, but the letters were short and not very satisfactory, for men never do tell the interesting little things that women best like to hear. Fanny forwarded her bits of news to Polly. Polly sent back all the extracts from Ned's letters concerning Tom, and by putting the two reports together, they gained the comfortable assurance that Tom was well, in good spirits, hard at work, and intent on coming out strong in spite of all obstacles.

Polly had a quiet summer at home, resting and getting ready in mind and body for another winter's work, for in the autumn she tried her plan again, to the satisfaction of her pupils and the great joy of her friends. She never said much of herself in her letters, and Fanny's first exclamation when they met again, was an anxious "Why, Polly, dear! Have you been sick and never told me?"

"No, I'm only tired, had a good deal to do lately, and the dull weather makes me just a trifle blue. I shall soon brighten up when I get to my work again," answered Polly, bustling about to put away her things.

"You don't look a bit natural. What have you been doing to your precious little self?" persisted Fanny, troubled by the change, yet finding it hard to say wherein it lay.

Polly did not look sick, though her cheeks were thinner and her color paler than formerly, but she seemed spiritless, and there was a tired look in her eyes that went to Fanny's heart.

"I'm all right enough, as you'll see when I'm in order. I'm proper glad to find you looking so well and happy. Does all go smoothly, Fan?" asked Polly, beginning to brush her hair industriously.

"Answer me one question first," said Fanny, looking as if a sudden fear had come over her. "Tell me, truly, have you never repented of your hint to Sydney?"

"Never!" cried Polly, throwing back the brown veil behind which she had half hidden her face at first.

"On your honor, as an honest girl?"

"On my honor, as anything you please. Why do you suspect me of it?" demanded Polly, almost angrily.

"Because something is wrong with you. It's no use to deny it, for you've got the look I used to see in that very glass on my own face when I thought he cared for you. Forgive me, Polly, but I can't help saying it, for it is there, and I want to be as true to you as you were to me if I can."

Fanny's face was full of agitation, and she spoke fast and frankly, for she was trying to be generous and found it very hard. Polly understood now and put her fear at rest by saying almost passionately, "I tell you I don't love him! If he was the only man in the world, I would n't marry him, because I don't want to."

The last three words were added in a different tone, for Polly had checked herself there with a half-frightened look and turned away to hide her face behind her hair again.

"Then if it's not him, it's some one else. You've got a secret, Polly, and I should think you might tell it, as you know mine," said Fanny, unable to rest till everything was told, for Polly's manner troubled her.

There was no answer to her question, but she was satisfied and putting her arm round her friend, she said, in her most persuasive tone, "My precious Polly, do I know him?"

"You have seen him."

"And is he very wise, good, and splendid, dear?"

"No."

"He ought to be if you love him. I hope he is n't bad?" cried Fan, anxiously, still holding Polly, who kept her head obstinately turned.

"I'm suited, that 's enough."

"Oh, please just tell me one thing more. Don't he love back again?"

"No. Now don't say another word, I can't bear it!" and Polly drew herself away, as she spoke in a desperate sort of tone.

"I won't, but now I 'm not afraid to tell you that I think, I hope, I do believe that Sydney cares a little for me. He 's been very kind to us all, and lately he has seemed to like to see me always when he comes and miss me if I 'm gone. I did n't dare to hope anything, till Papa observed something in his manner, and teased me about it. I try not to deceive myself, but it does seem as if there was a chance of happiness for me."

"Thank heaven for that!" cried Polly, with the heartiest satisfaction in her voice. "Now come and tell me all about it," she added, sitting down on the couch with the air of one who has escaped a great peril.

"I 've got some notes and things I want to ask your opinion about, if they really mean anything, you know," said Fanny, getting out a bundle of papers from the inmost recesses of her desk. "There 's a photograph of Tom, came in his last letter. Good, is n't it? He looks older, but that 's the beard and the rough coat, I suppose. Dear old fellow, he is doing so well I really begin to feel quite proud of him."

Fan tossed her the photograph, and went on rummaging for a certain note. She did not see Polly catch up the picture and look at it with hungry eyes, but she did hear something in the low tone in which Polly said, "It don't do him justice," and glancing over her shoulder, Fan's quick eye caught a glimpse of the truth, though Polly was half-turned away from her. Without stopping to think, Fan dropped her letters, took Polly by the shoulders, and cried in a tone full of astonishment, "Polly, is it Tom?"

Poor Polly was so taken by surprise, that she had not a word to say. None were needed; her telltale face answered for her, as well as the impulse which made her hide her head in the sofa cushion, like a foolish ostrich when the hunters are after it.

"Oh, Polly, I am so glad! I never thought of it you are so good, and he 's such a wild boy, I can't believe it but it is so dear of you to care for him."

"Could n't help it tried not to but it was so hard you know, Fan, you know," said a stifled voice from the depths of the very fuzzy cushion which Tom had once condemned.

The last words, and the appealing hand outstretched to her, told Fanny the secret of her friend's tender sympathy for her own love troubles, and seemed so pathetic, that she took Polly in her arms, and cried over her, in the fond, foolish way girls have of doing when their hearts are full, and tears can say more than tongues. The silence never lasts long, however, for the feminine desire to "talk it over" usually gets the better of the deepest emotion. So presently the girls were hard at it, Polly very humble and downcast, Fanny excited and overflowing with curiosity and delight.

"Really my sister! You dear thing, how heavenly that will be," she cried.

"It never will be," answered Polly in a tone of calm despair.

"What will prevent it?"

"Maria Bailey," was the tragic reply.

"What do you mean? Is she the Western girl? She shan't have Tom; I 'll kill her first!"

"Too late, let me tell you is that door shut, and Maud safe?"

Fanny reconnoitered, and returning, listened breathlessly, while Polly poured into her ear the bitter secret which was preying on her soul.

"Has n't he mentioned Maria in his letters?"

"Once or twice, but sort of jokingly, and I thought it was only some little flirtation. He can't have time for much of that fun, he 's so busy."

"Ned writes good, gossipy letters I taught him how and he tells me all that 's going on. When he 'd spoken of this girl several times (they board with her mother, you know), I asked about her, quite carelessly, and he told me she was pretty, good, and well educated, and he thought Tom was rather smitten. That was a blow, for you see, Fan, since Trix broke the engagement, and it was n't wrong to think of Tom, I let myself hope, just a little, and was so happy! Now I must give it up, and now I see how much I hoped, and what a dreadful loss it 's going to be."

Two great tears rolled down Polly's cheeks, and Fanny wiped them away, feeling an intense desire to go West by the next train, wither Maria Bailey with a single look, and bring Tom back as a gift to Polly.

"It was so stupid of me not to guess before. But you see Tom always seems so like a boy, and you are more womanly for your age than any girl I know, so I never thought of your caring for him in that way. I knew you were very good to him, you are to every one, my precious; and I knew that he was fond of you as he is of me, fonder if anything, because he thinks you are perfect; but still I never dreamed of his loving you as more than a dear friend."

"He does n't," sighed Polly.

"Well, he ought; and if I could get hold of him, he should!"

Polly clutched Fan at that, and held her tight, saying sternly, "If you ever breathe a word, drop a hint, look a look that will tell him or any one else about me, I 'll yes, as sure as my name is Mary Milton I 'll proclaim from the housetops that you like Ar " Polly got no further, for Fan's hand was on her mouth, and Fan's alarmed voice vehemently protested, "I won't! I promise solemnly I 'll never say a word to a mortal creature. Don't be so fierce, Polly; you quite frighten me."

"It 's bad enough to love some one who don't love you, but to have them told of it is perfectly awful. It makes me wild just to think of it. Oh, Fan, I 'm getting so ill-tempered and envious and wicked, I don't know what will happen to me."

"I 'm not afraid for you, my dear, and I do believe things will go right, because you are so good to every one. How Tom could help adoring you I don't see. I know he would if

he had stayed longer after he got rid of Trix. I don't think he 's good enough for you, Polly, and I don't quite see how you can care for him so much, when you might have had a person so infinitely superior."

"I don't want a 'superior' person; he 'd tire me if he was like A. S. Besides, I do think Tom is superior to him in many things. Well, you need n't stare; I know he is, or will be. He 's so different, and very young, and has lots of faults, I know, but I like him all the better for it, and he 's honest and brave, and has got a big, warm heart, and I 'd rather have him care for me than the wisest, best, most accomplished man in the world, simply because I love him!"

If Tom could only have seen Polly's face when she said that! It was so tender, earnest, and defiant, that Fanny forgot the defence of her own lover in admiration of Polly's loyalty to hers; for this faithful, all absorbing love was a new revelation to Fanny, who was used to hearing her friends boast of two or three lovers a year, and calculate their respective values, with almost as much coolness as the young men discussed the fortunes of the girls they wished for, but "could not afford to marry." She had thought her love for Sydney very romantic, because she did not really care whether he was rich or poor, though she never dared to say so, even to Polly, for fear of being laughed at. She began to see now what true love was, and to feel that the sentiment which she could not conquer was a treasure to be accepted with reverence, and cherished with devotion.

"I don't know when I began to love Tom, but I found out that I did last winter, and was as much surprised as you are," continued Polly, as if glad to unburden her heart. "I did n't approve of him at all. I thought he was extravagant, reckless, and dandified. I was very much disappointed when he chose Trix, and the more I thought and saw of it, the worse I felt, for Tom was too good for her, and I hated to see her do so little for him, when she might have done so much; because he is one of the men who can be led by their affections, and the woman he marries can make or mar him."

"That 's true!" cried Fan, as Polly paused to look at the picture, which appeared to regard her with a grave, steady look, which seemed rather to belie her assertions.

"I don't mean that he 's weak or bad. If he was, I should hate him; but he does need some one to love him very much, and make him happy, as a good woman best knows how," said Polly, as if answering the mute language of Tom's face.

"I hope Maria Bailey is all he thinks her," she added, softly, "for I could n't bear to have him disappointed again."

"I dare say he don't care a fig for her, and you are only borrowing trouble. What do you say Ned answered when you asked about this inconvenient girl?" said Fanny turning hopeful all at once.

Polly repeated it, and added, "I asked him in another letter if he did n't admire Miss B. as much as Tom, and he wrote back that she was 'a nice girl,' but he had no time for nonsense, and I need n't get my white kids ready for some years yet, unless to dance at Tom's wedding. Since then he has n't mentioned Maria, so I was sure there was something serious going on, and being in Tom's confidence, he kept quiet."

"It does look bad. Suppose I say a word to Tom, just inquire after his heart in a general way, you know, and give him a chance to tell me, if there is anything to tell." "I 'm willing, but you must let me see the letter. I can't trust you not to hint or say too much."

"You shall. I 'll keep my promise in spite of everything, but it will be hard to see things going wrong when a word would set it right."

"You know what will happen if you do," and Polly looked so threatening that Fan trembled before her, discovering that the gentlest girls when roused are more impressive than any shrew; for even turtle doves peck gallantly to defend their nests.

"If it is true about Maria, what shall we do?" said Fanny after a pause.

"Bear it; People always do bear things, somehow," answered Polly, looking as if sentence had been passed upon her.

"But if it is n't?" cried Fan, unable to endure the sight.

"Then I shall wait." And Polly's face changed so beautifully that Fan hugged her on the spot, fervently wishing that Maria Bailey never had been born.

Then the conversation turned to lover number two, and after a long confabulation, Polly gave it as her firm belief that A. S. had forgotten M. M., and was rapidly finding consolation in the regard of F. S. With this satisfactory decision the council ended after the ratification of a Loyal League, by which the friends pledged themselves to stand staunchly by one another, through the trials of the coming year.

It was a very different winter from the last for both the girls. Fanny applied herself to her duties with redoubled ardor, for "A. S." was a domestic man, and admired housewifely accomplishments. If Fanny wanted to show him what she could do toward making a pleasant home, she certainly succeeded better than she suspected, for in spite of many failures and discouragements behind the scenes, the little house became a most attractive place, to Mr. Sydney at least, for he was more the house-friend than ever, and seemed determined to prove that change of fortune made no difference to him.

Fanny had been afraid that Polly's return might endanger her hopes, but Sydney met Polly with the old friendliness, and very soon convinced her that the nipping in the bud process had been effectual, for being taken early, the sprouting affection had died easy, and left room for an older friendship to blossom into a happier love.

Fanny seemed glad of this, and Polly soon set her heart at rest by proving that she had no wish to try her power. She kept much at home when the day's work was done, finding it pleasanter to sit dreaming over book or sewing alone, than to exert herself even to go to the Shaws'.

"Fan don't need me, and Sydney don't care whether I come or not, so I 'll keep out of the way," she would say, as if to excuse her seeming indolence.

Polly was not at all like herself that winter, and those nearest to her saw and wondered at it most. Will got very anxious, she was so quiet, pale and spiritless, and distracted poor Polly by his affectionate stupidity, till she completed his bewilderment by getting cross and scolding him. So he consoled himself with Maud, who, now being in her teens, assumed dignified airs, and ordered him about in a style that afforded him continued amusement and employment.

Western news continued vague, for Fan's general inquiries produced only provokingly unsatisfactory replies from Tom, who sang the praises of "the beautiful Miss Bailey," and professed to be consumed by a hopeless passion for somebody, in such half-comic, half-tragic terms, that the girls could not decide whether it was "all that boy's mischief," or only a cloak to hide the dreadful truth.

"We 'll have it out of him when he comes home in the spring," said Fanny to Polly, as they compared the letters of their brothers, and agreed that "men were the most uncommunicative and provoking animals under the sun." For Ned was so absorbed in business that he ignored the whole Bailey question and left them in utter darkness.

Hunger of any sort is a hard thing to bear, especially when the sufferer has a youthful appetite, and Polly was kept on such a short allowance of happiness for six months,

that she got quite thin and interesting; and often, when she saw how big her eyes were getting, and how plainly the veins on her temples showed, indulged the pensive thought that perhaps spring dandelions might blossom o'er her grave. She had no intention of dying till Tom's visit was over, however, and as the time drew near, she went through such alternations of hope and fear, and lived in such a state of feverish excitement, that spirits and color came back, and she saw that the interesting pallor she had counted on would be an entire failure.

May came at last, and with it a burst of sunshine which cheered even poor Polly's much-enduring heart. Fanny came walking in upon her one day, looking as if she brought tidings of such great joy that she hardly knew how to tell them.

"Prepare yourself somebody is engaged!" she said, in a solemn tone, that made Polly put up her hand as if to ward off an expected blow. "No, don't look like that, my poor dear; it is n't Tom, it 's II!"

Of course there was a rapture, followed by one of the deliciously confidential talks which bosom friends enjoy, interspersed with tears and kisses, smiles and sighs.

"Oh, Polly, though I 've waited and hoped so long I could n't believe it when it came, and don't deserve it; but I will! for the knowledge that he loves me seems to make everything possible," said Fanny, with an expression which made her really beautiful, for the first time in her life.

"You happy girl!" sighed Polly, then smiled and added, "I think you deserve all that 's come to you, for you have truly tried to be worthy of it, and whether it ever came or not that would have been a thing to be proud of."

"He says that is what made him love me," answered Fanny, never calling her lover by his name, but making the little personal pronoun a very sweet word by the tone in which she uttered it. "He was disappointed in me last year, he told me, but you said good things about me and though he did n't care much then, yet when he lost you, and came back to me, he found that you were not altogether mistaken, and he has watched me all this winter, learning to respect and love me better every day. Oh, Polly, when he said that, I could n't bear it, because in spite of all my trying, I 'm still so weak and poor and silly."

"We don't think so; and I know you 'll be all he hopes to find you, for he 's just the husband you ought to have."

"Thank you all the more, then, for not keeping him yourself," said Fanny, laughing the old blithe laugh again.

"That was only a slight aberration of his; he knew better all the time. It was your white cloak and my idiotic behavior the night we went to the opera that put the idea into his head," said Polly, feeling as if the events of that evening had happened some twenty years ago, when she was a giddy young thing, fond of gay bonnets and girlish pranks.

"I 'm not going to tell Tom a word about it, but keep it for a surprise till he comes. He will be here next week, and then we 'll have a grand clearing up of mysteries," said Fanny, evidently feeling that the millennium was at hand.

"Perhaps," said Polly, as her heart fluttered and then sunk, for this was a case where she could do nothing but hope, and keep her hands busy with Will's new set of shirts.

There is a good deal more of this sort of silent suffering than the world suspects, for the "women who dare" are few, the women who "stand and wait" are many. But if work-baskets were gifted with powers of speech, they could tell stories more true and tender than any we read. For women often sew the tragedy or comedy of life into their work as they sit apparently safe and serene at home, yet are thinking deeply, living whole heart-histories, and praying fervent prayers while they embroider pretty trifles or do the weekly mending.