

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[An Old-Fashioned Girl](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)

Chapter 18 - Tom's Success

"Come, Philander, let us be a marching, Every one his true love a searching,"

WOULD be the most appropriate motto for this chapter, because, intimidated by the threats, denunciations, and complaints showered upon me in consequence of taking the liberty to end a certain story as I liked, I now yield to the amiable desire of giving satisfaction, and, at the risk of outraging all the unities, intend to pair off everybody I can lay my hands on.

Occasionally a matrimonial epidemic appears, especially toward spring, devastating society, thinning the ranks of bachelordom, and leaving mothers lamenting for their fairest daughters. That spring the disease broke out with great violence in the Shaw circle, causing paternal heads much bewilderment, as one case after another appeared with alarming rapidity. Fanny, as we have seen, was stricken first, and hardly had she been carried safely through the crisis, when Tom returned to swell the list of victims. As Fanny was out a good deal with her Arthur, who was sure that exercise was necessary for the convalescent, Polly went every day to see Mrs. Shaw, who found herself lonely, though much better than usual, for the engagement had a finer effect upon her constitution than any tonic she ever tried. Some three days after Fan's joyful call Polly was startled on entering the Shaws' door, by Maud, who came tumbling down stairs, sending an avalanche of words before her, "He 's come before he said he should to surprise us! He 's up in mamma's room, and was just saying, 'How 's Polly?' when I heard you come, in your creep-mouse way, and you must go right up. He looks so funny with whiskers, but he 's ever so nice, real big and brown, and he swung me right up when he kissed me. Never mind your bonnet, I can't wait."

And pouncing upon Polly, Maud dragged her away like a captured ship towed by a noisy little steam-tug.

"The sooner it 's over the better for me," was the only thought Polly had time for before she plunged into the room above, propelled by Maud, who cried triumphantly, "There he is! Ain't he splendid?"

For a minute, everything danced before Polly's eyes, as a hand shook hers warmly, and a gruffish voice said heartily, "How are you, Polly?" Then she slipped into a chair beside Mrs. Shaw, hoping that her reply had been all right and proper, for she had not the least idea what she said.

Things got steady again directly, and while Maud expatiated on the great surprise, Polly ventured to look at Tom, feeling glad that her back was toward the light, and his was not. It was not a large room, and Tom seemed to fill it entirely; not that he had grown so very much, except broader in the shoulders, but there was a brisk, genial, free-and-easy air about him, suggestive of a stirring, out-of-door life, with people who kept their eyes wide open, and were not very particular what they did with their arms and legs. The rough-and-ready travelling suit, stout boots, brown face, and manly beard, changed him so much, that Polly could find scarcely a trace of elegant Tom Shaw in the hearty-looking young man who stood with one foot on a chair, while he talked business to his father in a sensible way, which delighted the old gentleman. Polly liked the change immensely, and sat listening to the state of Western trade with as much interest as if it had been the most thrilling romance, for, as he talked, Tom kept looking at her with a nod or a smile so like old times, that for a little while, she forgot Maria Bailey, and was in bliss.

By and by Fanny came flying in, and gave Tom a greater surprise than his had been. He had not the least suspicion of what had been going on at home, for Fan had said to herself, with girlish malice, "If he don't choose to tell me his secrets, I 'm not going to tell mine," and had said nothing about Sydney, except an occasional allusion to his being often there, and very kind. Therefore, when she announced her engagement, Tom looked so staggered for a minute, that Fan thought he did n't like it; but after the first surprise passed, he showed such an affectionate satisfaction, that she was both touched and flattered.

"What do you think of this performance?" asked Tom, wheeling round to Polly, who still sat by Mrs. Shaw, in the shadow of the bed-curtains.

"I like it very much," she said in such a hearty tone, that Tom could not doubt the genuineness of her pleasure.

"Glad of that. Hope you 'll be as well pleased with another engagement that 's coming out before long"; and with an odd laugh, Tom carried Sydney off to his den, leaving the girls to telegraph to one another the awful message, "It is Maria Bailey."

How she managed to get through that evening, Polly never knew, yet it was not a long one, for at eight o'clock she slipped out of the room, meaning to run home alone, and not compel any one to serve as escort. But she did not succeed, for as she stood warming her rubbers at the dining-room fire, wondering pensively as she did so if Maria Bailey had small feet, and if Tom ever put her rubbers on for her, the little overshoes were taken out of her hands, and Tom's voice said, reproachfully, "Did you really mean to run away, and not let me go home with you?"

"I 'm not afraid; I did n't want to take you away," began Polly, secretly hoping that she did n't look too pleased.

"But I like to be taken away. Why, it 's a whole year since I went home with you; do you remember that?" said Tom, flapping the rubbers about without any signs of haste.

"Does it seem long?"

"Everlasting!"

Polly meant to say that quite easily, and smile incredulously at his answer; but in spite of the coquettish little rose-colored hood she wore, and which she knew was very becoming, she did not look or speak gayly, and Tom saw something in the altered face that made him say hastily, "I 'm afraid you 've been doing too much this winter; you look tired out, Polly."

"Oh, no! it suits me to be very busy," and she began to drag on her gloves as if to prove it.

"But it does n't suit me to have you get thin and pale, you know."

Polly looked up to thank him, but never did, for there was something deeper than gratitude in the honest blue eyes, that could not hide the truth entirely. Tom saw it,

flushed all over his brown face, and dropping the rubbers with a crash, took her hands, saying, in his old impetuous way, "Polly, I want to tell you something!"

"Yes, I know, we've been expecting it. I hope you'll be very happy, Tom;" and Polly shook his hands with a smile that was more pathetic than a flood of tears.

"What!" cried Tom, looking as if he thought she had lost her mind.

"Ned told us all about her; he thought it would be so, and when you spoke of another engagement, we knew you meant your own."

"But I did n't! Ned's the man; he told me to tell you. It's just settled."

"Is it Maria?" cried Polly, holding on to a chair as if to be prepared for anything.

"Of course. Who else should it be?"

"He did n't say you talked about her most and so we thought " stammered Polly, falling into a sudden flutter.

"That I was in love? Well, I am, but not with her."

"Oh!" and Polly caught her breath as if a dash of cold water had fallen on her, for the more in earnest Tom grew, the blunter he became.

"Do you want to know the name of the girl I've loved for more than a year? Well, it's Polly!" As he spoke, Tom stretched out his arms to her, with the sort of mute eloquence that cannot be resisted, and Polly went straight into them, without a word.

Never mind what happened for a little bit. Love scenes, if genuine, are indescribable; for to those who have enacted them, the most elaborate description seems tame, and to those who have not, the simplest picture seems overdone. So romancers had better let imagination paint for them that which is above all art, and leave their lovers to themselves during the happiest minutes of their lives.

Before long, Tom and Polly were sitting side by side, enjoying the blissful state of mind which usually follows the first step out of our work-a-day world, into the glorified region wherein lovers rapturously exist for a month or two. Tom just sat and looked at Polly as if he found it difficult to believe that the winter of his discontent had ended in this glorious spring. But Polly, being a true woman, asked questions, even while she laughed and cried for joy.

"Now, Tom, how could I know you loved me when you went away and never said a word?" she began, in a tenderly reproachful tone, thinking of the hard year she had spent.

"And how could I have the courage to say a word, when I had nothing on the face of the earth to offer you but my worthless self?" answered Tom, warmly.

"That was all I wanted!" whispered Polly, in a tone which caused him to feel that the race of angels was not entirely extinct.

"I've always been fond of you, my Polly, but I never realized how fond till just before I went away. I was n't free, you know, and besides I had a strong impression that you liked Sydney in spite of the damper which Fan hinted you gave him last winter. He's such a capital fellow, I really don't see how you could help it."

"It is strange; I don't understand it myself; but women are queer creatures, and there's no accounting for their tastes," said Polly, with a sly look, which Tom fully appreciated.

"You were so good to me those last days, that I came very near speaking out, but could n't bear to seem to be offering you a poor, disgraced sort of fellow, whom Trix would n't have, and no one seemed to think worth much. 'No,' I said to myself, 'Polly ought to have the best; if Syd can get her, let him, and I won't say a word. I'll try to be better worthy her friendship, anyway; and perhaps, when I've proved that I can do something, and am not ashamed to work, then, if Polly is free, I shan't be afraid to try my chance.' So I held my tongue, worked like a horse, satisfied myself and others that I could get my living honestly, and then came home to see if there was any hope for me."

"And I was waiting for you all the time," said a soft voice close to his shoulder; for Polly was much touched by Tom's manly efforts to deserve her.

"I did n't mean to do it the first minute, but look about me a little, and be sure Syd was all right. But Fan's news settled that point, and just now the look in my Polly's face settled the other. I could n't wait another minute, or let you either, and I could n't help stretching out my arms to my little wife, God bless her, though I know I don't deserve her."

Tom's voice got lower and lower as he spoke, and his face was full of an emotion of which he need not be ashamed, for a very sincere love ennobled him, making him humble, where a shallower affection would have been proud of its success. Polly understood this, and found the honest, hearty speech of her lover more eloquent than poetry itself. Her hand stole up to his cheek, and she leaned her own confidently against the rough coat, as she said, in her frank simple way, "Tom, dear, don't say that, as if I was the best girl in the world. I've got ever so many faults, and I want you to know them all, and help me cure them, as you have your own. Waiting has not done us any harm, and I love you all the better for your trial. But I'm afraid your year has been harder than mine, you look so much older and graver than when you went away. You never would complain; but I've had a feeling that you were going through a good deal more than any of us guessed."

"Pretty tough work at first, I own. It was all so new and strange, I'm afraid I should n't have stood it if it had not been for Ned. He'd laugh and say 'Pooh!' if he heard me say it, but it's true nevertheless that he's a grand fellow and helped me through the first six months like a well, a brother as he is. There was no reason why he should go out of his way to back up a shiftless party like me, yet he did, and made many things easy and safe that would have been confoundedly hard and dangerous if I'd been left to myself. The only way I can explain it is that it's a family trait, and as natural to the brother as it is to the sister."

"It's a Shaw trait to do the same. But tell me about Maria; is Ned really engaged to her?"

"Very much so; you'll get a letter full of raptures tomorrow; he had n't time to send by me, I came off in such a hurry. Maria is a sensible, pretty girl and Ned will be a happy old fellow."

"Why did you let us think it was you?"

"I only teased Fan a little; I did like Maria, for she reminded me of you sometimes, and was such a kind, cosy little woman I could n't help enjoying her society after a hard day's work. But Ned got jealous, and then I knew that he was in earnest, so I left him a clear field, and promised not to breathe a word to any one till he had got a Yes or No from his Maria."

"I wish I 'd known it," sighed Polly. "People in love always do such stupid things!"

"So they do; for neither you nor Fan gave us poor fellows the least hint about Syd, and there I 've been having all sorts of scares about you."

"Serves us right; brothers and sisters should n't have secrets from each other."

"We never will again. Did you miss me very much?"

"Yes, Tom; very, very much."

"My patient little Polly!"

"Did you really care for me before you went?"

"See if I did n't;" and with great pride Tom produced a portly pocket-book stuffed with business-like documents of a most imposing appearance, opened a private compartment, and took out a worn-looking paper, unfolded it carefully, and displayed a small brown object which gave out a faint fragrance.

"That 's the rose you put in the birthday cake, and next week we 'll have a fresh one in another jolly little cake which you 'll make me; you left it on the floor of my den the night we talked there, and I 've kept it ever since. There 's love and romance for you!"

Polly touched the little relic, treasured for a year, and smiled to read the words "My Polly's rose," scribbled under the crumbling leaves.

"I did n't know you could be so sentimental," she said, looking so pleased that he did not regret confessing his folly.

"I never was till I loved you, my dear, and I 'm not very bad yet, for I don't wear my posy next my heart, but where I can see it every day, and so never forget for whom I am working. Should n't wonder if that bit of nonsense had kept me economical, honest, and hard at it, for I never opened my pocket-book that I did n't think of you."

"That 's lovely, Tom," and Polly found it so touching that she felt for her handkerchief; but Tom took it away, and made her laugh instead of cry, by saying, in a wheedlesome tone, "I don't believe you did as much, for all your romance. Did you, now?"

"If you won't laugh, I 'll show you my treasures. I began first, and I 've worn them longest."

As she spoke, Polly drew out the old locket, opened it, and showed the picture Tom gave her in the bag of peanuts cut small and fitted in on one side on the other was a curl of reddish hair and a black button. How Tom laughed when he saw them!

"You don't mean you 've kept that frightful guy of a boy all this time? Polly! Polly! you are the most faithful 'loveress,' as Maud says, that was ever known."

"Don't flatter yourself that I 've worn it all these years, sir; I only put it in last spring because I did n't dare to ask for one of the new ones. The button came off the old coat you insisted on wearing after the failure, as if it was your duty to look as shabby as possible, and the curl I stole from Maud. Are n't we silly?"

He did not seem to think so, and after a short pause for refreshments, Polly turned serious, and said anxiously, "When must you go back to your hard work?"

"In a week or two; but it won't seem drudgery now, for you 'll write every day, and I shall feel that I 'm working to get a home for you. That will give me a forty-man-power, and I 'll pay up my debts and get a good start, and then Ned and I will be married and go into partnership, and we 'll all be the happiest, busiest people in the West."

"It sounds delightful; but won't it take a long time, Tom?"

"Only a few years, and we need n't wait a minute after Syd is paid, if you don't mind beginning rather low down, Polly."

"I 'd rather work up with you, than sit idle while you toil away all alone. That 's the way father and mother did, and I think they were very happy in spite of the poverty and hard work."

"Then we 'll do it by another year, for I must get more salary before I take you away from a good home here. I wish, oh, Polly, how I wish I had a half of the money I 've wasted, to make you comfortable, now."

"Never mind, I don't want it; I 'd rather have less, and know you earned it all yourself," cried Polly, as Tom struck his hand on his knee with an acute pang of regret at the power he had lost.

"It 's like you to say it, and I won't waste any words bewailing myself, because I was a fool. We will work up together, my brave Polly, and you shall yet be proud of your husband, though he is 'poor Tom Shaw.' "

She was as sure of that as if an oracle had foretold it, and was not deceived; for the loving heart that had always seen, believed, and tried to strengthen all good impulses in Tom, was well repaid for its instinctive trust by the happiness of the years to come.

"Yes," she said, hopefully, "I know you will succeed, for the best thing a man can have, is work with a purpose in it, and the will to do it heartily."

"There is one better thing, Polly," answered Tom, turning her face up a little, that he might see his inspiration shining in her eyes.

"What is it, dear?"

"A good woman to love and help him all his life, as you will me, please God."

"Even though she is old-fashioned," whispered Polly, with happy eyes, the brighter for their tears, as she looked up at the young man, who, through her, had caught a glimpse of the truest success, and was not ashamed to owe it to love and labor, two beautiful old fashions that began long ago, with the first pair in Eden.

Lest any of my young readers who have honored Maud with their interest should suffer the pangs of unsatisfied curiosity as to her future, I will add for their benefit that she did not marry Will, but remained a busy, lively spinster all her days, and kept house for her father in the most delightful manner.

Will's ministerial dream came to pass in the course of time, however, and a gentle, bright-eyed lady ruled over the parsonage, whom the reverend William called his "little Jane."

Farther into futurity even this rash pen dares not proceed, but pauses here, concluding in the words of the dear old fairy tales, "And so they were married, and all lived happily till they died."