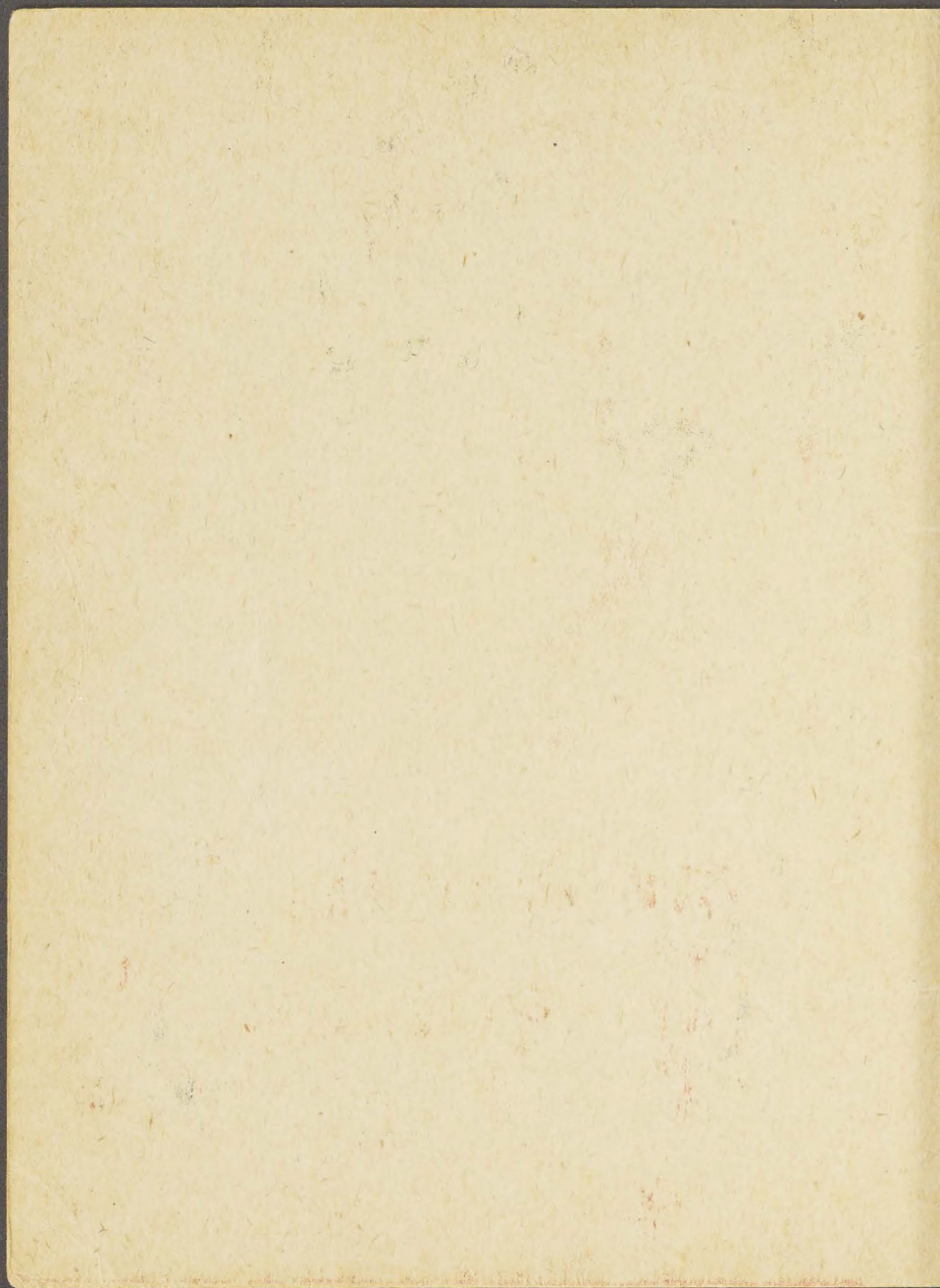




**A String  
of Pearls**  
by I. M. Purkiss

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*By I. M. Purkiss*



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# A String of Pearls

By I. M. Purkiss

## CHAPTER ONE.

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE; POLLY REMEMBERS A PROMISE.

**P**OLLY! Polly! *Poll—ly!*" Dick's voice grew louder with each repetition, but there was no answer. If the hayloft above him concealed any Polly, it was a silent one.

And yet Dick, standing at the foot of the ladder, looked doubtfully at the open trapdoor. He had searched the house, and Polly *must* be somewhere.

"Polly!" he tried again, giving the ladder a vicious little shake. "You may as well answer, for I'm coming up, anyway."

Up in the loft a small white-faced girl turned her head noiselessly and watched the trapdoor with wideopen, frightened eyes. But the only sound which reached Dick's ears was the steady beat, beat, of the rain.

After a second, Polly heard the barn door slam. With a sigh of relief, she shifted her cramped position and looked down once more at the white pearls lying in her lap. Oh, how pure, how beautiful they were! Polly lifted a handful and let them slip through her fingers, her blue eyes bright with admiration.

But Dick might come back at any moment to carry out

his threat of climbing the ladder, and it would never do to be found here with the pearls in her lap.

In a sudden panic she emptied the beads into a paste-board box, which she thrust hastily into the pocket of her raincoat.

At the barn door Polly paused irresolutely. If she went to the house, Dick would ask her where she had been, and she had no excuse to offer for refusing to answer him. But if she slipped along the west side, where the parlor blinds were closed, and so through the front gate, she could run down to Dr. Sinclare's, and Dick would never mistrust. And—well, the confession had to be made, and the sooner it was over, the better.

"Is Miss Bernie in, Susan?" Polly asked as Mrs. Sinclare's maid opened the door.

"No. She's gone," Susan answered unsteadily.

"Gone! Where?" exclaimed Polly in astonishment.

But before Susan could answer, Mrs. Sinclare's voice broke in, "Is that you, Polly, out in all this rain? Come right in here, dear."

There were two ladies in the sitting room when Polly entered, for Mrs. Sinclare had a friend, a Mrs. Turnbull from Quebec, staying with her. Polly noticed that their eyes were quite red.

"Bernie's been gone about an hour," said Mrs. Sinclare, drawing forward a chair for her young guest. "Her father telegraphed early this morning, and I sent her off on the ten-thirty. She was dreadfully anxious to run up and say good-by to you before she went, but I had so little time to get her things packed I couldn't spare her. And besides, the rain. I couldn't have her starting off in wet clothes. But she left a note for you, and I'm sure she'll write to you from Liverpool."



She had crossed her heart, when Bernie had slipped the little parcel into her hand. (See page 6.)

"Has she gone for good—to the Old Country, I mean?" gasped Polly.

"Yes, she started for the Old Country. Her father had to go two weeks earlier than he expected, and they are sailing at daybreak tomorrow. But it is not for always, you know, Polly. She will stay six months or a year with her grandmother, but her home will always be here with her uncle and me. Here is the note she left you, dear. I'm afraid she wrote it in a hurry."

Yes, the note had evidently been written in a hurry. It was little like Bernice's neat penmanship.

Through a mist of tears, Polly made out the hastily scrawled words.

"Oh, Polly, Polly, remember you promised, and you crossed your heart. It's a sacred trust. Dear, dear Polly, good-by."

Her promise, her trust! For a moment, in the shock of the unexpected tidings, Polly had forgotten. Now she was conscious, once more, of the pearls in her pocket, the broken string for which she must account to Bernie Sinclare.

Yes, she had crossed her heart, as a sacred pledge of secrecy, when Bernie had slipped the little parcel into her hand.

It had happened last evening when Polly had run over for a moment after dinner to borrow an arithmetic, and Bernie had run upstairs to get it.

When she had come down again, her cheeks were quite red, Polly remembered, and she had drawn her out on the front step before she spoke. Then she had said, a little breathlessly, while she slipped a small white box into Polly's hand, "You're to take this, Polly, and keep it for me till I ask you for it. And you're to hide it and cross your



heart never to let anybody know. Do you hear, Polly? Cross your heart, *quick*."

Polly had crossed her heart. Then she had gone back home and unlocked her bureau drawer, intending to hide the box far back in a corner. As she had stood wondering about the strange request, half unconsciously toying with the rubber band around the box, the band had broken and the contents of the box had spilled on the carpet at her feet.

With a gasp of surprise and admiration, Polly had picked up the long, shimmering string of pearls. Pearl beads! And such beauties! Why, she was sure they must have cost four or five dollars at the very least. And they had such an odd clasp, the two tiny gold hands clasping a pearl. Wherever had Bernie got them!

Unable to resist the temptation, Polly had lifted and fastened them about her neck, turning this way and that to admire the effect. It was then that the real tragedy had happened. For as Polly had lifted a hand glass to see the effect of the little gold clasp at the back of her neck, the chain caught on a corner of the open drawer. There was a short, sharp crack, and then a sudden shower of the little white globes.

That was the secret of the confession that Polly had meant to make to Bernie. But Bernie was out of reach, and Polly was left with a couple of handfuls of loose beads and a promise pledge on a crossed heart.

"Well, I'll just have to lock them up in my bureau drawer and write to Bernie about breaking the string," she told herself, as she rose to go.

"What's all this about thieves at Mrs. Sinclair's?" Mr. Trent asked, helping himself to soup several hours later.

"Thieves!" exclaimed three interested voices.

"Why, I was there this morning," Polly added in astonishment.

"What! You haven't heard? Young Morgan was telling me something about it as we came up on the car. Perhaps it's a mistake, Polly, if you were there this afternoon—"

"This morning," corrected Polly.

"Oh! It was this afternoon, I imagine, the pearls were missed."

"Pearls!" Mrs. Trent echoed, in surprise.

Pearls! At the fateful word Polly's heart stood still, and then went on with a sickening leap that sent the blood racing through her veins and turned her cheeks from white to crimson.

Dick opened his mouth, but noticing Polly's emotion, was too surprised to speak.

"Well, if that isn't just like a girl," he told himself.

"Always getting fussed up about everything."

Then father spoke again, and Dick forgot his sister.

"It appears they belong to a friend who is stopping with Mrs. Sinclair. She intended wearing them to a dinner party this evening, but when she opened her jewel case, they were missing!"

"Were they very valuable?" inquired Mrs. Trent.

"Well, yes. I believe so. They've communicated with the police, I understand."

## CHAPTER TWO.

ALONE WITH A SECRET; A PERILOUS CLIMB.

HOW she got through that dinner, Polly never could have told.

What did it mean? Where could Bernie have got the pearls? Mrs. Turnbull's? Oh, no. They couldn't be Mrs. Turnbull's. They *couldn't*. Bernie wouldn't— That was too horrible to think of. Yet, Mrs. Turnbull's pearls were gone, and the police— What had father said about the police?

No, Polly never knew how she got through her dinner, eating her food mechanically, even managing to answer when spoken to.

She was thankful when dinner was over at last, and she could make her escape to the study. There she sat till bedtime with her history open before her, but her mind was going constantly over and over the same old theme, striving vainly to stifle this awful fear that clutched at her heart. For the pearls couldn't be Mrs. Turnbull's—they *couldn't*—and yet— Oh, if only Bernie were at home instead of far away, out of reach!

But Bernie *was* far away, at that very moment boarding the great steamer that was to carry her across the ocean. And here, in the little study at home, Polly sat alone with her secret, weighed down by a sense of responsibility and fear almost too great to be borne. For if—oh, it couldn't be true!—but *if* the pearls hidden away in her bureau drawer belonged to Mrs. Turnbull, what might not happen if they were found in her possession?



The perilous ascent was made at last, and the little box shoved far back into the corner. (See page 13.)

With a quick, frightened movement, Polly lifted her hand to her throat to feel for the key of her bureau drawer. It was there, safe under her blouse.

When the clock struck ten, Polly closed her history, and began to gather up her books.

"Oh, Polly!" mother called after her as she went through the hall. "Just while I think of it, dear. I'm going to begin cleaning next week, and Monday I'm going at the bureau drawers. I want you to give me your key so that I can get yours done in the morning while you're at school."

"All right, Mother."

Polly's heart was beating tumultuously as she closed the door of her bedroom.

If there was one thing about which Mrs. Trent was thorough, it was the semi-annual cleaning. Every spring and fall she insisted on going through every nook and corner of the big house. Those were times of special trial to Polly, for mother was burdened with no foolish sentiment, and many a treasured trifle was sacrificed to the flames if Polly could give no sufficiently good reason why it should be spared.

But tonight Polly was fretting over no childish treasures. The pearls! Where would they be safe from discovery? Where in all the big, roomy house was there a hiding place secure from mother's eyes?

For hours the little girl tossed wearily to and fro before she fell, at last, into a restless, troubled sleep.

It was a pale, heavy-eyed Polly who came down to breakfast Sunday morning.

"My head aches," she replied in answer to mother's startled inquiries.

"Then you had better not go to church," mother said,

and Polly was glad enough to be left at home. She stood at the parlor window, watching till father and mother and Dick had turned the corner.

But the instant they were out of sight, she flew upstairs. A little later with the pasteboard box hidden in the front of her blouse, she stole through the kitchen, carefully choosing a time when Jane was busy in the dining room.

In all the big house she was leaving, there was no safe hiding place for the precious packet. But in the barn—Surely, *surely*, out there, there must be some spot where it could lie concealed till this spring chaos was over, and the key of her drawer was once more safe in her own keeping.

At the top of the stairs leading to the loft, Polly looked about her with a slight feeling of dismay.

Oh, if only hay had been up to the lower rafters as she had often known it to be. Then there would have been deep, dark corners, into which she could have pushed the box far down out of sight.

But today there was only a very little hay scattered over the center of the floor, and the corners of the room lay revealed to her, bare and shadowless.

Far up above her head was spread a perfect network of beams. One above the other, they stretched across the big empty loft, and it was to these that Polly now looked for help.

That highest one, there, where it joined the sloping roof! It was high up, and the shadows there were deep. Perhaps, if the box were pushed far back—

To climb the rafters was no new thing to Polly, but the spot she had chosen was far higher than she had ever before attempted, and her head ached horribly. Long before she reached her goal, drawing herself carefully from beam to beam, she felt sick and dizzy.

The perilous ascent was made at last, and the little box shoved far back into the corner. As Polly started to withdraw her arm, she found her sleeve caught on a nail. She was forced to wrench it free, leaving a little square of the blue striped gingham behind it. But as it was an old dress whose usefulness was almost over, Polly wasted no tears over it. She carefully made her way back to the floor of the loft, where she moved hurriedly from place to place to assure herself that the package was not visible from any point.

Polly was lying on the lounge when the others came in from church, Dick talking excitedly about the detective who had been sent for. Mother exclaimed when she saw Polly's hot cheeks and bright eyes. "Did you have your rubbers on when you were out yesterday, Polly?"

"I was only as far as Bernie's," Polly answered evasively, "and I ran every step of the way."

"Oh, Polly! In those thin shoes!" exclaimed mother.

It was quite evident that Polly's foolishness had brought its own punishment. Her head was aching worse, and she began to feel stiff and sore all over.

"Why, Polly, you've torn your dress," said mother as she leaned over her.

"Looks as though somebody had bitten a hunk out," laughed Dick, who stood at the foot of the lounge.

Polly made no answer but put her hand to her throbbing head, and mother forgot the torn sleeve in her anxiety for her little daughter.

During the afternoon Polly's head grew worse and worse till at last mother put her to bed and sent for Dr. Sinclare.

All night long the little girl tossed to and fro, her head racked with pain and her heart sick with fear.

In the morning Dr. Sinclair came again, and looked very grave as he stood by Polly's bedside. "Is she worrying about anything?" he asked the mother when she had followed him into the hall.

Mrs. Trent shook her head.

When Dick came from school at noon, he hung over the foot of Polly's bed for a few moments. "Did Dr. Sinclair say anything about the pearls?" he asked mother, who sat by the window with her sewing.

"No, they were not mentioned."

"Did—did you hear anything?" Polly spoke with an effort, and her voice was strangely weak.

"Only that they say at the school that they suspect the maid."

"Susie!" Polly struggled up on her elbow and stared.

"Lie down, dear," said mother gently as she motioned Dick away.

"But, oh, Mother, will they put Susie in jail?"

Mother bent soothingly over her. "I trust that Susie can prove her innocence, dear," she replied. "Lie still, and think no more about it."

The first part of mother's directions Polly carried out faithfully, so faithfully that mother thought she was sleeping, but behind the closed eyes the tired brain was going over and over the problem.

Susie suspected of stealing! Susie, who was always so happy and good-natured, accused of having the pearls that were stored away in the loft— No, they were not the ones. They were some other pearls. Whose were they? Oh, yes, Mrs. Turnbull's. And they were in the loft. How could Susie have them when Bernie was hiding with them up in the loft? Thus poor Polly's mind wandered.



### CHAPTER THREE.

DICK SHARES THE SECRET AND PROTECTS POLLY.

POLLY was delirious. Ever since Monday noon her mind had been wandering, and now it was Tuesday evening. Dick, sitting over his books in the study, could hear the weak little voice rambling on and on although he was too far away to catch the words.

The boy's heart was very heavy. He had always made much of Polly in his boyish, teasing way, but he had never realized till now how very dear and precious his sister was to him.

Life without Polly! The idea was unbearable. He pushed back his arithmetic and leaned his elbows on the table, his face hidden in his hands as he listened to the low murmur from above.

What was she talking about now, he wondered. The pearls? They had been the burden of her cry all along. Sometimes her mind would wander to other things—to school and Bernie and the countless little pleasures and trials that go to make up a schoolgirl's life. But always she came back to the one thing—the pearls.

“Quite natural,” Dr. Sinclair had said when mother commented on the fact. “In her weak state, it is not at all surprising that the theft should have taken a hold on her imagination. And her last conscious moments were filled with a vision of Susan under arrest. Quite natural, quite natural.”

On his way up to bed, Dick stopped for a moment in the

open doorway of Polly's room, and mother beckoned him in to say good-night.

As he stood a second by the bed, looking down on the hot, flushed little face, Polly turned and looked at him with unnaturally bright eyes.

"She didn't do it, Bernie," she said clearly.

Then, as Dick did not reply, she repeated louder, "I say she didn't do it."

It was so clear that she was taking him for Bernie, and that she expected an answer, that Dick spoke soothingly, "No, dear, I know she didn't."

"Susie *couldn't*, you know," she said, in a quieter tone, "because they're quite, quite safe." Then she dropped her voice to a whisper so that only Dick, standing close to her, caught the words, "They're in the loft."

The next day two loads of hay father had ordered to fill up the big empty loft arrived, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Dick, who had not had the heart to go to school, went out to help unload them.

Standing on top of the load, the man passed the hay up through the window while Dick, inside the loft, received it and tossed it back out of the way. It was hard work, and despite the fact that he had had three hours to rest between the unloading of the two racks, Dick began to be conscious that his back was aching.

As the empty wagon rattled away out of the yard, Dick, standing on the pile of hay he had built up, stretched his tired muscles by raising himself on his toes, his closed fists lifted to the fullest extent of his strong, young arms. And standing up with his head thrown well back, he made a discovery. Shoved back in a corner, far above his head, was a small, square white object.

The boy stared at it in surprise. It was strange that he



Polly turned and looked at him with unnaturally bright eyes.  
(See page 16.)

had never seen it before, unless—Yes, that was it. Only from this one point was it visible. If he shifted his position ever so little or if he even stooped the merest trifle, it disappeared entirely.

Whatever could it be? Dick was not one to remain long in doubt. A quick spring, and he had caught the nearest beam with both hands. He swung himself higher and higher until he reached his goal at last, and the little paste-board box that Polly had believed so securely hidden lay in his hand.

The box was firmly tied, but Dick, sitting astride the beam, had no scruples about undoing the knot and lifting the cover.

Then, all at once, Dick's heart seemed to leap into his throat, and he felt cold all over. Pearls! Mrs. Turnbull's pearls! How had they come here?

But the next second he laughed, and the color stole back into his cheeks. What a ninny he was to be so startled at sight of a few beads—worthless enough, in all probability! It was a necklace that Mrs. Turnbull had lost. He had read the description a dozen times on the little handbills that had been thrown about, a rope of pearls with an odd clasp, two tiny gold hands holding a large pearl. No doubt these were some treasures of Polly's. What freak had led her to climb away up here with them? Poor little Polly! Would she ever climb again? Would she—

His mind full of thoughts of his little sick sister, Dick held the box of pearls in his hand, half unconsciously stirring them about with his finger. Then, up from the depth of the box, up into plain view, came something that seemed to stop Dick's heart beats altogether and to send the blood racing from his cheeks. That something was a gold clasp—two tiny hands holding a large pearl.

His first suspicion had been right. They were Mrs. Turnbull's pearls. But how had they gotten here? Who would think of using his father's barn as a hiding place? Who would dare?

Dick turned the box over and over, examining it on every side, but its plain white sides gave no answer to the riddle. Then he leaned forward and thrust his hand into the hiding place, on the chance that there might be some clue lurking there.

A clue there was, sure enough. When he withdrew his hand, it contained a tiny scrap of familiar blue cloth, a piece of Polly's well-known dress, undoubtedly the piece that had been missing from her sleeve Sunday morning.

Polly! It was Polly, who had hidden them here. But where could she have gotten them? She could not have known—before him flashed a vision of Polly's face as he had seen it at dinner the night father had told them of the theft while in his ears rang again the strange tones of Polly's voice as he had heard it last night.

"She didn't take them. Susie *couldn't*, you know, because they are quite, quite safe." And then the whisper, "They're in the loft!" *She knew*. Polly had put them here, and Polly *knew*.

Long after he had swung himself down from the rafters, Dick lay, face down in the hay, battling with an agony of doubt and uncertainty, the tiny patch of familiar cloth, the evidence of Polly's guilt, crushed in the palm of his hand.

Polly a thief! No, no, the thought was unbearable. It was dreadful, horrible to think of such a thing—more than horrible when little Polly was lying so ill and helpless and unable to protect herself from the cruel suspicion. Yet Polly had put them there. Knowing that they belonged to Mrs. Turnbull, Polly had deliberately climbed up the raft-

ers and hidden them away. What did it mean? What *could* it mean, except—No, it *couldn't* be that. Oh, Polly wouldn't—

One thing only was clear to Dick as he sat up at last, pushing back the hair from his aching forehead and looking with reddened eyes about the already darkening loft. The pearls must be returned, and that without delay. But how?

To carry them boldly to Mrs. Turnbull and tell the truth about them, so far as he knew it, would lead to a lot of inquiry and conjecture that must undoubtedly implicate Polly.

The mail? Even if he had been able successfully to disguise his handwriting, which he doubted, the parcel was too large to drop into the letter box, and to hand it in at the wicket was out of the question.

Yet some way the pearls must be returned, this very evening, he determined. The thought of keeping them overnight was insufferable to his overstrung nerves.

In the general anxiety over Polly, Dick's red eyes and unusual loss of appetite at dinner, were allowed to pass without remark.

## CHAPTER FOUR.

### THE PEARLS RETURNED; DICK UNDER SUSPICION.

IN the study after dinner Dick got out his books, as usual, but he did not get to work. The clouds had appeared threatening all day. Now he could hear the heavy swish of rain against the window. Drawing aside the curtain, he looked out. Owing to the rain, the night had closed in early, and it was already dark. He was glad. Anxious to rid himself of his unwelcome find as soon as possible, he hailed the unexpected blackness with delight. Even the rain, which at another time might have been considered inconvenient, was now welcomed as a friend since it would lessen his chances of meeting anyone.

Listening a moment, to make sure that the coast was clear, the boy slipped into the hall. He buttoned his coat to the chin as he went, pulled his cap down over his eyes, and let himself silently out of the front door. No, there was little chance of his meeting anyone. Necessity alone could drive one abroad on a night like this.

The front windows of Dr. Sinclare's house were lighted, and through the lace curtains Dick, standing in the shelter of a big maple tree, could see Mrs. Sinclare and Mrs. Turnbull moving about.

His idea had been to lay the parcel on the doorstep, ring the bell, and get away before the door opened. But now that plan scarcely seemed feasible. Mrs. Sinclare, moving about the parlor, might open the door with a promptness that would hinder his chance of escape. Besides, between

him and the door lay a wide band of light from the window, and who could tell what eyes might be watching from the houses across the street. No. To cross that band of light meant a danger of discovery too great to be risked.

The back door? Dick moved till he could command a view of the back of the house. It was dark. Here, then, was his chance. He would slip around, lay the parcel on the back instead of the front doorstep, ring the kitchen bell, and make his escape through the lane that ran along the back of the house.

Taking care to keep out of range of the light from the windows, Dick vaulted the fence. He crossed the orchard, making first for the little gate leading into the narrow lane, which he carefully unhooked. He left it open in preparation for a hurried exit.

Then he stole around to the back of the house, slipped up on the little porch, carefully placed the package in a conspicuous position near the door, rang a furious peal at the bell, and rushed headlong across the back yard. Pell-mell he ran through the little gate, turned sharply to the left, and dashed into a gentleman who was hurrying in the opposite direction.

"I beg your pardon." In the shock of surprise the words had slipped involuntarily from the boy's lips. The next second he could have bitten his tongue for its foolishness. But it was too late.

Dr. Sinclare, taking a short cut home through the rain, had recognized Dick's voice at once. "Hello! Is it you, Dick? No harm done, my boy. A bad night!"

Then he was gone, leaving Dick standing petrified in the rain and darkness. What now? The lane had a blind end just beyond the gate through which he had come. Dr. Sinclare, when he stopped to think, would know that Dick



could have come from nowhere but his own house. There could be no doubt as to who had left the pearls.

Frightened and miserable, the boy made his way home, crept into the house, and back to the study.

Pretty soon the front doorbell rang. Dick heard father cross the hall. There was a sound of voices, then silence again as father led the visitor into the library and closed the door.

Cowering in his chair, Dick waited the summons he felt was coming.

It came almost sooner than he expected. White and miserable, he entered the library, where father and Mr. Sinclare were sitting together, the box of pearls on the table beside them.

"Dick," father asked gravely as he motioned toward the box on the table, "do you know anything about this?"

"Yes, sir," Dick answered nervously.

"Well, we are waiting for you," father said after a second of silence. "What have you to say about it?"

Aware that there was no escape, the boy lifted his head and looked his father full in the face. "I found them," he replied, "and tonight I left them on Dr. Sinclare's doorstep."

"Found them! Where?"

"I should rather not say, Father."

"But, Dick, this is a question that must be answered," father said gravely.

"I can't answer it. Please don't ask me."

"But I *must* ask you, Dick. Come, my boy, don't be afraid to speak out and tell us all you know."

Dick's lips set in a determined line; entreaties and commands were alike powerless to move him.

To Dr. Sinclare, loth though he was to admit the

thought, Dick's obstinacy could point to but one thing.

Father, too, was beginning to doubt. Dick could read that in his white, drawn face, and the boy's heart grew heavier and heavier. But he only set his white lips the firmer. There was nothing to be gained by clearing himself at Polly's expense.

"You may go, Dick," father said wearily at last.

Back once more in the study, the boy bowed his head on his arms and gave way to a torrent of grief.

"Dick," it was his mother's voice that roused him at last. He lifted his head to find her beside him, looking down with tender, loving eyes that never wavered in their faith in him. "Dick, could you tell Mother?"

But no, to no one, least of all to mother, could Dick tell his miserable secret.

Oh, the wretchedness of the long, weary night that followed! Dick was glad when morning came. Yet he lingered long over his dressing and stood a full moment with his hand on the door before he found courage to open it. How could he again face his father's stern glance, the pleading of his mother's eyes? Then the sound of Polly's voice drifted to him, and Dick pulled himself together. It was for Polly's sake.

The pearls! The pearls!

Still they were in the burden of Polly's cry. But today, in the light of last night's disclosures, the words on her lips had a new significance to Dr. Sinclare.

The first day of her illness, he had asked, "Is she worrying about anything?" and Mrs. Trent's negative reply had left him at a loss to account for her condition. But now, he believed, he had an inspiration. In whatever way Dick was implicated in the theft of the pearls, Polly had known about it. In some way she had become aware of the boy's



He stole around to the back porch and carefully placed the package near the door. (See page 22.)

guilty secret and had worried over it till she had brought herself to this condition. As Dr. Sinclair stood looking down on the flushed little face, he was more sure about it than ever. But how could he turn this new knowledge to account?

"Polly," he said, leaning over her and speaking in a clear, even tone, his eyes fixed steadily on hers, "listen to me. The pearls are quite safe in Mrs. Turnbull's jewel box. Do you understand, Polly? The pearls have been returned to Mrs. Turnbull."

At the first word the little rambling voice had stopped, and the hot, dry eyes looked back into his, held by his steady commanding gaze.

"Mrs. Turnbull has her pearls," he said again.

Wonderingly, Mrs. Trent and the nurse, standing in the background listened while the clock ticked on and on, and the doctor's steady, monotonous voice repeated over and over, "The pearls have been returned. Mrs. Turnbull has her pearls."

At last the doctor straightened himself and turned to them with a smile of triumph. For the first time in many days the hot, bright eyes were closed. Polly was asleep.

It was a very weak little Polly who woke at last from that long, life-giving sleep, a thin little wisp of a girl content to lie back on her pillows, without speaking, for hours at a time, scarcely thinking even, at first.

Mrs. Turnbull's pearls had been returned. That was one of the first things she had been told on regaining consciousness. Dr. Sinclair had told her himself in a quiet matter-of-fact way.

She had not cared much just then. She was too weak to care about anything. But as her strength began slowly to return, she recalled his words with a sense of comfort that she did not try to understand.

By degrees things began to come back to her memory, and among them the recollection of the beads Bernie had given her and the theft of Mrs. Turnbull's necklace. But the knowledge that Mrs. Turnbull's pearls had been returned robbed the recollection of all its terrors.

Gradually Polly's strength returned till there came a day when she was able to go downstairs and take lunch with the family. Oh, how good it was to be down again, and how glad they all were to have her! Yet Polly could not fail to see that something was wrong. There was a constraint between Dick and his parents that had never been there before.

The boy seldom spoke except when addressed, and father's voice had a strange new note of sternness when he spoke to him. Mother's eyes, when they rested on him, looked sad and wistful. What did it mean?

At first mother turned her questions aside, but after awhile by dint of a question here and a question there, the thing in its awful ugliness lay revealed to Polly.

Dick a thief! Her own dear brother suspected of having taken Mrs. Turnbull's pearls! Dick had returned them, had been caught in the act, and had refused to account for his possession of them.

"Oh, Mother, *you* don't believe it. *You don't,*" she cried, hysterically.

"No, dear, I do not," answered mother. "But, oh, Polly, if only Dick would tell us all about it. He must see how this strain is wearing me out. Yet he will say nothing. Your father's commands and my pleading are all in vain. Oh, Polly, if *you* could influence him."

"I'll try, Mother," Polly said, her eyes full of tears. "He's in the study. I'll go to him now. I'll tell him he's making you ill, and perhaps he'll listen."

## CHAPTER FIVE.

A WELCOME CABLE FROM ENGLAND.

DICK was studying, but Polly noticed, as he turned at the sound of her step, that his eyes were red.

"Dick," she said, coming to the point at once in a headlong rush of words, "Oh, Dick, I *know*; I've just found out. And, oh Dick, I *know* you didn't do it. And so does mother, but it's making her ill, Dick. Can't you see it is? Oh, Dick, won't you tell for her sake?"

Dick turned round in his chair and stared at her, his face going from red to white. "You mean you know that they think I took the pearls? And you want me to tell about them?"

"Yes. Oh, Dick, *do*. Please, *please*."

"Do you mean that *you* don't know?"

Dick was looking at her with eager eyes, that grew suddenly bright, as she exclaimed in unquestionable astonishment, "I!"

"Then it *wasn't* you who hid them in the loft? Oh, Polly, Polly!"

The sense of relief was too great to be borne calmly. Dick dropped his head on his arms on the table and burst into a passion of sobs that shook his strong young frame.

But Polly! White and trembling, she clung to the back of Dick's chair. The pearls she had hidden—the pearls Bernie had given her—they *were* Mrs. Turnbull's. *Bernie was the thief*.

A low, shuddering sob made Dick lift his tear-stained face to look at her.

"It was— Oh, Polly! Where did you get them?"

But Polly shook her head. "I can't tell you, Dick."

"You *must* tell me, Polly," said Dick. "Perhaps no one else need ever know, but *I* must."

But Polly's answer was decided. "I can't tell you or anyone. But *you* must tell where you found them, Dick," she said at last. "It isn't fair for *you* to be suspected, and mother—"

"I'll never tell," Dick spoke shortly.

Polly looked at him wonderingly. The suffering of the last few weeks had left its mark on the boy's face.

"I'm going to tell, Dick. There's father coming in, and I'm going to tell him *now*—this very minute."

"Wait, Polly. Unless you can tell—"

But she had eluded the hand put out to stop her, and the next moment Dick heard her voice in the hall, crying excitedly, "Oh, Father, Dick found the pearls in the loft. I don't know *how* he came to find them, but he did. And, oh, Father, it was *I* who hid them there."

And so the burden of suspicion that had weighed Dick down was lifted from his shoulders to her own by Polly herself.

"I hid them in the loft—that Sunday when you were all at church," she confessed and refused to tell any more.

And at that very moment, far off in England, Bernie and old Mrs. Sinclare were listening breathlessly to a letter Mr. Sinclare was reading aloud.

"How very strange!" said grandmother as Mr. Sinclare laid down the sheet. "Are the maids quite trustworthy, Bernie?"

"The maids? There's only one, you know. Oh, yes, Susan's honest."

"But how could anyone else have access to the rooms?"



Dick dropped his head on his arms and burst into a passion of sobs that shook his strong young frame. (See page 28.)



Bernie made no answer, but by-and-by, when Mr. Sinclair went off to the library, she followed him.

"Oh, Father, about the pearls. Do you remember the string mother used to have?"

Father nodded gravely, and Bernie hurried on. "Auntie was keeping them for me, you know, with mother's other jewels, and she won't let me wear any of them because she thinks I'm not old enough. I don't mind about the others, but, oh, I do love the pearls, and lots and lots of little girls wear strings of pearls on their necks, Daddy. And the day before I left, auntie had been showing Mrs. Turnbull my jewels, and when I went upstairs for something, there they were—the pearls, I mean—and all of a sudden it just came to me that you'd let me wear them if I could just get them away to England with us. Honest, true, Daddy, I didn't mean to wear them without asking you, but they weren't Aunt Letty's pearls; they were mine. And I caught them up, and, Daddy," her voice fell suddenly to a horrified whisper, "I hadn't time to examine them, and I didn't know Mrs. Turnbull had any, and—"

Father uttered a sudden, sharp exclamation. Then he held her at arm's length studying the red, guilty little face, with his keen, gray eyes.

"And you have brought Mrs. Turnbull's pearls to England," he said slowly.

"No, I haven't, Daddy. I gave them to Polly Trent to take care of for me."

"Ah! And Polly has been sick, it appears from the letter. But now that she is better, she will return them, no doubt."

"But she doesn't *know*, Daddy. They were shut up in a box. Polly doesn't *know* it's the pearls. And if she *did* know, she couldn't do anything because she crossed her heart not to tell, and—"

"Crossed her heart?" daddy asked in surprise.

"Yes; that means you'll never, never break your promise. So you see she couldn't tell, Daddy."

Daddy looked very grave. "That no one has had to suffer for your fault is scarcely to be hoped for," her father said. "But we will do what we can to put matters straight. The first thing is to cable uncle."

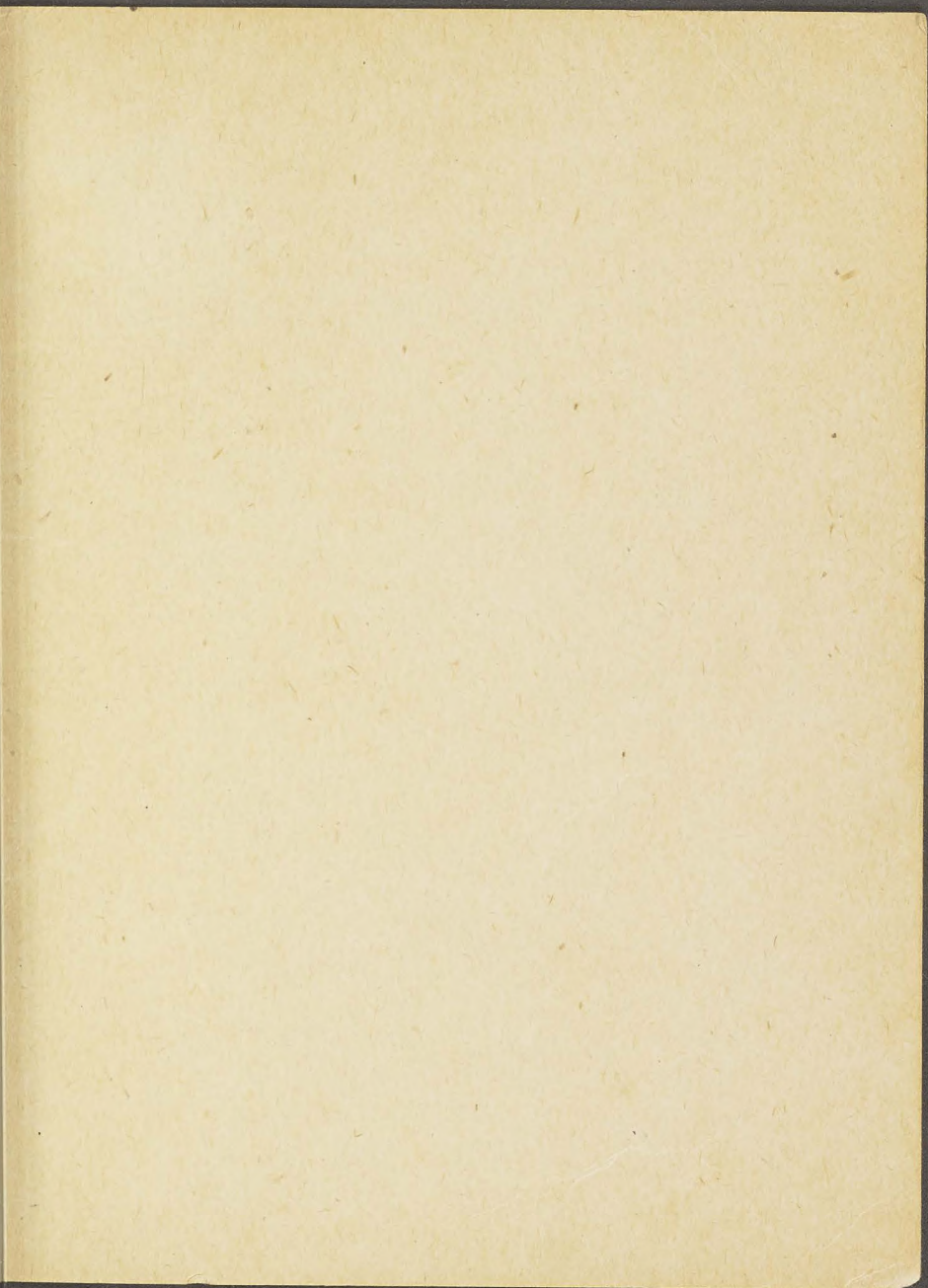
So a costly message was flashed under the ocean, explaining as briefly as possible Bernie's mistake and wrongdoing, and freeing Polly from her promise.

Oh, the glad relief of that freedom. How joyfully, despite her tears, Polly sobbed out her share in the mystery, mother's arms clasping her close as she recalled shudderingly the agony of fear she had endured on hearing of Mrs. Turnbull's loss.

Then Dick took up the tale and told how he had discovered the box up among the eaves and the little piece of Polly's dress, and—

Polly's arms were about his neck in an instant. "Dick Trent," she exclaimed, "you're a real hero."

THE END.



Alma Williams  
from Louise Stone.  
Christmas 1929.

