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opening extract from

Historical House: Polly's March

written by

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published by

Usborne Publishers

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POLLY'S MARCH

Chapter One

New Neighbours

The swing tree had always been Polly's favourite part of the garden. She came here to sit, or to read, or to watch the birds squabbling over thrown bread; or she came to swing. She liked to push herself as high as she could, her stretched-out feet pointing at Lily's bedroom on the second floor, till she almost felt she could launch herself from the swing seat and land neatly on the mat beside Lily's bed.

But now it wasn't Lily's bedroom, not any more, and today Polly couldn't find the energy for proper swinging.

Until last week, she and Lily had come here together – to be by themselves, to talk and giggle and share secrets. Now there was no Lily, no one to share anything, and Polly didn't even want to look up at the top-floor flat. For nearly a week, the windows had been blank and empty. Today the new people were moving in, and they were going to be duller than dull, she just knew it. It was so unfair!

Polly sat glumly, twisting the swing seat one way, then the other. She dragged her feet on the scuffed bare earth underneath.

She and Lily had been best friends for seven years, ever since Polly and her parents had moved into Number Six, Chelsea Walk. As their mothers were good friends too, Polly and Lily had shared a nanny and attended the same school; they had walked along the Thames Embankment and picnicked in Ranelagh Gardens; they both had piano lessons with Lily's Aunt Dorothy, who lived nearby. Now Lily's mother was ill, and the family had moved to Tunbridge Wells, where the healthy air would do her good, Dr. Mayes said. All Lily's family's possessions and furniture had been carried out, less than a week ago.

This afternoon, Polly had arrived home from school to find a van parked outside, and boxes and crates being carried in by the very same men, three of them, in flat caps. What a strange job it must be, Polly thought – carting people's whole lives from one place to the next, swapping people around like books on shelves!

She felt resentful of the newcomers. There hadn't been time to get used to Lily being gone, let alone to face the thought of new people moving in, putting their own pictures and ornaments where Lily's had been, making it all different.

"Lily can come to stay, sometimes," Polly's mother had said yesterday, seeing her gloomy face. "Tunbridge Wells isn't that far away. You haven't said goodbye to her for ever and ever. And there's still Maurice!"

Maurice! Grown-ups simply didn't understand. As if Maurice could even begin to replace Lily! Polly glowered at the windows of the Dalbys' ground-floor flat. Polly's mother and Mrs. Dalby often had afternoon tea together or sat chatting while they sewed, but that didn't mean Polly was going to be friends with Horrid Maurice.

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He was the worst boy she knew. As she knew very few boys, this was less of an insult than she'd have liked; but she felt sure that even if she knew hundreds and hundreds, Maurice would still be the one she detested most.

If ever he saw Polly and Lily playing in the garden, he used to come out purely to pester them. He was the same age as them, twelve; but as Lily remarked loftily, "He's only a boy. They always seem younger than girls for their age." Once, he'd sneaked up behind Polly with a toad he'd found at the end of the garden, holding it so close that she came face to face with it when she turned round, and couldn't help shrieking with horror. That piercing shriek – she hadn't known she could make such a sound – had annoyed her as much as it had amused Maurice; she never usually made a fuss about mice, spiders or other crawly creatures. Another time, he had thrown Eugenie, Lily's doll, high into the branches of the walnut tree, where her long hair had become so firmly snagged on twigs that Polly had to call the gardener to bring a ladder and climb to the rescue.

Why couldn't it have been Maurice's mother who was ill and needed the Tunbridge Wells air?

And now a new disappointment! The one hope remaining to Polly was that the new occupants of Flat Three would have a daughter her own age – not, of course, one she would like as much as Lily, because that would be disloyal, but still someone who could fill the friend gap. But Papa had heard that the new people weren't a family at all, but a pair of spinsters: Miss Cross and Miss Rutherford. Polly wrinkled her nose when she heard the names. She imagined the Misses Cross and Rutherford as elderly ladies, dressed stiffly in black and purple and old lace that smelled of mothballs. Miss Cross would be cross, of course – probably they both would. They'd look down long noses at her and would sniff in disapproval if she played in the garden. They'd be hard of hearing and would cup their hands to their ears if she tried to speak to them, so that she'd have to repeat everything three times. They might even be so deaf as to use ear trumpets. Yet their ears would be sharply tuned to any noise she made on the back stairs or in her bedroom; there would be complaints to Mama and Papa. She knew it! She disliked them already.

"Oh, but this is lovely!" said a voice, close behind her.

Polly turned. Two people had come out of the doorway that led to the back stairs: both young women, dressed alike in navy-blue skirts and white blouses. The taller and thinner of the two was looking this way and that, giving excited little claps of her hands; the other, dark-haired, stocky and hatless, gazed around her as she came down the steps to the grass.

"We could hardly have done better!" the tall one went on. "And look, this tree – lovely shade on a hot day – oh! Hello! I'm so sorry if we startled you."

They were coming towards her, smiling and interested, as if a girl on a swing were the most exciting thing they could hope to find in a garden. Polly felt annoyed with herself; she could have dodged out of sight behind the blackcurrant bushes, to look and listen without being seen.

Slowly, she got up from the swing seat, and tugged at her skirt. "Only for a moment." She looked from one face to the other. These two must be nieces, or something, of

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the old ladies who were moving in; spinsters, of course, wouldn't have daughters or grand-daughters.

"You live here, do you?" the shorter one asked.

"Yes. Up there, in the middle flat." Polly pointed to the first-floor windows.

"Then we're going to be neighbours!" exclaimed the tall young woman, who seemed ready to be delighted by everything. "How marvellous! We must introduce ourselves properly. How do you do? I'm Edwina Rutherford, and this is Violet Cross." She held out a hand to shake Polly's. "Do tell us who you are!"

"Oh!" Polly was unable to hide her surprise. "But you're not – I mean, I thought – I thought you'd be cross and old!" It came out, just like that, before she could stop herself; she blushed at her rudeness.

Miss Rutherford laughed, not seeming to mind. "I feel old, sometimes. Look old, sometimes." And Polly noticed that her face, under her hat brim, looked pale and drawn, like that of a very ill person who was venturing out for the first time after weeks on a sickbed. "As for Violet –" Miss Rutherford turned to her friend – "Cross by name, kindly by nature!"

"And your name?" prompted Miss Cross.

"Polly. Paulina Elizabeth Genevieve Stubbs, but I'm always called Polly. So you're really the people moving in upstairs?"

Miss Rutherford laughed. "We really are. We've come outside to give ourselves a rest from boxes and dust and decisions. Maybe you could show us around the garden?"

Polly wasn't sure what to show them that they couldn't see easily for themselves, but she said, "Yes, of course." Miss Rutherford made a big show of setting off on a Grand Tour, adjusting her hat, looking round expectantly, and putting her best foot forward.

"Now, Edwina," said Miss Cross, glancing anxiously at her, "you're not to go over-tiring yourself. It's been a long day. You ought to be putting your feet up. The doctor said—"

"I can rest later," Miss Rutherford assured her. But she took the offered arm, and leaned slightly against her friend as they took a few steps down the garden. Only a few steps, because Polly wanted them to have a proper look at the tree. She stood back to gaze up at it, its cracked bark and the spreading canopy of leaves, and the branch that had the swing's ropes lashed round it.

"We'll start here. This tree," she said proudly, "is a walnut tree. We get walnuts from it in autumn. The Romans, you know, brought walnuts when they came to England, and planted them. This one was grown from a walnut by a girl who lived here years and years ago. And now it's big enough to swing from!"

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“How marvellous!” Miss Rutherford tilted back her head to look at the upper branches. “And how do you know that?”

“Mrs. Parks told me. She’s our cook.”

“Imagine!” said Miss Rutherford. “One little walnut, growing into a tree this size! I shall find a nut in autumn and try to grow a new tree myself. There,” she added, looking sidelong at Miss Cross, “you see what great things can grow from small beginnings! What an inspiration, to look out of our window and see this every day!”

“You got more’n enough inspiration if you ask me,” said Miss Cross, almost crossly.

Polly looked at them with interest. She had thought at first that they might be cousins, but now decided that they couldn’t be related at all; they looked so unalike, and their voices were very different, too. Whereas Miss Rutherford spoke in the clear, carrying tone of most people who lived in this part of Chelsea, Miss Cross’s way of speaking was less refined – the way a servant might speak. Polly liked her friendly directness, but her accent was what Mama called common. Polly wondered if maybe she was looking after Miss Rutherford – perhaps she was a paid nurse, or companion. Miss Rutherford had the liveliest blue eyes, that seemed to dart around taking in everything; but she also looked as tired as a candle on its last sputter. Her skin looked almost transparent, there were shadows under her eyes, and she was so thin that – as Mama would say – a puff of wind would blow her over. And Miss Cross had mentioned the doctor, and resting. Mama saw the doctor quite often, and was supposed to rest each afternoon with her feet up on the couch, but that was because of the new baby that was on the way. That couldn’t possibly be the cause of Miss Rutherford’s frailness.

“Excuse me, Miss Rutherford –” Polly ventured.

“Oh, please – call me Edwina, and Violet, Violet! Miss Rutherford makes me feel like an elderly spinster! You don’t want us to call you Miss Stubbs, do you? May we call you Polly?”

“Yes, of course. Well, er – Edwina,” Polly continued awkwardly, not used to calling grown-ups by their first names, “I hope you won’t think I’m rude, but are you ill?”

“Well, like –” Miss Cross, Violet, began, but Edwina cut her short, fixing Polly with her straight blue gaze.

“Yes, Polly, in a way I have been ill. You see, I’ve just been released from prison.”

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