



# Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	v
<i>Chapter 1:</i>	Polio Girl ..... 1
<i>Chapter 2:</i>	Welcome Home ..... 11
<i>Chapter 3:</i>	The Yellow Dress ..... 19
<i>Chapter 4:</i>	Danger in the Pasture..... 27
<i>Chapter 5:</i>	Gifts and Goodness..... 35
<i>Chapter 6:</i>	Sunday Company ..... 39
<i>Chapter 7:</i>	School Steps..... 47
<i>Chapter 8:</i>	Christmas Surprises ..... 55
<i>Chapter 9:</i>	Story Girls ..... 61
<i>Chapter 10:</i>	Fried Chicken or Stew ..... 69
<i>Chapter 11:</i>	The Way It Is..... 77
<i>Chapter 12:</i>	Watching Me ..... 87
<i>Chapter 13:</i>	Funny Faces..... 95
<i>Chapter 14:</i>	Berries to Sell..... 99

<i>Chapter 15:</i>	Nightmare! .....	103
<i>Chapter 16:</i>	Another School .....	109
<i>Chapter 17:</i>	Red Canvas Shoes .....	117
<i>Chapter 18:</i>	Helping Mrs. Hopewell.....	125
<i>Chapter 19:</i>	Meals on Time .....	131
<i>Chapter 20:</i>	Calling for Help .....	135
<i>Chapter 21:</i>	Opportunities .....	141



## Chapter 1

# Polio Girl

**“H**EY, wait for me!”

The skinny girl leaned across the iron handrail and slid to the bottom of the steps. Her brown hair brushed her face as she let go of the rail and plopped to the ground. There! She was free for a while! She struggled to her feet, then limped after the hunched woman heading across the yard.

“Mrs. Hartsong!” the girl called to her kind, elderly friend. “Wait. I’m coming too!”

The thin woman turned. “Slow down, girl. You must not fall!”

Dewdill laughed with happiness. For a little while she was free from the dreadful poorhouse that towered like a gloomy castle holding her prisoner. For a little while she could be her six-year-old self, away from the cranky old woman who lived across the hall. Too many times Dewdill or the other children

had been whopped on the backside when the old lady became upset. For a little while Dewdill didn't have to see the pitiful cripples and wrinkled, hungry people in ragged clothes. No one could scold her now or smack her fingers if she reached for food.

The big frightening house where the poorest people lived fell behind her. She and her brother and sisters had lived here half a year, all because they had no home. Daddy had been here too when they first arrived.

Smiling, Dewdill hobbled up to Mrs. Hartsong. Deep inside the green print bonnet, the woman's small wrinkled face lit with a smile. She reached out a bony arm toward the girl. "Come along," she said.

"Oh, good!" Dewdill panted. "Are you making baskets today?"

"I am. Would you like to help?"

"Yep! I love to watch you do that!"

"Well, come on, and we'll keep each other company." The woman's long dress skimmed the grass and her tiny ragged shoes as she opened the gate to the pasture.

"It's nice to be out here with you!" Dewdill followed Mrs. Hartsong into the meadow. She spread her hands up to the sky. Oh, for sunshine and happiness!

Mrs. Hartsong chuckled. "This is a wonderful day to be out."

"Yeah," Dewdill said. "I don't like living here!"

"Some of us have no choice," Mrs. Hartsong replied. "We have no other home, but the almshouse gives us a bed, a little food, and a roof to keep off the rain. You see, the heavenly Father doesn't forget us poor folks."

The words vanished into thin air, for just then, the familiar tug started in Dewdill's left toes. *Oh, why must a spell come now?* she thought. The cramp grew stronger, and her toes curled to the bottom of her foot. Nothing would stop the spell now.

Mrs. Hartsong leaned close. "Your trouble?"

"Uh-huh, but it'll be over soon." Dewdill wobbled and breathed faster. Muscles tightened all the way up her leg with an agonizing cramp. She rubbed the muscles, hoping to relieve the pain, but suddenly her leg felt as limp as a cooked noodle, and she was falling, falling. Helpless, she crumpled to the ground.

Long full skirts drooped beside her. "You all right?"

Dewdill rubbed her arm and sat up. "Uh-huh. I'll come in a minute."

"No hurry," said Mrs. Hartsong. "I'll wait for you."

"If only I didn't have polio, I could play games with the other children and work just as hard as my brother and sisters."

Mrs. Hartsong gave her a gentle pat. "You can do some things, can't you? Why, you walked here from the poorhouse. You don't even have leg braces, and you ain't cooped up in the hospital like scores of children with polio!"

Stunned, Dewdill soaked in the words. "Oh! I hadn't thought of that."

"You're right spunky too," Mrs. Hartsong continued. "When you fall, you get up and walk before long. And to think, your leg doesn't drag behind like poor ole Jimmy's pitiful leg!"

Like poor Jimmy! The poor disabled man had no wheelchair to help him. He could barely get to the dining room with his useless leg dragging behind him. Why hadn't she thought of that? At least she could get around and do things!

When Dewdill was just a baby, the dreadful polio virus had slithered through her veins bringing torment and fever. Polio had damaged her muscles and nerves and caused her left leg to become thin and weak. Her parents could not afford the treatments other children received in a hospital. By age three, however, she had learned to walk again. Even so, spells of cramping and weakness often troubled her.

She rubbed her leg, feeling the muscles relax and the pain ease. She stood up. "Now I'm ready to make baskets!"

"Let's get started then." Mrs. Hartsong chuckled. "Even poor folks have things to do."

The thin woman snipped long-stemmed wildflowers with a shears. Sudden warmth sprang into Dewdill's heart for this good woman.

"I like you," she said. "You're not crabby and mean."

"Hope not!" the woman laughed as she stuffed the flowers into the roomy pockets of her apron.

Mrs. Hartsong sat on a stump in the shade, and Dewdill sat in the grass beside her as they stripped the leaves from the long stems. Dewdill felt as light as a dandelion puff. In the distance, dust rose behind horse-drawn harvest machines clattering across the field. Dewdill looked and listened. If only she and her family could be outdoors harvesting produce from the fields along with the other migrant workers like they had last summer.

She had to talk about it, and Mrs. Hartsong always listened. "When Daddy got real sick and couldn't work, Mother took all us children away to harvest in the fields," she said.

The old, nubby fingers piled the bare stems in a heap. "You helped harvest too?"



“Uh-huh. I picked beans and tomatoes, but I rested sometimes and watched my little sister. But I’m stronger now, and I could work even harder if we got together again.”

“Yes, you’re getting stronger. Where did you live when you worked in the fields?”

“We slept on the ground beside the fields, and we ate ’round a campfire, whatever we had gathered in the field that day.” Her eyes followed the horses and harvesters down the field. The memories of picking the long rows beside her sisters and brother stirred a longing in her heart. “We were together then,” she whispered.

## When Sparrows Sing

“What about school?” Mrs. Hartsong cupped her wrinkled hand and wove a stem through her fingers.

“We didn’t go to school. None of the field children did, but I was too little.”

“Oh my, all children should have school, but these times are so bad.”

Dewdill watched the bony fingers weave four long stems between the cupped fingers of the other hand. Next the elderly woman wove stems the opposite direction, poking stems in and out, over and under. Dewdill fumbled with her stems. She curled her small hand just right, and started to weave slowly—in and out, over and under. Was that the way to do it?

She studied the gnarled fingers that moved with ease—around and around, in and out, over and under, twisting the stems and tucking them in.

“There! That’s the first one.” Mrs. Hartsong held up a tiny basket and started to sing.

“Why should I feel discouraged,  
Why should the shadows come,  
Why should my heart be lonely . . .”

Dewdill tried to weave and hum along at the same time. Why didn’t her basket turn out as nice as Mrs. Hartsong’s? She pressed her lips together in determination. She must try harder.

Just then the elderly woman leaned over and whispered, “Look at that sparrow.” Her crooked finger pointed at a little brown bird perched on a low branch not far away. “He has not a care in the world. No work, no worries. The heavenly Father watches over him just like us folks at the poorhouse.”



Dewdill watched the sparrow stretch his tiny neck as he trilled out his song. Suddenly the bird flicked his tail and flew away. For an hour or more Dewdill worked, sometimes gazing at the machines that clattered on and on in the distant fields. Then she'd focus on her basket again until the clopping feet of horses and the rumbling wagon wheels headed toward the barn. If she could be out there with the workers, how happy she'd be.

Sitting here felt familiar, for Daddy had worked in his fields at home, and when they moved away, she had lived and worked in the wide-open fields. Field work and sleeping on the hard ground was better any day than staying in that awful poorhouse with so little to eat and only one bed for the children to sleep in. But Daddy had died at the poorhouse a few months ago, and some of the family lived in other homes now. Mother had disappeared, and no one had heard from her.

Lifting her wobbly basket, Dewdill studied it closer. "I wonder if Sammy and my sister like their new homes."

"I expect so," Mrs. Hartsong replied and continued her song.

"I sing because I'm happy,  
I sing because I'm free ..."

Dewdill lowered her hand and jabbed the long stem in and out, around the back of her hand, and along the basket sides that grew higher. She hummed along as Mrs. Hartsong sang.

"For His eye is on the sparrow,  
And I know He watches me."

## When Sparrows Sing

The girl interrupted, “I wonder when somebody will take me home to live with them.”

“Your turn will come someday,” Mrs. Hartsong said. “The good Lord doesn’t turn His back on us needy ones. He hears our cries for help, and He watches us like He watches His bitsy little sparrows.”

Dewdill tried to mimic Mrs. Hartsong’s skilled motions round and round, in and out, over and under. But her mind wandered. Of course, God had watched over her homeless family in the fields. Every night He had looked down from the starry heavens and watched them as they slept. When Mother left them alone, God had seemed so close, as if His gigantic arms reached down and surrounded them in the dark beneath the stars. She need not be afraid with such a great big God to watch over her.

Mrs. Hartsong sang again,

“His eye is on the sparrow,  
And I know He watches me.”<sup>1</sup>

Dewdill shook her head in disgust. Where was God now? If He really cared about her, why didn’t He give her a home? ‘Course, people didn’t want a polio girl. Nope. Maybe she’d have to stay at the poorhouse a long time.

Kind eyes peered across the glasses resting on Mrs. Hartsong’s nose. “What’s wrong?” her elderly friend asked.

The girl frowned at her own crooked basket and shrugged. “I can’t make it nice as yours.”

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1 “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” by Civilla D. Martin. Public domain.

“You’re learning, and if you keep at it, one day yours will turn out fine.”

“Dewdill!”

She turned at the sound of the familiar voice. Her sister Evie was running toward her across the meadow, smiling like a possum.

“Guess what?” Evie leaned her red face close to Dewdill, her hands on her bent knees. “A nice man and woman have come to take us to live with them! Mr. and Mrs. Simmons.”

“What?” Dewdill pulled back in disbelief. “When they see I have polio, they will leave me here.”

“Don’t be goofy!” Evie yanked her arm. “Come on! They’re waiting now!”

“Go on,” Mrs. Hartsong urged. “You might be surprised.”

Dewdill ripped the half-made basket off her hand and threw her arms around her elderly friend. “That means I have to leave you!”

A knobby finger lifted the girl’s chin. “You go right on and find yourself a good home! The poorhouse is no place for you! And here—take the little basket I made with you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hartsong!” Dewdill tore herself away and limp-hurried after Evie.