

Williamson Alice Muriel

The Girl Who Had Nothing



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Williamson A. M. Alice Muriel

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CHAPTER I-The Old Lady in the Victoria

Joan Carthew had reason to believe that it was her birthday, and she had signalled the occasion by running away from home. But her birthday, and her home, and her running away, were all so different from things with the same name in the lives of other children, that the celebration was not in reality as festive as it might seem if put into print.

In the first place, she based her theory as to the date solely upon a dim recollection that once, eons of years ago, when she had been a petted little creature with belongings of her own (she was now twelve), there had been presents and sweets on the 13th of May. She thought she could recall looking eagerly forward to that anniversary; and she argued shrewdly that, as her assortment of agreeable memories was small, in all likelihood she had not made a mistake.

In the second place, Joan's home was a Brighton lodging-house, where she was a guest of the landlady, and not a "paying" guest, as she was frequently reminded. In that vague time, eons

ago, she had been left at the house by her mother (who was, it seemed, an actress), with a sum of money large enough to pay for her keep until that lady's return from touring, at the end of the theatrical season. The end of the season and the end of the money had come about the same time, but not the expected mother. The beautiful Mrs. Carthew, whose professional name was Marie Lanchester, had never reappeared, never written. Mrs. Boyle had made inquiries, advertised, and spent many shillings on theatrical papers, but had been able to learn nothing. Mr. Carthew was a vague shadow in a mysterious background, less substantial even than a "walking gentleman," and Mrs. Boyle, feeling herself a much injured woman, had in her first passion of resentment boxed Joan's ears and threatened to send the "brat" to the poorhouse. But the child was in her seventh year and beginning to be useful. She liked running up and downstairs to answer the lodgers' bells, which saved steps for the two overworked servants; and, of course, when she became a financial burden instead of the means of lightening burdens, it was discovered that she could do many other things with equal ease and propriety. She could clean boots and knives, wash dishes, help make beds, and carry trays; she could also be slapped for misdeeds of her own and those of others, an act which afforded invariable relief to the landlady's feelings. As years went on, further spheres of usefulness opened, especially after the Boyle baby came; one servant could be kept instead of two; and taking everything into consideration, Joan's hostess decided to continue her charity.

Therefore, the child could have answered the conundrum, "When is a home not a home?" out of the stores of her intimate experience.

In the third place, she had only run away as far as one of the shelters on the Marine Parade; she had brought the landlady's baby with her, and, lurking grimly in the recesses of her mind, she had the virtuous intention of going home again when Minnie should be hungry enough to cry, at tea-time.

Joan was telling the two-year-old Minnie a fairy story, made up out of her own head, all about a gorgeous princess, and founded on the adventures she herself would best like to have, when, just as the narrative was working towards an exciting climax, a girl of Joan's own age came in sight, walking with her governess.

The story broke off short between Joan's little white teeth, which suddenly shut together with a click. This did not signify much, as far as the Boyle baby was concerned, for Joan unconsciously wove fairy tales more for her own pleasure than that of her companion, and as a matter of fact the warmth of the afternoon sunshine had acted as "juice of poppy and mandragora" upon Minnie's brain. Her small, primrose-yellow head was nodding, and she was unaware that the story had ended abruptly just as the princess was beguiling the dragon, and that a girl almost as fine as the princess herself was approaching.

The new-comer was about twelve or thirteen, and she was more exquisitely dressed than any child Joan remembered to have

met. Perhaps, if the apparition had been a good deal younger or older, the lodging-house drudge would not have observed so keenly, or realised with a quick stab of passionate pain the illimitable gulf dividing lives. But here was a girl of her own age, her own height, her own needs and capacities, and yet-the difference!

It struck her like a thrust of some thin, delicate surgical instrument which could inflict anguish, yet leave no trace. Joan's whole life was spent in dreaming; without the dreams, existence at 12, Seafoam Terrace would not have been tolerable to a young creature with the nerves of a racehorse and the imagination of a Scheherazade. She lived practically a double life within herself, but never until this moment had she been consciously jealous of the happier fate of a fellow-creature.

In looking from the shelter where she sat in shadow, at the other girl who walked in sunshine, she knew the crunching pain of the monster's fangs.

The other girl had long, fair hair; she wore white muslin, foaming with lace frills, white silk stockings, and shoes of white suede. Her face was shaded by a great, rose-crowned, leghorn hat, which flopped into soft curves and made a picture of small features which without it might have seemed insignificant. The magnetism that was in Joan Carthew's eyes forced the girl to turn and throw a glance as she passed at the shabby child in faded brown serge (a frock altered from a discarded one of Mrs. Boyle's) who sat huddled in the shelter, with a

tawdrily dressed baby asleep by her side. The glance had all the primitive, merciless disdain of a sleek, fortunate young animal for a miserable, hunted one, and Joan felt the meaning of it in her soul.

"Why should she have everything and I nothing?" was the old-new question which shaped itself wordlessly in the child's brain. "She looks at me as if I were a rat. I'm not a rat! I'm as good as she is, if I had her clothes. I'm cleverer, and prettier, too, I know I am-heaps and heaps. Oh! I want to be like her, only better-I must be-I shall!"

She quivered with the fierceness of her revolt against fate, yet in it was no vulgar jealousy. The other girl's pale blue eyes, in one contemptuous glance, had found every patch on her frock and shoes, had criticised her old hat, and sneered at her little, rough, work-worn hands, scorning her for them as if she were a creature of an inferior race; but Joan had no personal hatred for the happier child, no wish for revenge, no desire to take from the other what she had. The feeling which shook her with sudden, stormy passion was merely the sharp realisation of injustice, the conviction that by nature she herself was worthy of the good things she had missed, the savage resolve to have what she ought to have, at any cost.

It was not tea-time yet, and Minnie was happily asleep; Joan was certain to be scolded just as sharply on her return as if she had stopped away for hours longer, therefore she might as well have drained her birthday cup of stolen pleasure to the dregs;

but the good taste of the draught was gone. She yearned only to go home, to get the scolding over, and to have a few minutes to herself in the tiny back room which she shared with the baby. There seemed to be much to think of, much to decide.

The child waked Minnie, who was cross at being roused, and refused to walk. The quickest way of triumphing over the difficulty was to carry her, and this method Joan promptly adopted. But the baby was heavy and fractious. She wriggled in her young nurse's grasp, and just as Joan had staggered round the corner of Seafoam Terrace, with her disproportionate burden, she tripped and fell, under the windows of No. 12.

Minnie roared, and there was an echoing shriek from the house. Mrs. Boyle, who had been looking up and down the street in angry quest of her missing drudge, saw the catastrophe and rushed to the rescue of her offspring. She snatched the baby, who was more frightened than hurt, and holding her by one arm, proceeded to administer chastisement to Joan.

Instinctively she knew that the girl was sensitive and proud, though she had no kindred feelings in her own soul, and she delighted in humiliating her drudge before the whole street. As she screamed reproaches and harsh names, raining a shower of blows on Joan's ears and head and burning cheeks, a face appeared in at least one window of each house along the Terrace. Though a cataract of sparks cascaded before the child's eyes, somehow she saw the faces and imagined a dozen for every one.

The shame seemed to her beyond bearing. She forgot even

her love for the baby, which (with the dreams) was the bright thread in the dull fabric of her existence. After this martyrdom, she neither could nor would live on in Seafoam Terrace, which with all its eyes had seen her beaten like a dog.

"Into the house with you, you lazy, good-for-nothing brat!" panted Mrs. Boyle, when her hand was tired of smiting; and with a push, she would have urged the girl towards the open front door, but Joan turned suddenly and faced her.

"No!" she cried, "I won't be your servant any more! I've done with you. I will never go into your hateful house again, until I come back as a grand lady you will have to bow down to and worship."

These were grandiloquent words, and Mrs. Boyle would either have laughed with a coarse sneer, or struck Joan again for her impudence, had not the look in the child's great eyes actually cowed her for the moment. In that moment the thin girl of twelve, whom she had beaten, seemed to grow very tall and wonderfully beautiful; and in the next, she had gone like a whirlwind which comes and passes before it has been realised.

Joan was desperate. Her newly formed ambition and her stinging shame mounted like frothing wine to her hot brain. She was in a mood to kill herself-or make her fortune.

For a time she flew on blindly, neither knowing nor caring which way she went. By and by, as breath and strength failed, she ran more slowly, then settled into a quick, unsteady walk. She was on the front, running in the direction of Hove, and in the

distance a handsome victoria with two horses was coming. The sun shone on the silver harness and the horses' satin backs. There was a coachman and a groom in livery, and in the carriage sat an old lady dressed in grey silk, of the same soft tint as her hair.

Joan had seen this old lady in her victoria several times before, and had pretended to herself, in one of her glittering dreams, that the lady took a fancy to her and proposed adoption.

Now, in a flash of thought, which came quick as the glint of light on a bird's wing, the child told herself that this thing must happen. She had no home, no people, nothing; she would stake her life on the one throw which might win all or lose all.

Without stopping to be afraid, or to argue whether she were brave or foolhardy, she ran forward and threw herself in front of the horses. The coachman pulled them up so sharply that the splendid pair plunged, almost falling back on to the victoria, but he was not quick enough to save the child one blow on the shoulder from an iron-shod hoof.

In an instant the groom was in the road and had snatched her up, with a few gruff words which Joan dimly heard and understood, although she had just enough consciousness left to feign unconsciousness.

"How dreadful! how dreadful!" the old lady was exclaiming. "You must put the poor little thing in the carriage, and I'll drive to the nearest doctor's."

"Better let me take her in a cab to a hospital, my lady," advised the groom. "It wasn't our fault. She ran under the horses' feet."

Tomkins and me can both swear to that."

The arbitress of Joan's fate appeared to hesitate, and the child thought best to revive enough to open her eyes (which she knew to be large and soft as a fawn's) for one imploring glance. In the fall which had caused her to drop the Boyle baby, she had grazed her forehead against a lamp-post, and on the small, white face there remained a stain of blood which was effective at this juncture. She started, put out her hand, and groped for the old lady's dress, at which she caught as a drowning man is said to catch at a straw.

"On second thoughts, I will take her home, if she can tell me where she lives. She seems to be reviving," said the lady. "Where do you live, my poor little girl?"

"I don't live anywhere," gasped Joan, white-lipped. "I haven't any mother or any home, or anything. I wanted to die."

"Oh, you poor little pitiful thing! What a sad story!" crooned the old lady. "You shall go to *my* home, and stop till you get well, and I will buy you a doll and lots of nice toys."

The rapidly recovering Joan determined that, once in the old lady's house, she would stop long after she had got well, and that she would, sooner or later, have many things better than toys. But she smiled gratefully, faintly, looking like a broken flower. The groom was directed to place her on the seat, in a reclining posture, and she was given the old lady's silk-covered air-cushion to rest her head upon. She really ached in every bone, but she was exaggerating her sufferings, saying to herself: "It's come! I've walked right into the fairy story, and nothing shall make me

walk out again. I've got nobody to look after me, so I'll have to look after myself and be my own mamma. I can't help it, whether it's right or wrong. I don't know much about right and wrong, anyhow, so I shan't bother. I've got to grow up a grand, rich lady; my chance has come, and I'd be silly not to take it."

Having thus disposed of her conscience-such as her wretched life had made it-Joan proceeded to faint again, as picturesquely as possible. Her pretty little head, rippling over with thick, gold-brown hair, fell on the grey silk shoulder and gave the kindly, rather foolish old heart underneath a warm, protecting thrill. The child's features were lovely, and her lashes very long and dark. If she had been ugly, or even plain, in spite of her appealing ways, Lady Thorndyke (the widow of a rich City knight) would probably have agreed to the groom's suggestion; but Joan did not overestimate her own charms and their power. A quarter of a century ago Lady Thorndyke had lost a little girl about the age of this pathetic waif, and she had had no other child. There was a nephew on the Stock Exchange, but Lady Thorndyke was interested in him merely because she thought it her duty, though he had been brought up to take it for granted that he would be her heir. In truth, the lonely woman had half unconsciously sighed all her life for romance and for love. She had never had much of either, and now, in this tragic child who clung to her and would not be denied, there was promise of both.

So Joan was borne in supreme spiritual triumph and slight bodily pain to the big, old-fashioned Brighton house where her

new protectress spent the greater part of the year. She was put into a bed which smelled of lavender and felt like a soft, warm cloud; she went through the ordeal of being examined by a doctor, knowing that her whole future might depend upon his verdict. She lay sick and quivering with a thumping heart, lest he should say: "This child is perfectly well, except for a bruise and a scratch or two. There is nothing to prevent her being sent home." But in her anxiety Joan had worked herself into a fever. The doctor was a fat, comfortable man, with children of his own, and the escaped drudge could have worshipped him when he announced that she was in a highly nervous state, and would be better for a few days' rest, good nursing, and nourishing food.

She had arnica and plasters externally, and internally beef-tea. Then she told her story. Had it been necessary, Joan would have plunged into a sea of fiction, but she had enough dramatic sense to perceive that nothing could be more effective than the truth, dashed in with plenty of colour.

Joan's memory was as vivid as her imagination. She was fired to eloquence by her own wrongs; and her word-sketch of the poor baby deserted by a beautiful, mysterious actress, her picturesque conjectures as to that actress's noble husband, the harrowing portrait of her angelic young self as a lodging-house drudge, the final climax, painting the savage punishment in the street, and her resolve to seek refuge in death (the one fabrication in the tale), affected the secretly sentimental heart of the City knight's widow like music.

"I would rather have been trampled to death under your horses' feet than go back!" sobbed the child.

"Don't be frightened and excite yourself, my poor, pretty little dear," Lady Thorndyke soothed her. "No harm shall come to you, I promise that."

Joan's instinctive tact had been sharpened to diplomacy by the constant need of self-defence. She said no more; she only looked; and her eyes were like those of a wounded deer which begs its life of the hunter.

Lady Thorndyke began to turn over various schemes for Joan's advantage; but that same evening, which was Saturday, her nephew, George Gallon, arrived from town to spend Sunday with his aunt. She told him somewhat timidly about the lovely child she was sheltering, and the hard-mouthed, square-chinned young man threw cold water on her projects. He said that the girl was no doubt a designing little minx, who richly deserved what she had got from the charitable if quick-tempered woman who gave her a home. He advised his aunt to be rid of the young viper as soon as possible, and meanwhile to leave the care of her entirely to servants.

His strong nature impressed itself upon Lady Thorndyke's weak one, as red-hot iron cauterises tender flesh. She believed all he said while he was with her, and conceived a distrust of Joan; but Gallon had an important deal on in the City for Monday, and was obliged to leave early, having extracted a half-promise from his aunt that the intruder should go forth that day, or at latest the

next.

He had not seen Joan Carthew, and therefore had not reckoned on her strength and fascination as forces powerful enough to fence with his influence.

Joan felt the difference in her patroness's manner, as a swallow feels the coming of a storm. She knew that there had been a visitor, and she guessed what had happened. She grew cold with the chill of presentiment, but gathered herself together for a fight to the death.

"You look much better this morning, my dear," began Lady Thorndyke nervously. "You will perhaps be well enough to get up and be dressed by and by, to drive out with me, and choose yourself a doll, or anything you would like. You will be glad to hear that-that my nephew and I called on Mrs. Boyle yesterday, and-she is sorry if she was harsh. In future, you will not be living on her charity. I shall give her a small yearly sum for your board and clothing. You will be sent to school, as you ought to have been long ago, and really I don't see how she managed to avoid this duty. But in any case you will be happy."

Joan turned over on her face, and the bed shuddered with her tearing sobs. She was not really crying. The crisis was too tense for tears.

"Don't, dear, don't," pleaded Lady Thorndyke, feeling horribly guilty. "I will see you sometimes, and-"

"See me sometimes!" echoed the child. "You are the only person who has ever been kind to me. I can't live without you

now. I won't try. Oh, it was cruel to bring me here and show me what happiness could be, just to drive me away again into the dark!"

"But-" the distressed old lady had begun to stammer, when the child slipped out of bed and fell at her protectress's feet.

"Keep me with you!" she implored. "I'll be your servant. I'll live in the kitchen. I'll eat what your dog eats. Only let me stay."

She wound her slim, childish arms round Lady Thorndyke's waist, her eyes streamed with tears at last; her beautiful hair curled piteously over the grey-silk lap. She was at that moment a great actress, for though she was honestly grateful, she neither wished nor intended to live in the kitchen and eat what the dog ate. She would be a child of the house or she would be nothing. Her beauty, her despair, and her humility were irresistible. Lady Thorndyke forgot George Gallon and clasped the child in her arms, crying in sympathy. "If you care so much, dear, how can I let you go?" she whimpered.

"I care enough to die for you, or to die if I lose you!" Joan vowed.

"You shall not die, and you shall not lose me!" exclaimed the old lady, remembering her nephew now and defying him. "You shall stay and be my little girl."

Joan did stay. Before the week ended, and another visit from George Gallon was due, she had so entwined herself round Lady Thorndyke's heart that the rather cowardly old woman had courage to face her nephew with the news that she meant to keep

the waif whom "Providence had sent her."

CHAPTER II-The Old Lady's Nephew

At first there was no question of formal adoption. Joan simply stayed on and was allowed to feel that she had a right to stay. Gallon did all he could to oust her, for his mind had telescopic power and brought the future near. He feared the girl, but he dared not actually offend his aunt, lest he should lose at once what he wished to safeguard himself against losing later.

The child made Lady Thorndyke happier than she had ever been. Her presence created sunshine. She was never naughty like other children; she was never sulky nor disagreeable. A governess was procured for her, a mild, common-place lady whom Joan despised and astonished with her progress. "I was born knowing a lot of things which she could never learn," the little girl told herself scornfully. But she did not despise George Gallon, whom she occasionally saw, nor did she exactly fear him, because she believed that she would be able to hold her own in case the day ever came for a second contest, as she foresaw it would.

When she had learned all that the governess knew, and rather more besides, she was sent to a boarding-school in Paris to be "finished." After her first term, she came back to Brighton for the Christmas holidays, so grown up, so beautiful, and so distinguished that Lady Thorndyke was very proud. "What shall I give you for Christmas, my dear?" she asked. "A diamond ring?" Joan kissed her withered leaf of a hand.

"If you love me," she said, "give me the right to call myself your daughter. That is the one thing in the world you have left me hungry for. Will you adopt me, so that I can feel I am your own, own child? Think what it would be if any one ever claimed me and took me away from you!"

Joan's love was not all a pretence. She would have been a monster if it had been, instead of the mere girl of seventeen she was, with a large nature, and capacities for good which had been stunted and turned the wrong way. But the vicissitudes of life had taught her to be even more observant than she was critical, and she knew as well how to manage Lady Thorndyke as if the kind old creature had been a marionette, worked with strings. It was not necessary to let her benefactress know all that was in her mind, nor how she had calculated that to be the rich woman's legally adopted daughter ought to mean being her heiress as well. While she pleaded to be Lady Thorndyke's "own, own child," she was saying to herself: "I will make a good deal better use of the money than that hateful George Gallon would."

No normal young man, and no sentimental old lady, could have doubted the disinterestedness of a girl with eyes like Joan Carthew's. Lady Thorndyke was delighted with the dear child's affection, and promptly sent for her lawyer to talk over the matter of a formal adoption. She also announced her intention of altering her will, and leaving only twenty thousand pounds to her nephew, the bulk of her property to Joan, "who would no doubt be greatly surprised."

Thinking it but fair that George should be prepared for this change in his prospects, she told him what she intended to do, in the presence of a friend, lest there should be a scene.

There was no scene, for George was a sensible man, and saw that a little butter on his bread was better than none. But he hated Joan, and respected her at the same time because she had triumphed. He was not quite beaten yet, however. He had a talk, which he hoped sounded manly and frank, with his young rival, told Joan that he bore her no grudge, and paid her a compliment. When she went back to school, flowers and sweets began to arrive from "Cousin George"; and the girl saw the game he was playing and smiled.

When she came home for Easter, he proposed. He got her on a balcony, by moonlight, where he said that he had loved her for years, and could not wait any longer to speak out what was in his heart.

"Your heart!" laughed Joan, with all the insolence of a beautiful, spoiled young heiress of eighteen, who has pined for revenge upon a hated man, and got it at last. "Your heart!" It was delicious to throw policy to the wind for once and be frankly herself. She was thoroughly enjoying the situation, as she stood with the pure radiance of the moonlight shining down upon her bright head and her white, filmy gown. "What a fool you must think me, Mr. Gallon! It's your pockets you would have me fill, not your heart. I acknowledge I have owed you a debt for a long time, but it's not a debt of love. When I was a forlorn, friendless

child, you tried to turn me out into the cold; and if I hadn't been stronger than you, you would have succeeded. Instead, it was I who did that. I've always meant to pay, for I hate debts. No, I will not marry you. No; nothing that your aunt means to give me shall be yours. Now I have paid, and we are quits."

George Gallon was cold with fury. "Don't be too sure," he said in his harsh voice, which Joan had always hated. "They laugh best who laugh last."

"I know that," the girl retorted; and passing him to go indoors, where Lady Thorndyke dozed after dinner, she threw over her shoulder a laugh to spice her words.

The next day she went back to school, pleased with herself and what she had done, for she was no longer in the least afraid of George Gallon.

Some things are in the air. It was in the air at school that Joan would be a great heiress. The girls were very nice to her, and Joan enjoyed their flatteries, though she saw through them and made no intimate friends. When in June, shortly before the coming of the summer holidays, the girl was telegraphed for, because Lady Thorndyke had had a paralytic stroke and was dying, there was a sensation in the school. Of course, as Joan would now inherit something like a million, she would not return, but after her time of mourning would come out in Society, well chaperoned, be presented, and probably marry at least a viscount. The other girls were nicer than ever; tears were shed over her, and farewell presents bestowed.

When Joan arrived in England, Lady Thorndyke was dead, and the girl was sad, for she realised how well she had loved her benefactress. After the funeral came the reading of the will. The dead woman's adopted daughter, the servants, and George Gallon were the only persons present besides the lawyer. Joan's heart scarcely quickened its beating, for she was absolutely confident. Any surprise which might come could be merely a matter of a few thousands more or less. She sat leaning back in an armchair, very calm and beautiful in her deep mourning. George Gallon's eyes never left her face, and they lit as at last she lifted her head, with bewilderment on the suddenly paling face.

There had been a few bequests to servants and to a favourite charity. Everything else which Lady Thorndyke died possessed of was left unconditionally to her nephew, George Gallon. There was no mention of Joan Carthew. The will was dated ten years before. Lady Thorndyke had put off making the new one, and death had rendered the delay irrevocable. Joan Carthew had not a penny in the world; save for her education, her clothes, and the memory of six happy years, she was no better off than on the day when she threw herself under Lady Thorndyke's carriage.

At first she could not believe that it was true. It was like having rolled a heavy stone almost to the top of an incredibly steep hill, to find oneself suddenly at the bottom, crushed under the stone. But the solicitor's stilted sympathy, and the look in George Gallon's eyes, which said: "Now perhaps you are sorry for having made a fool of yourself," brought her roughly face to face with

the truth. At the same time she was stimulated. The words, the look, braced her to assume courage, if she had it not.

She was down-very far down; but she was young, she was beautiful, she was brave, and life had early taught her to be unscrupulous. The world was, after all, an oyster; she would open it yet somehow and make it hers; this was a vow.

When the solicitor had gone, George remained. The house was his house now.

"What do you intend to do?" he inquired.

"I have my plans," Joan answered.

In the man's veins stirred a curious thrill, which was something like dread. The girl was wonderful, and formidable still, not to be despised. He half feared her, yet he could not resist the temptation to humiliate the creature who had laughed at him.

"It is a pity you never learned anything useful, like typing and shorthand," said he patronisingly. "If you had, I would have taken you into our office as secretary. There's two pounds a week in the job, and that's better than the wages of a nursery governess, which, in the circumstances, you will, no doubt, be thankful to get. After what has passed between us, you would hardly care, I suppose, to accept charity from me, even if I were inclined to offer it."

"I would take no favour from you," said Joan, in an odd, excited voice. "But I *will* accept that secretaryship; you'll find me competent."

George stared. "You don't know what you are talking about.

You have no knowledge of typing or shorthand."

"I am expert in both. I thought, as a woman with large property, the accomplishments might be useful to me, and I insisted on taking them up at school instead of one or two others more classical but not as practical."

"You would actually come and work in my office, almost as a menial, on a salary of two pounds a week, while I enjoy the million you expected would be yours?"

"Beggars mustn't be choosers," returned Joan, drily. "You don't withdraw the offer?"

"No-o," replied George slowly, doubtful whether his scheme of humiliation had been quite wise, yet finding a certain pleasure in it still. "The girl's expression is queer," he said to himself. "She looks as if she had something up her sleeve."

He was right. Joan had something "up her sleeve," something too small to be visible, yet large enough, perhaps, to be the seed of fortune.

CHAPTER III-A Deal in Clerios

George Gallon had lately left a well-known firm of stockbrokers, in which he had been junior partner, and set up business on his own account. He had started at a trying time, about the close of the Boer war, when the financial world was in a state of depression; but he had since brought off two or three *coups* for his clients and himself, and though he was unpopular, he had begun to be talked of among a limited circle in the City as a man who would succeed.

Joan Carthew had heard "George's luck" discussed by guests at Lady Thorndyke's, when she had been at home from school on her holidays; therefore it was that she had so promptly accepted the offer thrown to her in derision, as a bone is flung to a chained dog. "If I keep my eyes and ears open, I shall get tips," was the thought that flashed into her mind.

If Joan had been an ordinary eighteen-year-old girl, she would have faltered before the difficulty of turning such "tips" to her own advantage, on a salary of two pounds a week; but she would not have entered George Gallon's service if she had been one to falter before difficulties; and three days after the reading of the will which left the girl a pensioner on her own wits, she presented herself at the office in Copthall Court.

It was early, and Gallon had not yet arrived. However, his curiosity to see whether Joan would really keep her engagement

brought him to the City half an hour earlier than usual. When he came in, there sat at an inner office, at the desk used by his late stenographer, a young woman plainly dressed in black, though not in mourning deep enough to depress the spirits of the beholder.

It was Joan Carthew. She had already taken off her hat and hung it on a peg. Gallon noticed instantly that her beautiful golden-brown hair was dressed more simply than he had seen it. Every detail of her costume was suited to the new part she was about to play—that of the business woman.

"Good morning, Mr. Gallon," she said crisply. "Your head clerk told me this would be my desk. I have brought my own typewriter. I hope you don't mind. You know, from the test you made the other day, that I take down quickly from dictation, and that my typing is clear. I am ready to begin work whenever you are."

"Glad to find you so businesslike," said Gallon, uncomfortable in spite of himself, though there was a keen relish in the situation.

"You will, I hope, never find me anything else," quietly replied Joan.

So the new *régime* began. At first, for some days, the man was ill at ease, could not collect his thoughts for dictation, and stammered in his speech. He regretted that his desire to humiliate the girl had tempted him to offer this position; but Joan's attitude was so tactful, so unobtrusive, that little by little he forgot his awkwardness and even the meanness of his motive in making her

his dependent. He almost forgot that he had ever asked her to marry him; and because he found her astonishingly clever and useful, he waived the idea of further insults which had flitted through his head when first the dethroned heiress became his secretary.

One autumn morning, Gallon was late. Joan sat waiting in his office, and had opened such correspondence as was not marked "Private," had typed several letters ready for her employer's signature, and having no more business which could be transacted until he appeared, began to glance through an illustrated Society weekly which she took in. This paper she always read with eagerness; not because she had the morbid interest of an outsider in the doings of Society, with a capital S, but because any information she could glean about important people might be of service in the career to which she undauntedly looked forward.

On one page of this particular paper, country houses, electric-launches, libraries, motor-cars, and even family jewels were advertised; and it was an absorbing page to Joan. To-day she gazed long at the reproduction of a handsome steam-yacht, which for some weeks past had been advertised for sale, for the sum of twelve thousand pounds. Only a few months ago, she had been planning to have some day a yacht of her own. It had been one of the many pleasant things she had meant to do with Lady Thorndyke's money.

"I shouldn't mind owning the *Titania*, if she's as good as her

photograph," the girl was thinking, when George Gallon and a fat, foreign-looking man came in.

"You can go back into the next room, Miss Carthew," said George, abruptly. "I shall not need you at present, and you may tell them outside that I am not to be disturbed."

Joan rose and walked into the outer office, where the three clerks, who were all more or less in love with the beautiful secretary, glanced up joyfully from their work at sight of her. The youngest, whose desk was close to the door, had already proposed. He was a dreamy youth with a fluffy brain, but his father was a rich man known in the City as "the Salmon King," who cherished hopes that one day his son would cut a figure on the Stock Exchange. These family details the young man had confided to Joan as a lure to matrimony, and though she had answered that he was a "foolish boy," and nothing was farther from her intention than to settle down as Mrs. Tommy Mellis, she had not in so many words refused the honour.

Now she whispered a request that, if he had still a regard for her, he would slip away and buy a box of chocolates, for the need of which she was perishing. A moment later Tommy was out of his chair, and Joan was in it. His was the one seat in the room where conversation in Gallon's private office could by any means be overheard; and Gallon was aware that whatever might go in at Tommy's right ear promptly went out at the left, without leaving the smallest impression of its meaning.

"Is the deal certain to come off?" she heard George inquire.

"Sure as the sun is to rise to-morrow," replied another voice with a foreign accent. "You are the only outsider in the know. That's worth something, isn't it?"

"It's worth what I've promised for it."

"At least that. And I want an advance to-day."

"In such a hurry? Remember I shan't make anything, or be sure you haven't fooled me, for weeks. Still, I can manage a hundred."

"I need ten times that."

"You'll have it the day the Clerios are taken over."

"Sh! not so loud! And no names, for Heaven's sake, man!"

"Oh, that's all right. The clerk near the door is a fool. The only one out there with any real brains is a girl, but she doesn't know the difference between Clerios and clerics. That's why I employ a woman for a secretary. She spends her spare energy on the fashions, and doesn't bother about things which are none of her business."

In spite of this protest, Gallon dropped his voice. Only a word here and there started out of the broken murmurs on the other side of the door; but one more sentence, almost whole, came to her ears. "Grierson Mordaunt ... sort of chap ... carries these things through." Then reappeared Tommy with the chocolates, and Joan went to her own desk; but the stray bits of information were as flint and steel in her brain, and together they struck out a spark of inspiration. She was as sure as if she had heard all details of the transaction that the World's Shipping Combine,

of which the American millionaire, Grierson Mordaunt, stood at the head, had arranged to take over the Clerio line of Italian boats plying between Mediterranean ports. The fat man with the foreign accent was no doubt the confidential agent of the Italian company, and being acquainted with George Gallon and his methods, had given the secret away for a consideration. Doubtless he was poor, perhaps in difficulties; otherwise he would have kept the information and bought all the Clerio shares he could lay his hands upon.

Now Joan knew why Gallon had written yesterday to a man in Manchester, asking him how many Clerios he had to sell, and what was the lowest price he was prepared to take for them, adding that it would be useless, in the present depressed state of the market, to name a high figure. This man had been requested to wire his answer, and at any moment it might arrive.

When Joan had jumped so far in her conclusions, Gallon escorted his visitor out, flinging back word that he would be in again in half an hour.

The girl's blood sang in her ears. It seemed to her that Fortune was knocking at the door; but could she find the key to open it? She called all her wits to the rescue, and in five minutes that key was grating in the lock.

In Gallon's private room was a small desk, which she used when her services were wanted there. This gave her an excuse to go in, and in passing she threw a glance at Tommy Mellis, which caused him, after the lapse of a decent interval (he counted eighty

seconds), to follow.

"Once you said you would do anything for me," she began, with a lovely look. "Did you mean it?"

"Rather!"

"Well, then, the next question is: Will your father do anything for *you*?"

"He'll do a good deal."

"If you tell him you've a tip about some shares that are bound to rise, will he give you the money to buy them?"

"He'd lend it. That's his way. He'd be tickled to see me taking an interest in business. But what has that got to do with-"

"I want to buy some shares-lots of shares-all I can get hold of. To-day they're going cheap. To-morrow, who can say? They are Clerios."

"But, look here, even I know that Clerios are no good. It's a badly managed line, and the shares are down to next to nothing."

"All the better. Mr. Gallon mustn't know you are in this, as he wants to get hold of all the shares himself. You must trust me enough to have them put into my name, and when I've got your profit for you, we'll go halves. Can you see your father inside half an hour?"

"His place is just round the corner."

"Well, then, if you *do* care anything for me, ask him to see you through a big deal. You shall really make on it, I promise you, something worth having besides my-gratitude."

"The governor's a queer fish. If I should let him in-"

"You won't let him in. But we don't want your father or anybody else in with us. All we want is the loan, and his name, which is a good one in the City, I know. I trust you for that. You must show how clever you are, if you're anxious to please me. I'll manage the rest. Now, like a dear, good boy, run off and arrange things with your father."

Again Tommy became knight-errant, and hardly was he out of the way when a strange voice was heard in the adjoining office. "Mr. Gallon in? I'm Mr. Mitchison, from Manchester."

"Mr. Gallon is out at present, but-" a clerk had begun, when Joan appeared and cut him short. "Mr. Gallon wishes me to see Mr. Mitchison, in his absence. Will you kindly step in here, sir?"

The gentleman from Manchester obeyed. Joan's quick eyes noted his worried air and the genteel shabbiness of his clothing. "I am Mr. Gallon's confidential secretary," she said. "I know about this business of Clerios. You came instead of wiring? Mr. Gallon rather expected you would."

"I had to come to London in a day or two, anyhow, and it's always more satisfactory to do business in person."

"Exactly. Well, I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Gallon has seen reason to change his mind about buying your block of shares in the Clerio line, as he has some big things on now, and finds his hands full; but Mr. Mellis, a client of his-'the Salmon King,' you know-wants to invest some money privately for his son. Mr. Gallon has advised them that, though Clerios are not likely to rise much for some years, there is a certain, if small, dividend;

and if you can tell young Mr. Mellis where they can get hold of other blocks of the same shares, it might then be worth his while to take over yours. Those you hold are hardly enough for him without others."

"I know several men in Genoa, where I did business for some years, who hold shares and would part with them for a decent price. I could work the deal for Mr. Mellis, I'm certain."

"Good. He's at his father's office now. I have Mr. Gallon's permission to introduce you to him, but his only free time this morning is in the next half-hour. I can go with you to Mr. Mellis senior's office, if you're inclined to settle matters at once."

"The Salmon King," who had earned his title by building up the largest "canned goods" business of its kind in England, had offices on the ground floor of an imposing building not far away, and Joan was lucky enough to guide her companion to the door without the dreaded misfortune of meeting George Gallon on the way. As they crossed the threshold, Tommy Mellis issued from a room with a ground-glass door. Joan hurried to him, asked if his father had been kind, was assured that all was well so far, and hastened to explain the new development of affairs so clearly that even Tommy's slow intelligence grasped her meaning without difficulty. "When I've introduced you to Mr. Mitchison, offer him twenty pounds a share (their nominal value is fifty), and if necessary go up to twenty-five. Tell him he shall have a commission on all the other shares he can get, if the whole thing can be fixed up by wire to-morrow. Say there is a man coming

to see you the day after about some other investment, which your father prefers, but you've taken a fancy to this, and want everything settled before the two older men come together. As Gallon must do all his business in Clerios privately, and doesn't want to ask for them in the House, that will give us time to work."

"By Jove! this will mean a lot of money," faltered Tommy. "Of course, I'm delighted to do this for you, but if the governor—"

Joan soothed his fears; and introduced Mitchison to young Mellis, who took them both into a small, empty office. She hovered about during the business conversation which ensued, putting in a word here and there, and impressing the Manchester man with her shrewdness. In his opinion, George Gallon had a treasure for a secretary, and he was grateful to her for pushing on his affairs so well, especially as he did not believe he could have got from Gallon the price which Mellis was willing to give.

When Joan returned to the office in Copthall Court, her employer had not yet come back. "Don't tell Mr. Gallon I've been out, will you?" she appealed to the clerks, her slaves. As she spoke, the door opened, and Gallon entered, just in time to hear the ingenuous request. The young men flushed in consternation for her, but the girl did not change colour. As a matter of fact, she had known that George was coming up, and had probably seen her on the stairs. She had not spoken without design.

Having been delayed vexatiously, Gallon was not in a good mood, and his black ones were unpleasant for underlings. A frowning look and a gesture of the head called Joan to his private

office. She followed meekly; but when the scolding had reached the stage which she mentally designated as "ripe," her meekness vanished like snow in sunshine.

"How dare you speak to me like that!" she exclaimed, her eyes blazing. "I'm not your servant, though I have served you well. I leave to-day."

"This moment, if you choose," George flung back at her furiously, though in reality he had not intended matters to touch this climax. Joan had become valuable, but, as he said to himself in his sullen anger, she was the "last person in the world whose impudence he would stand."

When Joan had gathered up her few belongings, and remarked that she would send for her typewriter, she added: "Mr. Mitchison, of Manchester, called, and wanted me to tell you that he'd already parted with the shares you wired about last night. I asked who had bought them, but he was pledged to secrecy. I believe that is all I need say, except that you will find all your correspondence in good order, to be taken over by my successor; and as you have declared so often that clever stenographers are starving for want of employment, you will not be long in obtaining one."

With this she was off, and, hailing the first cab she saw (though in her circumstances a cab was an extravagance), drove to Woburn Place, where she lived in a back bedroom on the top floor of a cheap boarding-house.

She remained only long enough, however, to change into one

of the pretty dresses left from last spring's wardrobe. Looking as if her home should be Park Lane instead of Bloomsbury, she went to the office of the illustrated weekly in which she had been interested that morning. When she inquired the address of *Titania's* owner, she was told that all business connected with the yacht would be done at the advertising bureau of the paper. This was a blow, for the proposal that Joan had to make was not, perhaps, of a kind suited to the taste of a mere commonplace agent. She thought for a moment, and then said, with a slight accent which she had learned through mimicking a girl at school: "Well, I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid we can't do business, then. I'm an American girl; my name is Mordaunt. Grierson Mordaunt is my uncle. I guess you've heard of him. I want to buy a yacht, in a hurry-my people generally are in a hurry-and I thought this one might do. But if I can't see the owner myself, it's no use. *Good morning.*"

Before she had got half-way to the door the dapper manager of the advertising bureau stopped her. Possibly an exception might be made in her favour; he would write to his client.

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