



***STELLA
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Stella Benson

Living Alone

EAN 8596547014706

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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CHAPTER I

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MAGIC COMES TO A COMMITTEE

There were six women, seven chairs, and a table in an otherwise unfurnished room in an unfashionable part of London. Three of the women were of the kind that has no life apart from committees. They need not be mentioned in detail. The names of two others were Miss Meta Mostyn Ford and Lady Arabel Higgins. Miss Ford was a good woman, as well as a lady. Her hands were beautiful because they paid a manicurist to keep them so, but she was too righteous to powder her nose. She was the sort of person a man would like his best friend to marry. Lady Arabel was older: she was virtuous to the same extent as Achilles was invulnerable. In the beginning, when her soul was being soaked in virtue, the heel of it was fortunately left dry. She had a husband, but no apparent tragedy in her life. These two women were obviously not native to their surroundings. Their eyelashes brought Bond Street—or at least Kensington—to mind; their shoes were mudless; their gloves had not been bought in the sales. Of the sixth woman the less said the better.

All six women were there because their country was at war, and because they felt it to be their duty to assist it to remain at war for the present. They were the nucleus of a committee on War Savings, and they were waiting for their Chairman, who was the Mayor of the borough. He was also a grocer.

Five of the members were discussing methods of persuading poor people to save money. The sixth was making spots on the table with a pen.

They were interrupted, not by the expected Mayor, but by a young woman, who came violently in by the street door, rushed into the middle of the room, and got under the table. The members, in surprise, pushed back their chairs and made ladylike noises of protest and inquiry.

"They're after me," panted the person under the table.

All seven listened to thumping silence for several seconds, and then, as no pursuing outcry declared itself, the Stranger arose, without grace, from her hiding-place.

To anybody except a member of a committee it would have been obvious that the Stranger was of the Cinderella type, and bound to turn out a heroine sooner or later. But perception goes out of committees. The more committees you belong to, the less of ordinary life you will understand. When your daily round becomes nothing more than a daily round of committees you might as well be dead.

The Stranger was not pretty; she had a broad, curious face. Her clothes were much too good to throw away. You would have enjoyed giving them to a decayed gentlewoman.

"I stole this bun," she explained frankly. "There is an uninterned German baker after me."

"And why did you steal it?" asked Miss Ford, pronouncing the H in "why" with a haughty and terrifying sound of suction.

The Stranger sighed. "Because I couldn't afford to buy it."

"And why could you not afford to buy the bun?" asked Miss Ford. "A big strong girl like you."

You will notice that she had had a good deal of experience in social work.

The Stranger said: "Up till ten o'clock this morning I was of the leisured classes like yourselves. I had a hundred pounds."

Lady Arabel was one of the kindest people in the world, but even she quivered at the suggestion of a common leisure. The sort of clothes the Stranger wore Lady Arabel would have called "too dretful." If one is well dressed one is proud, and may look an angel in the eye. If one is really shabby one is even prouder, one often goes out of one's way to look angels in the eye. But if one wears a squirrel fur "set," and a dyed dress that originally cost two and a half guineas, one is damned.

"You have squandered all that money?" pursued Miss Ford.

"Yes. In ten minutes."

A thrill ran through all six members. Several mouths watered.

"I am ashamed of you," said Miss Ford. "I hope the baker will catch you. Don't you know that your country is engaged in the greatest conflict in history? A hundred pounds ... you might have put it in the War Loan."

"Yes," said the Stranger, "I did. That's how I squandered it."

Miss Ford seemed to be partially drowned by this reply. One could see her wits fighting for air.

But Lady Arabel had not committed herself, and therefore escaped this disaster. "You behaved foolishly," she said. "We are all too dretfully anxious to subscribe what we can spare to the War Loan, of course. But the State does not expect more than that of us."

"God bless it," said the Stranger loudly, so that everybody blushed. "Of course it doesn't. But it is fun, don't you think, when you are giving a present, to exceed expectations?"

"The State—" began Lady Arabel, but was nudged into silence by Miss Ford. "Of course it's all untrue. Don't let her think we believe her."

The Stranger heard her. Such people do not only hear with their ears. She laughed.

"You shall see the receipt," she said.

Out of her large pocket she dragged several things before she found what she sought. The sixth member noticed several packets labelled MAGIC, which the Stranger handled very carefully. "Frightfully explosive," she said.

"I believe you're drunk," said Miss Ford, as she took the receipt. It really was a War Loan receipt, and the name and address on it were: "Miss Hazeline Snow, The Bindles, Pymley, Gloucestershire."

Lady Arabel smiled in a relieved way. She had not long been a social worker, and had not yet acquired a taste for making fools of the undeserving. "So this is your name and address," she said.

"No," said the Stranger simply.

"This is your name and address," said Lady Arabel more loudly.

"No," said the Stranger. "I made it up. Don't you think 'The Bindles, Pymley,' is too darling?"

"Quite drunk," repeated Miss Ford. She had attended eight committee meetings that week.

"S—s—s—sh, Meta," hissed Lady Arabel. She leaned forward, not smiling, but pleasantly showing her teeth. "You gave a false name and address. My dear, I wonder if I can guess why."

"I dare say you can," admitted the Stranger. "It's such fun, don't you think, to get no thanks? Don't you sometimes amuse yourself by sending postal orders to people whose addresses look pathetic in the telephone book, or by forgetting to take away the parcels you have bought in poor little shops? Or by standing and looking with ostentatious respect at boy scouts on the march, always bearing in mind that these, in their own eyes, are not little boys trotting behind a disguised curate, but British Troops on the Move? Just two pleased eyes in a crowd, just a hundred pounds dropped from heaven into poor Mr. Bonar Law's wistful hand...."

Miss Ford began to laugh, a ladylike yet nasty laugh. "You amuse me," she said, but not in the kind of way that would make anybody wish to amuse her often.

Miss Ford was the ideal member of committee, and a committee, of course, exists for the purpose of damping enthusiasms.

The Stranger's manners were somehow hectic. Directly she heard that laughter the tears came into her eyes. "Didn't you like what I was saying?" she asked. Tears climbed down her cheekbones.

"Oh!" said Miss Ford. "You seem to be—if not drunk—suffering from some form of hysteria."

"Do you think youth is a form of hysteria?" asked the Stranger. "Or hunger? Or magic? Or—"

"Oh, don't recite any more lists, for the Dear Sake!" implored Miss Ford, who had caught this rather pretty expression where she caught her laugh and most of her thoughts—from contemporary fiction. She had a lot of friends in the writing trade. She knew artists too, and an actress, and a lot of people who talked. She very nearly did something clever herself. She continued: "I wish you could see yourself, trying to be uplifting between the munches of a stolen bun. You'd laugh too. But perhaps you never laugh," she added, straightening her lips.

"How d'you mean—laugh?" asked the Stranger. "I didn't know that noise was called laughing. I thought you were just saying 'Ha—ha.'"

At this moment the Mayor came in. As I told you, he was a grocer, and the Chairman of the committee. He was a bad Chairman, but a good grocer. Grocers generally wear white in the execution of their duty, and this fancy, I think, reflects their pureness of heart. They spend their days among soft substances most beautiful to touch; and sometimes they sell honest-smelling soaps; and sometimes they chop cheeses, and thus reach the glory of the butcher's calling, without its painfulness. Also they handle shining tins, marvellously illustrated.

Mayors and grocers were of course nothing to Miss Ford, but Chairmen were very important. She nodded curtly to the

Mayor and grocer, but she pushed the seventh chair towards the Chairman.

"May I just finish with this applicant?" she asked in her thin inclusive committee voice, and then added in the direction of the Stranger: "It's no use talking nonsense. We all see through you, you cannot deceive a committee. But to a certain extent we believe your story, and are willing, if the case proves satisfactory, to give you a helping hand. I will take down a few particulars. First your name?"

"M—m," mused the Stranger. "Let me see, you didn't like Hazeline Snow much, did you? What d'you think of Thelma ... Thelma Bennett Watkins?... You know, the Rutlandshire Watkinses, the younger branch——"

Miss Ford balanced her pen helplessly. "But that isn't your real name."

"How d'you mean—real name?" asked the Stranger anxiously. "Won't that do? What about Iris ... Hyde?... You see, the truth is, I was never actually christened ... I was born a conscientious objector, and also——"

"Oh, for the Dear Sake, be silent!" said Miss Ford, writing down "Thelma Bennett Watkins," in self-defence. "This, I take it, is the name you gave at the time of the National Registration."

"I forget," said the Stranger. "I remember that I put down my trade as Magic, and they registered it on my card as 'Machinist.' Yet Magic, I believe, is a starred profession."

"What is your trade really?" asked Miss Ford.

"I'll show you," replied the Stranger, unbuttoning once more the flap of her pocket.

She wrote a word upon the air with her finger, and made a flourish under the word. So flowery was the flourish that it span her round, right round upon her toes, and she faced her watchers again. The committee jumped, for the blind ran up, and outside the window, at the end of a strange perspective of street, the trees of some far square were as soft as thistledown against a lemon-coloured sky. A sound came up the street....

The forgotten April and the voices of lambs pealed like bells into the room....

Oh, let us flee from April! We are but swimmers in seas of words, we members of committees, and to the song of April there are no words. What do we know, and what does London know, after all these years of learning?

Old Mother London crouches, with her face buried in her hands; and she is walled in with her fogs and her loud noises, and over her head are the heavy beams of her dark roof, and she has the barred sun for a skylight, and winds that are but hideous draughts rush under her door. London knows much, and every moment she learns a new thing, but this she shall never learn—that the sun shines all day and the moon all night on the silver tiles of her dark house, and that the young months climb her walls, and run singing in and out between her chimneys....

Nothing else happened in that room. At least nothing more important than the ordinary manifestations attendant upon magic. The lamp had tremulously gone out. Coloured flames danced about the Stranger's head. One felt the thrill

of a purring cat against one's ankles, one saw its green eyes glare. But these things hardly counted.

It was all over. The Mayor was heard cracking his fingers, and whispering "Puss, Puss." The lamp relighted itself. Nobody had known that it was so gifted.

The Mayor said: "Splendid, miss, quite splendid. You'd make a fortune on the stage." His tongue, however, seemed to be talking by itself, without the assistance of the Mayor himself. One could see that he was shaken out of his usual grocerly calm, for his feverish hand was stroking a cat where no cat was.

Black cats are only the showy properties of magic, easily materialised, even by beginners, at will. It must be confusing for such an orderly animal as the cat to exist in this intermittent way, never knowing, so to speak, whether it is there or not there, from one moment to another.

The sixth member took a severely bitten pen from between her lips, and said: "Now you mention it, I think I'll go down there again for the week-end. I can pawn my earrings."

Nobody of course took any notice of her, yet in a way her remark was logical. For that singing Spring that had for a moment trespassed in the room had reminded her of very familiar things, and for a few seconds she had stood upon a beloved hill, and had looked down between beech trees on a far valley, like a promised land; and had seen in the valley a pale river and a dark town, like milk and honey.

As for Miss Ford, she had become rather white. Although the blind had now pulled itself down, and dismissed April, Miss Ford continued to look at the window. But she cleared

her throat and said hoarsely: "Will you kindly answer my questions? I asked you what your trade was."

"It's too dretful of me to interrupt," said Lady Arabel suddenly. "But, do you know, Meta, I feel we are wasting this committee's time. This young person needs no assistance from us." She turned to the Stranger, and added: "My dear, I am dretfully ashamed. You must meet my son Rrchud.... My son Rrchud knows...."

She burst into tears.

The Stranger took her hand.

"I should like awfully to meet Rrchud, and to get to know you better," she said. She grew very red. "I say, I should be awfully pleased if you would call me Angela."

It wasn't her name, but she had noticed that something of this sort is always said when people become motherly and cry.

Then she went away.

"Lawdy," said the Mayor. "I didn't expect she'd go out by the door, somehow. Look—she's left some sort of hardware over there in the corner."

It was a broomstick.

CHAPTER II

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THE COMMITTEE COMES TO MAGIC

I don't suppose for a moment that you know Mitten Island: it is a difficult place to get to; you have to change 'buses seven times, going from Kensington, and you have to cross the river by means of a ferry. On Mitten Island there is a model village, consisting of several hundred houses, two churches, and one shop.

It was the sixth member who discovered, after the committee meeting, that the address on the forsaken broomstick's collar was: Number 100 Beautiful Way, Mitten Island, London.

The sixth member, although she was a member of committees, was neither a real expert in, nor a real lover of, Doing Good. In Doing Good, I think, we have got into bad habits. We try in groups to do good to the individual, whereas, if good is to be done, it would seem more likely, and more consonant with precedent, that the individual might do it to the group. Without the smile of a Treasurer we cannot unloose our purse-strings; without the sanction of a Chairman we have no courage; without Minutes we have no memory. There is hardly one of us who would dare to give a flannelette nightgown to a Factory Girl who had Stepped Aside, without a committee to lay the blame on, should the Factory Girl, fortified by the flannelette nightgown, take Further Steps Aside.