

# Old Scattergood's Money.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

## CHAPTER III.—CONCLUSION.

She had given her uncle his tea, cleared it away, and now was free to call an hour her own.

She only asked for a little spare time twice a week, when all her work was done, and this was spent in the one poor little pleasure of Joan's life—her music lessons.

It must not be supposed that her uncle paid for anything so extravagant as those lessons; far from it.

His niece earned every penny of the money by her own deft fingers in the long evenings, stitching away at the endless seams and hems of the house linen, one of the farmer's wives, who had but poor sight, but was particular over her plain sewing, had commissioned Joan to do for her.

Joan disliked the work as much as most healthy, active girls of her age dislike sitting still for hours in patient plodding; but she liked the reward—the hour she could spend at Miss Gower's little cottage piano once a week, to practice, and her weekly lesson.

She stopped at the little ivied porch of a tiny house in the village street, and was let in by the music mistress herself.

Lilias Gower was very fair—very blue eyed and flaxen haired, small and rather languid looking.

Her hair was most elaborately puffed and frizzed, and her cotton dress was new and smartly made.

'Gracious, Joan—early again! I never saw such an example of punctuality as you in all my life. You should see the little Jacksons, and Nan and Kitty Gresham, come crawling down the road on their lesson afternoons!'

A slow smile crept into Joan's hazel eyes, as she followed Miss Gower into the tiny parlor that was much too crowded with knickknacks and ornaments of every description.

There was too much tissue paper in various forms: too many bunches of dried grass, too many eccentricities in the shape of tidies and useless things upon the walls, too many colours everywhere; and Joan accustomed to the cool, large rooms of the farm house, and the subdued tones of the faded furniture, always felt stifled in this little room, and fearful lest she should do some dreadful damage every time she moved.

But Lilias Gower was perfectly happy amid her gay and crowded surroundings. She was just twenty and she was ambitious.

Her grandmother had been 'Susan the cook' up at the Hall years ago.

Her mother had been raised a step in life; had been called Amelia, and had served in a fancy shop in the nearest town.

And now Lilias, who had managed to impress upon her family while still very young that she was a child of exceeding cleverness, earned a very fair livelihood by teaching music.

Joan's smile died away into an envious expression as she watched Lilias' white smooth, fingers sweep along the keys with a clever little motion that showed off a new pearl ring and some silver bangles to perfection, and then sat down to try a feeble imitation of her mistress's touch and brilliancy.

But her fingers were stiff with much sewing, and her arms tired with the work she had done all the morning.

The waltz that had sounded so gay and rippling when Lilias played, was but a sad and halting performance from her own fingers, and the envious look deepened in her dark eyes.

'I can't play it!' she said, at last, regretfully; 'I shall never be able to do anything like other girls. I had better just practise scales again until my hour is up.'

The scales left Joan rather more depressed than before, and she turned slowly round on the stool when they were over, and rolled up her music.

A new cabinet-photo on the mantelshelf caught her eye, and she glanced again.

'It's very good, don't you think?' asked Lilias, with a smile. 'He takes well full face; but I don't know but that I like this one better,' and she took down another photograph from a corner bracket—a profile of Saxon March, and held the two together for Joan to compare.

'Yes; they're very good,' murmured Joan, and for the life of her she could think of nothing else to say but a repetition of Lilias' own words.

Something was stirring within her that made speech difficult just then.

Every day she had looked forward, dreadfully, to hear of the crash at the Red Farm, that Saxon had said was imminent; but no word of anything unusual had reached her ears.

She had seen him only twice since that interview, and he had not spoken—only raised his hat and passed with a look, the meaning of which she had not yet learned to fathom.

A faint color crept up into her cheeks now, and her eyes darkened.

It almost seemed as though Saxon had deceived her shamefully; and, if so, Joan was of a nature that would find it hard to forgive.

It was only during the last few weeks that she had even realized that she had in some way taken a greater interest in Farmer March's three big handsome boys than in the other village lads—she liked to put it in this way, even to herself; but if Joan had been quite honest and candid,

she would have owned that the interest centred itself mostly upon Saxon, the eldest of the three; and it was galling to her pride to think that he had got himself out of a very ugly scrape—perhaps even a very serious danger—by playing upon her childish credulity.

Lilias looked down upon the portraits with a wistful smile; then she sighed, and replaced them, with a lingering touch, in their former positions.

'It's very hard that one's—one's friends should go away and leave them,' she said, as she sat down by Joan's side. 'I don't know what Ayleswood will be like without him. It was always dull enough before; but the March boys put a little life into it; and now when Saxon goes it will be just awful!'

'So Saxon is going away?' 'Yes; didn't you know?' and Lilias raised her eyebrows in surprise. 'I thought everyone knew that.'

'I have no one to talk to,' said Joan, quietly. 'It is very rarely I hear any news you know.'

Although she was ready to go, she made no effort to start, and glanced up at Miss Gower's face interrogatively.

'He's off on Thursday,' Lilias went on, with an air of being very much at home in all Saxon's movements and arrangements.

'Of course it has been a terrible time for them all lately; you won't breathe a word to a living soul, my dear, will you? No, of course not, because it is a secret you know; but unless Mr. March's cousin had come forward at the very last hour and paid off that mortgage money, they would have lost the farm, and been turned off penniless. Mr. March himself was nearly demented, and Saxon was almost as bad; but it is all settled now, I'm glad to say, and they will make a fresh start; only, Saxon vows he won't stay on at home after all this upset. He says Ralph is quite old enough to take his place now, and he is off to strike out a new line for himself.'

'Yes?' said Joan, rather vaguely, as her companion paused for breath, and she wondered if there were any connection between that new pearl ring on Lilias' finger and Saxon's coming departure.

'And Africa too, of all places! He might just as well have stayed in some civilized place a bit nearer home,' Lilias went on, in an injured tone. 'Goodness only knows when we may expect him back again; but it won't be for some years in any case, so he says.'

'And does Mr. March agree to his going?' asked Joan, finding she was expected to make some remark, and thinking secretly how pleasant it must be to have people of near kin and kin, to whom one's going away or staying was of vital importance.

If she, Joan, were to leave Ayleswood suddenly, was there one single soul in all the village who would miss her, or give her one regretful thought?

Not one, said Joan's own heart, and she sighed a little.

'He is not very pleased about it, but what can he do? Saxon is over age now, and he is so set upon going that nothing will move him, and so his father has given in, and has paid his passage out to the Cape. More than that Saxon won't accept, and he's bent on making his own way in the world. After all he's young and strong and I don't see why he shouldn't do it.'

And Miss Gower heaved a small, but philosophic sigh, and looked out of the window with a far reaching gaze, presumably into Saxon March's future.

On Thursday morning Joan had her chair near the kitchen window and found her eyes often travelling towards the lane as she stitched away at the hem of a sheet.

The short cut to the station was down that lane, and she fancied Farmer March would drive his son to meet the train; but no one passed except a farm laborer or two, and the old pedlar who would never

take Joan's emphatic 'No!' for answer, and plagued her sadly to buy his wares.

It was nearly dinner-time and she had gone down to the gate to fasten the latch when she saw little Teddie Wade, the odd boy at the Red Farm House, driving the gig around the turn of the lane.

'Been to the station,' he cried, with a grin, for this was an unwelcome event to Ted, and savored of a holiday. 'Drove old Jess there all by myself.'

'By yourself?' asked Joan, lingering for news, and yet loath to ask for it. 'I wonder they trusted you! Was it a very important errand?'

'I took Master Saxon's portmanteaux to the train for him,' said Teddie. 'The master an' him rode over themselves on horse-back, after all.'

So Saxon was gone, without one word of gratitude or farewell; presumably without even a thought of either Joan or the Manor Farm.

## CHAPTER IV.

'But, my dear child, three refusals in one year! This is really becoming serious! I can't quite see why poor Sir Donald was sent to share his predecessor's fate. You must admit there was no fault to find with him, either personally or as a good match in a worldly sense—he is a man of a very different stamp from Major Chatteris, or Mr. de Lisle. I really feel it my duty to call you to account my dear, if only for poor Sir Donald's sake. It was for you yourself he cared for not your money.'

'I know,' said a girl, who sat in a low chair by the drawing room window, her hands clasped on her knees, and her dark eyes fixed on the marguerites and lobelias in the balcony outside.

It was a pleasant little house in Bayswater, with a side glimpse of Hyde Park from its windows, and it had been Joan's home for the last three years.

When, some months after Saxon's departure, old John Scattergood was found dead one evening in his arm chair by the kitchen hearth, it was discovered that he had willed all his hoarded treasure, and the fortune that had been accumulating all during his long life time, to his sole surviving relative, Joan Armitage.

When all his investments were put together, it was found there would be a clear income of over a thousand a year for the girl who had been a veritable Cinderella in the old lonely farmhouse, and who saw before her, a future richer in possibilities than she had ever pictured, even in her wildest dreams.

All she had longed for was now within her grasp, and Joan lost no time in consulting with the vicar at Ayleswood—a sharp little lady, who suddenly began to find Miss Armitage, the heiress, a much more interesting person than little Joan, the miser's niece; and after some advertising and enquiries, a home was found for her in London, where she could be near at hand for all the lessons and classes she wished to attend.

The first year did not pass without adventures of a mild kind.

She had been placed in the house of an astute matron, who had a spendthrift daughter, and Joan's money proved a very tempting bait for them both, and would have patched up the fortunes that were at a very low ebb.

But Joan had too much common sense not to see through the plot laid to entrap her, and soon sought another home.

Her next experience proved but little better, and it seemed to her at times as though the touch of her gold brought nothing but the worst qualities in those who handled it to the surface, and though all men and women were greedy and avaricious.

But chance threw in her way a happier experience when she finally settled down with a middle aged little widow in Bayswater, and quickly found in her a friend, almost a mother.

Mrs. Nelson, a soldier's widow, had lost her husband in an Indian skirmish, and had no children of her own.

She liked Joan for her own sake, and found a new interest in her somewhat lonely life, in forming the girl's mind, and helping her in the studies she plunged into with such ardour and delight.

Joan Armitage was twenty one now, and absolutely her own mistress, for the slight guardianship which the old family solicitor had exercised over her fortune was at an end now and done with, and she had altered a good deal from the Joan of the old Ayleswood days.

She laughed sometimes now, as she thought of those stolen hours at the piano in Miss Gower's little cottage—now, when she had an 'Eard' to play on as much as she liked, and a tiny studio upon the top floor whenever she chose to spend a long day among her beloved paints and canvases.

Joan had worked hard at music, for she loved it; but she found there would always be something hard and mechanical in her playing, and wisely gave it up, to cultivate her voice instead.

There was no disappointment for her there; the soft, vibrant voice was full of richness and feeling, and in singing Joan gave way to a depth of expression that rarely betrayed her otherwise, and the quiet, serious Miss Armitage was often transformed into a brilliant or pathetically winning personage, when her beautiful notes rang through a large room full of eager listeners.

'Please say no more about it—about Sir Donald, I mean,' she said, gently, as she rose from her chair. 'I like him—even admire him—in many ways; and for that reason I cannot marry him. He is too good for any woman to marry who cannot give him the love he deserves.'

'The same old story. No one has found your heart yet, Joan.'

'Surely it will be none the worse for keeping a little,' said Joan, with a smile; and, for some unattractive reason, her face flushed a little.

Perhaps it was because she had a rooted objection to discussing the subject of probable suitors, even with her dearest friend,

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and would allow no mention of it if she could possibly avoid it.

Perhaps some memory from the past had been newly aroused by her companion's chance words.

'I shall be back in time for tea, and mind you get a nice rest this afternoon. Here is Maudie's new book, dear, and now, good-bye.'

As Joan went slowly down the street, and into a florist's at the corners a tall man followed her, hesitated for a moment, then stood quietly outside, awaiting her coming.

In a few moments, he was rewarded.

Joan, in a dress of silver-gray cloth, with soft touches of snowy chiffon about the bodice, and a picture hat, with many ostrich feathers curling softly round its brim, came out, her hand full of lilies and white lilac.

She had been out to lunch with Mrs. Nelson at a rising artist's house, or she would hardly have chosen so smart a dress for the visit she was about to pay.

As she came out of the florist's, the man awaiting drew near.

'Forgive me, Joan—Miss Armitage! I was just venturing to call when I saw you come out, and I thought perhaps I had better speak to you here, and find out first if a call would be welcome.'

Joan had stopped short.

She did not start or lose her flowers.

But a subtle change had passed over her face; her great dark eyes had a dawning light in their hazel depths; a curious softness was stealing into the curves of her lips, and a faint glow had crept into her cheeks.

She held out her hand in its grey suede glove.

'Welcome home,' she said, simply, and the faint hesitation in the man's manner, and the half fearful look in his bronzed face, gave way at once to one of evident pleasure, and he looked searchingly into the beautiful face that was now so nearly on a level with his own.

There was a moment's pause, while Joan's eyes had fallen upon the lilies in her hand, and her proud head bent a little.

'I wonder you recognized me, after so long,' she said, as she moved slowly beside him along the deserted street.

'Oh, I knew you at once by your—' Saxon was about to say 'by your eyes,' but he checked himself, and said, 'I could not mistake you, Miss Armitage; you are not so very changed, after all, in these five years.'

'Nor are you,' said Joan; but she, who was ever the soul of truth had made an equivocation then, perhaps because she wanted an excuse for having so readily recognized the stranger.

Saxon March was very much altered from the fresh faced lad who had gone from the farm five years ago to seek his fortune in another land.

Instead of his six and twenty, he looked near thirty six.

His fair face had bronzed, and his features were sharpened and refined; he carried himself like a man who was accustomed to command, and to be obeyed.

There was an open, fearless look in his blue eyes, a frankness in his address that won most men and women to be his friends.

Just where the hair curled over his tanned forehead was a deep, clean cut scar, and Joan's eyes sought it presently then he was not looking at her. She knew most of his doings for the last two years; indeed, many who had never heard of Saxon March in England were interested in watching from afar the brilliant career of the young adventurer who, after years of hard toil and continued bad luck, had suddenly leapt into fortune at the diamond fields of South Africa.

For a time, everything he touched seemed to turn to gold, every bold stroke he made for fortune succeeded, and though he spent his money lavishly where he thought it needed to help on the district that soon became almost his own, in two years he was amply rich enough to think of coming home and settling down in England in almost any manner he might choose.

Among all the feverish rush for wealth, and the very doubtful methods adopted by many to enrich themselves, Saxon March had always kept his hands clean and his name unsullied.

No man could ever point to him and say he had been the loser of a shilling in any business between them.

Indeed, Saxon's reputation had been considerably enhanced by the knowledge that he had once lost a considerable sum by backing out some transaction which favoured to him a little of sharp practice.

During the last year a war had broken out among the native tribes in East Africa where Saxon was exploring for a few months before his return home; and, seeing the danger that threatened the scattered white settlers, he had quickly enrolled a small regiment of horse at his own expense and led them in some brilliant skirmishes, and not a few fierce fights when they came to close quarters with the savage foe.

Joan had read many a report in the newspapers of 'March's Horse' and their gallant doings during the months the war dragged on.

She read of his wound in the face from a native's lance, and his quick recovery, and of the devotion of his men for their gallant leader; and, during all those years no one had ever heard his name upon Joan Armitage's lips.

Unheeding, they had passed Mrs. Nelson's door.

'You will come in?' asked Joan, when she discovered it, and he answered by another question—

'Will you allow me?'

And something in his eyes, as they met hers, reminded her of the lad who had stood before her, in the old farm kitchen, years ago—shamed and conscience stricken.

She met them frankly with a grave look in her own.

'Mrs. Nelson and I will be pleased to see you whenever you care to come, Mr. March. I was not so very happy in my youthful days at Ayleswood, but I am glad to meet old friends from there, all the same.'

'You are walking towards the park—may I not come with you, instead of going in?'

'If you like. I am going across to Saint George's—the hospital, you know. Oh, no, nothing is the matter with anyone I know; but one must do something with their time and—' 'money,' she would have said, but checked herself quickly, 'and—one can easily spare a few hours a week to those who are not so fortunate as we are.'

'Yes,' he assented, slowly, glad to find she had not developed into a young lady of fashion, pure and simple. 'You spoke of Ayleswood just now; I have just spent a month home with father and the boys—such jolly fellows they have grown, too!—and a smile came over Saxon's face as he mentioned his brethren. 'But, of course, you have seen them? I heard you had been down to the Manor farm, and spent Christmas there the last two years. That was how I was able to get your address—your old pensioner there gave it to me.'

'Yes,' she said, slowly.

They were in the park now, walking beneath the creamy spires of chestnut flowers that were out on the long lines of trees in their freest spring glory; and beds of flaming tulips—great cups of deepest ruby and brightest gold—studded the green turf on either hand.

It was a soft May afternoon, with a gentle breeze wafted over the Serpentine, and the scent of spring flowers sweet upon the air.

'Yes, I like to go down there for a little while, especially at Christmas, and to make it a change from those dismal times of yore—any house would be lively and gay where Mrs. Nelson is. I only missed one winter, and then we were abroad in Italy.'

'So you have travelled, too?'

'Oh! nothing like you, of course, my friend and I spent a year on the continent, while I studied several subjects I was interested in.'

Saxon wondered what they were, but hardly dared to ask; only, he thought there was a very clever look about the handsome face—an intellectual expression in the dark eyes that made him wish to dive below the surface for the treasures he felt assured were hidden there.

There was so much for Saxon to tell, and for Joan to ask, that they were on the hospital steps before either quite realized it.

'And now I must say 'Good-bye,' said Joan.

Saxon hesitated over her extended hand.

'Are you going to walk back?' he asked.

'If so, may I come in and look round until you are ready? or should I bore you too much if I took you back? Please send me away if you think I should.'

'If you care to spend an hour here, you may return with me, and Mrs. Nelson shall give you some tea. Then you can finish about that last campaign,' said Joan. 'I should like to hear the end.'

In the quiet, shaded little drawing-room sweet-scented with pot-pourri that Joan had discovered in an old punch bowl at the farm, and with fresh spring flowers in every available place, she took off her hat, and poured out tea.

There were no other callers and Mrs. Nelson made Joan's new friend—or old one, as she chose to call him—very welcome to her home; so Saxon spent a pleasant hour watching his young hostess as she sat beside the low table with its fine china cups, and its heavy old silver service, that shone in the sunlight now, instead of lying in the dark cupboard in the old farmhouse.

He lingered a few moments on the landing as Joan wished him 'Good-bye.'

'You spoke of 'idle hours' this afternoon and said you had many; so also have I while I stay in town, and that will probably be all the season. You find something to do it seems. Cannot I help you? Can you give me anything—any trifle even—in which I can be of use?'

Joan looked into his face, a little flush upon her own.

It seemed to her that he must be laughing.

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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