

But even this pleasant piece of intelligence did not restore Joan to her normal condition. She ate her luncheon in a sort of dream, and yet nothing escaped her observation. She noticed with secret pride the perfect ease with which her brother entertained his distinguished guests, and the alert brightness of his aspect assured her of his satisfaction; and she also observed Silence's shy pleasure in Lady Dorothy's conversation. Nothing could exceed the Earl's affability; he talked to the Winchester boys and asked Noel's age, and made pleasant speeches to Wanda and Jessica. Jess was on her good behaviour for once—a real live Earl inspired her with awe. 'Though, after all,' as she remarked afterwards to her mother, 'he was only a nice red-faced old gentleman, who looked more like a farmer than a nobleman.'

As soon as luncheon was over, Lord Merriton hurried his daughter away. A few final directions were given to Joan, which Canon Leigh privately noted; and as he had a call to make in the station, he drove with them to the station.

Joan woke up in reality as the carriage wheels were lost in the distance. The children were gathered round her in a bunch, full of noisy lamentations that she was going away, and that their Christmas would be quite spoilt without Aunt Joan. But their mother promptly silenced them.

'Don't be selfish, children; your aunt would far rather be at Brantwood. Now there is no time to waste in talk. I am coming to your room, Joan, to help with your packing.'

Joan was truly thankful for her assistance. Silence was always so collected and capable when there was any business on hand. She never fussed or talked as some workers do. Joan had other things to think about