

Something for Nothing

by Sophie Kerr

Nothing in Washington Is What It Appears to Be; There's Always a Secret "Inside"; This Is One.

THE one thing that a Washington newspaper never believes in, so Louis Boland began this tale, is disinterestedness. I was a green kid when I went there, as green as the grass in the White House yard in April, and the only reason I got the job was because a rival paper lured away our old correspondent, and they had to send some one in a hurry. Old Slocum Sykes was managing editor then, and he called me in, and he says, booming his voice out from his bush of whiskers:

"Get down to Washington tonight and take charge of the bureau. Do your best until I can find an adult for the job. And may the Lord have mercy on your soul."

I did as I was told, scared to death, sure I couldn't make good. But—well, old Sykes never sent anyone to take my place. But all that's not part of the story.

It was at Mrs. Carrington's I met Miss Thatcher, and Miss Thatcher is the heroine of this story. I don't know who is the hero. Certainly I'm not, and neither is Senator Kaine. The villain's part is easy—only it was a villainess. Of her later.

We were in the press gallery, and Kaine got up to puncture some much-inflated oratory of the senator from Texas with a few cold statistics.

"There's the luckiest man in the senate," said Wesson. "He's got a guardian angel."

"What d'you mean guardian angel?" I asked.

"His secretary. Say, boy, you want to get acquainted with Estelle Thatcher. She's one of the landmarks of Washington. Used to be secretary and day nurse and campaign manager and everything else to old Armstrong of Oregon; wrote his speeches, kept him sober when necessary, jollied his constituency—by golly, she's a wonder. She's worth her salary for her memory alone."

And that very night at dinner Miss Thatcher, contrary to her usual custom, was talkative. The reason was, she was angry. An angry woman's bound to talk.

I think some of you newspaper people are the biggest fools," she said to me, half laughing, but plainly provoked. "O, I'm not hating at anything you've done. It was a woman—that silly Miss—No, I won't mention names. You'll run up against her before long, anyway. She gets all the feature stories for one of the biggest bureaus down here, but what d'you think she wanted Senator Kaine to do? Give her an interview on 'How it feels to be the handsomest man in the senate!' Can you beat it! Look at poor Mitchell Palmer. He was tagged 'the handsomest man in congress' along in his first year, and it pretty nearly was his finish."

"He is good looking, though," I said. I wanted to hear her views on that.

"He's a good man," she said with emphasis. "And he's as brainy a one as there is in congress today, in either party." And that was all the satisfaction I got.

But I wasn't through. "I understand he's quite a pet of the ladies," I went on.

She grinned at me—you couldn't help liking Miss Thatcher.

"The fishin' poor," she said. "But you can get all the information you want by reading the social items."

Gradually as I came to know the city, and as I came to know my work, and as I came to get a little perspective on the game of bunk known as national politics, I acquired, along with all of these, a profound respect for Miss Thatcher's abilities as there were demonstrated in her service to Senator Kaine.

It's an axiom that you don't know a man until you've seen him with a woman. Now, I'd often seen Senator Kaine with various women—at the theater, and receptions, and such affairs, but never attached to any special one. In a party, yes, but he was nobody's little pet lamb, to be pulled about by a string. His attentions were noticeably pleasant and courteous, but they sure were impersonal.

"Who's the pretty girl your senator goes walking with?" I inquired of Miss Thatcher that evening.

"Isn't she pretty? That's the daughter of one of his old friends, Arthur Reed, the big mining man, you know. The Reeds have come on and taken the McIntire house for the season. I believe they're going to entertain a lot this winter."

"I wish I wasn't a poor devil of a newspaper man," I said, "so that I could get acquainted with that girl. She's a peach."

"Yes, Louise Reed's a nice girl," agreed Miss Thatcher. "The senator's known her ever since she was a baby. As a matter of fact, Arthur Reed gave him his first case, when he was a struggling young lawyer nearly twenty years ago, and he's one of his staunchest supporters."

Fine romance material, what? And the society editors were quick to seize it. But wait a minute. Did you ever notice how, when a man shows symptoms of being attracted to a woman, some other woman simply can't bear it and starts right in to try to break it up? Professional troublemakers, usually—I don't want to slander the superior sex, but there are such in it. History bears me out.

Of such was Mrs. Marseme. She was a stormy petrel, it ever there was one—daughter of Admiral Filborne, you remember? A lovely, gentle looking creature, with violet eyes and helpless, fluttering hands, which were all a mask

for the perfect devil of vanity and heartlessness that she was. She had one occupation, turning heads and breaking hearts, and she was a wiz at it.

She'd been a debutante the first year I came to Washington, and I could recall what a sensation she made. She was always doing something extraordinary—and making the men who were crazy about her do things still more extraordinary. And at the end of her first season she married a good looking young Englishman, cousin of the then British ambassador. He had some money and he was a decent sort of chap, not awfully strong willed. It wasn't the super brilliant match everyone expected her to make, but it was pretty fair, and Marseme was simply off his head about her.

Stories drifted back after they'd been living in London a while—it seems that he took to drink and all the stuff that goes with it. And she was a suffering angel, an abused, neglected wife, and everyone felt sorry for her. Other rumors hinted that Gerald Marseme wasn't nearly as much of a brute as people said, and that lovely little wide-eyed Edith wasn't exactly the pathetic figure she so well represented herself to be. There were whispers of plenty of consolation for her, a young Guardsman, a middle-aged baronet, a South American mine owner—yes, and others. Be that as it may, Gerald Marseme finally died, and after some eight months or so of widowhood Mrs. Marseme turned up suddenly in Washington, vowing she had always longed to return to her native heath, and O, how happy she was to be back in dear old Washington with all the memories of her happy girlhood!

After she'd got her bearings a little she sighted Kaine's inclination toward Louise Reed. I say "inclination." It was more than that, but he didn't know it. It was different with Louise. She knew. She'd loved him all her life and couldn't help turning to him naturally, and confidingly. She hadn't reckoned on his blindness. Stupid creature, why didn't he see? But she felt sure he would see, before the winter was over.

And so he might have done if it hadn't been for Edith Marseme. Here was a piece of mischief just to her fancy. Delicately, gently, with all the finesse that her long experience had given her, she drew him away from Louise, and to herself. So smoothly, so casually! He never saw what he was getting into, but inensibly he was spending more and more time in Edith Marseme's little gray and gold apartment and less and less time in the big library of the Reed home, where Louise and he had read and talked and laughed together.

I dropped in at his office in the senate one day to have a word with Miss Thatcher, and found the outer sanctum empty. The door to the inner private room was half open and I heard Kaine speaking bitterly, violently.

"The trouble is," he said slowly. "That I'm not big enough. We need a leader. God, how we need a leader! But I am not he. I know it. I can't bring myself to work with these people, and I'm not strong enough to compel them to my way of thinking. My work is done. I would be glad and thankful beyond words to find some decent avenue of escape, to cut out of it all, to let some bigger man than I am take my place and do what I can't. O, the monstrous blunders, . . . the petty interests, . . . the complacency, the ignorance, . . . It makes me sick! I'm in a blind alley."

In all my life I've never heard anything so amazing. I had been sitting perfectly still, but somehow Miss Thatcher got suspicious. "Did someone come in?" she said suddenly, and came to the door. When she saw me she looked relieved. "O, it's you," she said. "I suppose you heard?"

"Yes, but—" I began.

"You needn't say it," she told me. "I know it's safe with you. I don't deserve such luck after being so careless. Did you want to see me?"

I told her what I'd come for, and went away. But that night after dinner, as I was starting down to my office, she stopped me.

"Come into my room," she said. "I've got to talk to somebody."

"You know," she said, her little pinched face pinched tighter than ever, "you know there's too much truth in what he said this afternoon—I mean what you overheard. I'd just gone in for a moment with a letter I wanted him to see and he began. I'm worried. And it's not just his career—that might come right; it's his happiness. Of course, they're mixed up together."

"Louise Reed's just the woman for him. She's young and she's good, and she's got character, and she's got beauty. And she loves him. O—why—why—can't he see that? It would be such a compensation to him, in the mood he's in. Of course it's because she's so hurt and so ashamed—for a girl who's shown a man that she loves him and seen him turn away from her is ashamed to the soul—that the Reeds are going. I don't blame her."

"But look here—about Mrs. Marseme—" I began.

She turned on me fiercely. "What can Edith Marseme give him? What will she do to him? She's got no heart, she's got no soul, she's all vanity, all selfishness, all meanness. And with her nasty, smirched past. O, nothing's been proven on her—so far. But everyone's talked."

She jumped up and walked back and forth, three steps each way was all the space there was.

"I won't stand it," she said, and that indomitable little chin of hers stuck out farther than ever. "I won't stand it. I've never interfered in anybody's life before, but I'm not going to sit by and let him plumb ruin himself."

But look how things dovetail together. A week or so after my talk with her there drifted into my office late one night a young chap who inquired, with a diffident English accent, if there might be a job stirring anywhere round that he could get.

When I finally got round to him there

he was, absorbed, staring at a cut in that morning's Post. It was Mrs. Marseme, in picturesque widow's weeds, and even the soft paper and the poor ink couldn't dim her pathetic loveliness. I touched the page with my pipe handle.

"Know the lady?" I asked.

"O—yes—rather," he answered, and his voice was queer.

"She's very popular in Washington," I said, carelessly.

"She was very popular in London," he blurted out. "Gerry Marseme was my cousin. I got the evidence for him to divorce her—but he died before he could use it."

"Whew!" I said. "That's quite a statement. A man in this country can't say things like that about a woman without being asked to prove it."

I had a hunch then, though I didn't know how it might be used. "Where are you stopping?" I asked him.

He was in a cheap rooming house, and the upshot of it was that I played my hand and got him in at Mrs. Carrington's, paid a week's board for him, and introduced him to Miss Thatcher. "Maybe he's your missing link," I told her.

She didn't need more than a hint. Between us we got young Edward a little job, and wasn't he grateful. Miss Thatcher mended some of his clothes, gave him tea out of her cheap little cups—good tea, though, no matter what the cups were. He hadn't a chance to hold out on her anything he knew about anybody.

One day she phoned to me. "Will you go with me and call on Mrs. Marseme?" she asked. "I'm afraid to go alone."

Presently we were in the sappiest little drawing room in all Washington, gray and gold. Lovely sort of demure gray, you understand, artfully touched and enlivened by the glamour of gold—golden gauze at the windows, a gold cushion or two on the floor, a bowl of gold luster filled with palest blue hyacinths, a gold framed French mirror. Miss Thatcher sniffed.

"Not much like my room at Mrs. Carrington's," she whispered. "Well . . . I've always wanted to see what the wages of sin could buy."

Then in came Edith Marseme, tall and gentle and sweet and appealing, all dressed in soft, trailing, colorful stuff, chiffon, I guess, that moved like a cloud as she walked and turned rose-lavender and blue-lavender and gray-lavender as it drifted along. No mere man can describe it. And I will rise to remark right here that so far as I am concerned I didn't blame Kaine for falling.

"You came from Senator Kaine?" she asked Miss Thatcher, a little puzzled. Miss Thatcher had sent up her name as the senator's secretary, so as to be sure of getting in.

"No," said Miss Thatcher, "but I came because of him and his interest in you. I was sent."

"Sent—by whom?" said Mrs. Marseme, and there was an edge of warning on her voice. She kept looking oddly at Miss Thatcher, but Miss Thatcher was so prim and respectable—her appearance was certainly her guarantee.

"You know," went on Miss Thatcher, "that a man in public life is not always permitted to follow his personal inclinations. Senator Kaine is a young man in his party—he is expected to go very far. The interests behind that party, who are backing him, do not feel that he would be of use to them, bluntly, if he married you, Mrs. Marseme. They have therefore gone to some pains and trouble to obtain, through a relative of your husband—"

"Edward!" exclaimed Mrs. Marseme feverishly.

"Through a relative of your late husband the corroboration of certain rumors about you—rumors which I won't trouble to repeat here. They have this corroboration in their hands, Mrs. Marseme. They intend to use it, unless you break your connection with Senator Kaine. They think—again pardon my bluntness—that he is too valuable a man to them to lose in the middle of his career. Do you see? Do you understand?"

Mrs. Marseme put one of her little hands up to her twitching mouth. She was frightened, but game. "Does Senator Kaine know this?" she asked.

"No," said Miss Thatcher. "No, certainly not. And I must tell you, in justice to Mr. Edward Marseme, that the material for this—this interview—was obtained from him by stealth and without his knowledge. The secret service—" she paused and smiled, "has many uses. But . . . I am also authorized to tell you that any move on your part for a hasty marriage with the senator, any attempted coup, will be instantly and fully and publicly—publicly, mind you—frustrated. You are . . . under constant surveillance."

"This is infamous," said Edith Marseme, at last. "Infamous!" And by the tone of her voice I knew she believed it, and was prepared to capitulate. "Do they offer me nothing—in return?"

"No," said Miss Thatcher. "Not a cent. They will merely make it easy for you to obtain a passport—this week, by preference. And to make you sure that they have—what they say they have—I am authorized to give you—this."

She opened her shabby little bag and took out a single typewritten sheet. "It's a copy, of course," she said, offering the paper to Mrs. Marseme.

Edith Marseme gave it one glance and winced. She crumpled it and held it in her hand. She looked very white and little and weak now, and, by God, I pitied her. Yes, I pitied her, and I wanted to get away. It was too painful. But she had herself well under control, even so.

"Have your employers planned what I shall say to Senator Kaine?" she asked. Miss Thatcher got up briskly. "No," she said. "They trust to your own excellent powers of invention for that."

We went out and left Mrs. Marseme sitting there, with that paper crumpled in her hand, a little, broken, hurt creature that you couldn't bear to look at. We

didn't say a word until we were out in the street again. The whole thing had been so fantastic that I began to feel that I'd dreamed it. "Say, did it really happen?" I asked Miss Thatcher. "And is it true?"

She stalked along, still the picture of Puritanic uprightness and reliability. "Not a word. I stole the stuff out of young Edward's trunk when I mended his underwear, and copied it and put it back. He doesn't know I've ever seen it. It was only a small part, that page I copied, but it was—convincing. You see, I am a thief as well as a liar. And this is only the beginning."

"Well, for the love of heaven," I said, "let me in on the next chapter. You owe me something after using my name as you did to that woman."

"I'll probably do more than let you in on it," she said. "You may have to do the real work next time."

"But look here—" I began to squirm.

She glanced up at me and stabbed me with the steel of the purpose in her eyes. "You stand by me in this," she said. "I haven't got a soul I can rely on but you."

What could I do after that? Nothing but say that I'd stick. O, my natural masculine curiosity helped; I itched to see how she'd follow up the defection of Mrs. Marseme, which I felt sure was going to happen.

And I was right. Edith Marseme packed her trunks and left Washington just one week after we'd called on her. It was a nine days' wonder, her going, and the consensus of opinion was that Kaine had jilted her. I don't know whether she saw him again or not. But, whether she broke with him in a personal interview or by letter, it was final and complete. He made no move to follow her, or anything like that. I have an idea that, just to please her own vanity, she was pretty brusque about it, handed him a he who gets slapped sort of wallop, laughed at him, told him he bored her to tears and that she simply couldn't stand his crudities and provincialisms. That would be her style. She couldn't make her exit without damage to someone.

Now look how the next thing hooked on. Hardly had the sensation of Mrs. Marseme's leaving died down when Miss Thatcher called me again to her room after dinner.

"I know now what to do next," she said. "I've got the way clear at last. Are you on good terms with Senator Bristol?"

Bristol, the gray old rat, the only man in the senate who had access to the White House at all times and seasons, head of the majority party, scheming, sly, all powerful. Yes, I was on good terms with him, so far as anybody was.

And he was on good terms with me because my paper was the biggest in his state. He was never out with the local press.

"I want you to go to him confidentially," said Miss Thatcher, "and tell him that it would be a good move to get the president to appoint Senator Kaine to the next vacancy among the United States circuit judgeships."

My jaw dropped. "But there's no vacancy likely to occur," I said, "unless you're arranged to kill off someone."

"Yes, there is," she said coolly. "Within a very short time, and out in our district, too. I just got word today that Judge Petersen's wife has inherited a lot of money and I know exactly what she'll do. It'll be New York and Paris for her for the rest of her life. She leads her husband round by the nose. So, Petersen will resign soon. There's nobody in the other party who's absolutely got to be taken care of just now, and Bristol knows it. He'll see the advantage instantly, for Kaine's been blocking some of his pet schemes and this is a chance to get him out of the way and harvest a lot of acclaim about it. Noble non-partisan stuff, you know—all that sort of thing."

"Will Kaine take it?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Ever see a person who wouldn't use a theater pass, even to the dullest show on earth? Well, it's like that with lawyers and judgeships. No matter what a lawyer has done or is doing, he always sees a judgeship as desirable." She turned, more serious. "And he's terribly fed up—Kaine is—die—do you remember what you overheard him say—weeks ago? It's more so now. And the gossip about the Marseme matter has irked him more than he knows. Oh, he'll take it, and be glad to. And I'm convinced that it's the best thing for him to do."

"Bristol won't listen to me," I objected.

"Bristol listens to everybody, and you know it," said Miss Thatcher. "And the fact that you've got advance news about this vacancy will send up your stock with him as to political sapience," she added mockingly.

What can you do with a woman like that? I went, of course. And as she had prophesied, Senator Bristol listened and his interest wasn't feigned. No, he seized on the idea. If I'd known then what I know later—about that water stroke of his—I'd never have made a move to get any possible opponent out of his way.

I said my little say to him and went on. If you've read the papers at all, you know how it all turned out—on the surface. The appointment of Kaine to the bench was hailed as a great stroke of generalship by the party in power. And the senator gave out interviews—through his secretary—of his happiness to go, the joy of release from legislative harness, the welcome he felt for his

judiciary duties. And he made a wonderful judge. There it all is—and he who runs may read. But—this is the inside story—the inside story that no one knows and that will never be told.

"You're satisfied now, I hope," I said to Miss Thatcher. "Unless you've thought up some other way to play guardian angel to him."

She smiled at me, a mighty little little watery smile, but awfully canny. "When he accepted it," she said, "I wired Mrs. Reed, in his name, and told her he'd soon be coming to read with her again. And I told him what I'd done. Oh, he understood. And he's ripe for her now. This Marseme affair has put women into his head. Louise Reed will get him within a month after he leaves Washington."

She paused, and her voice, usually so sharp and determined, quavered with uncontrollable feeling. "He said he understood leaving me more than anything else. He didn't mean it—but it was nice of him to say it."

And something in her eyes, something in her tone, revealed to me then the truth she had so passionately guarded.

She loved him!

Yes, that poor little homely woman with the great brain and the great heart loved that man as few are ever loved. For him she had plotted and lied and stolen and dared the impossible. Not for ambition, or pride in her work, as I had so fatuously imagined, but for love of this man, for him, that he might be happy with another woman who could give him what she could not.

There was her secret. There was her story. God, what other sacrifice, what other passion? She could not give him youth and beauty, and a wife's love, and a wife's companionship, but she loved him so much that she was willing to put aside her love, her natural pitiful jealousy, and by every means in her power secure these gifts for him from another.

I say "by every means in her power." But I tell you, unbelieve and old cynic that I am, I believe she was aided by something bigger than herself, by outside forces, unseen, unknown, who brought to her hands the right weapon for the right moment to defend him. Call it coincidence, if you like. Coincidence may be a part of a divine pattern, and I maintain that Estelle Thatcher was worthy of even so big a thing as that. She didn't need to ask help from powers of darkness. Powers of light watched over her and defended her at every step of her devious way.

Well, there you have it all. Kaine married Louise Reed last week. They'll be happy. Why shouldn't they be? Their happiness was certainly paid for at a steep enough price.

I said, when I began this story, that in Washington something was never given for nothing. Estelle Thatcher is the one great exception that proves the rule. She gave—everything; and she got—unless you want to figure in terms of selfishness and denial—nothing—nothing at all.

What's she doing now? Oh, she's secretary to Senator Bristol.

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