

# *The Ladies' Chain*

**Alan Sullivan**

Illustrated by

**E. J. Dinsmore**

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# THE LADIES' CHAIN

By ALAN SULLIVAN  
ILLUSTRATED BY E. J. DINSMORE

The evening meal at the Woollman Home always seemed to Miss Daggett, the matron, something more than the mere partaking of food.

Down the middle of a large, cheerful room stretched a long, snowy table at which old-fashioned women sat in old-fashioned chairs, and addressed themselves to tea, jam and buttered toast with the varying appetites to be found in an assembly whose ages ran from seventy-four to eighty-eight. On Miss Daggett's right was Mrs. Phipps and then Jane Martin; on her left Mrs. Pettigrew and Sarah Dobson, and for the rest of it a dwindling row of wrinkled faces, all eloquent in their own particular way.

Supper, which in summer was at seven o'clock, was mutually recognised as a function in which all differences and disputes of the day must be set aside—for the present at any rate—and the spirit of forbearance cultivated over the remnants of Martha Woollman's original-hand-painted china. There was generally a breeze at dusk, that whispered through the branches of the great friendly tree just outside like a softened requiem over these bent gray heads. It is a question whether any of them paid any attention to it except Miss Daggett, but to her it always came bringing a tender and communicable message of hope and comfort. This evening, however, there was that in her mind that dispossessed everything else. At a pause in the cackle of dry voices she began to speak.

"I have a very interesting piece of news for you," she said impressively, "and I only got it this afternoon. The committee is sending us another guest."

Mrs. Phipps put down her cup. "What's she like?"

"I haven't seen her yet; but from all I hear you'll find her a very interesting addition to our number, and," she added mysteriously, "I'd sooner you discovered the rest for yourselves. Miss Merivale is only seventy."

A sudden and intense curiosity throbbed in twenty aged breasts. Miss Merivale would be the baby of the Woollman Home. Why should a woman who was only seventy take refuge here?

"I know it isn't necessary for me to ask you all to be very kind to her," went on Miss Daggett's good-natured and rather heavy voice, "because you know it's difficult to begin amongst twenty strangers, but I think she's going

to brighten up the home a good deal. Her professional name is Madame Marilla.”

“What!” croaked Jane Martin.

Miss Daggett glanced smiling down the long table. “I’m not going to tell you another word more. Mrs. Pettigrew, will you have some tea?”

**B**ut the teapot had lost its attraction. Twenty old heads were nodding to each other while twenty old voices engaged in a cackling chatter. Jane Martin, in the back of her mind, was casting serious doubt on the moral standard of any woman who called herself by any such foreign sounding name as Marilla. Mrs. Pettigrew wondered if perhaps she came from the tropics where her own thoughts had so recently been straying. Mrs. Phipps was asking herself whether her leadership amongst the occupants of the Woollman Home was at last in peril. And in the middle of all this, Miss Daggett, noting contentedly that she had sown unexpected seeds in dry ground slipped off almost unobserved.

At four o’clock on the next afternoon, a semi-circle of white-haired women sitting in yellow wicker chairs under wide-spreading green branches, regarded with acute attention the newcomer’s first public appearance. Miss Merivale was coming across the lawn with Miss Daggett. She had a small and neatly-formed figure, an oval face and rather pointed features, a large tulle hat—soft and black; a trim black silk dress. Shiny kid shoes encased a pair of tiny feet. She wore white kid gloves and carried a bag made from a section of an embroidered Mandarin coat. The semi-circle gazed at her with a profound and seemingly awe-struck interest.

The matron made a round of formal introductions while one and all were conscious of the quick scrutiny of a pair of bright eyes. Then Miss Daggett disappeared, and the click of needles recommenced—but only spasmodically. Mrs. Phipps knew that she should do the honors, but something held her guiltily silent.

The stranger indulged in another swift glance, and bent on the group a little communicable smile. “It’s all just as I thought it would be; it’s all changed—and yet it hasn’t changed a bit.”

Mrs. Pettigrew looked up, and, daring greatly, made the first offering: “Do you mean that you’ve seen this place before, Miss—Miss Marilla?”

“Merivale, please,” nodded the newcomer. “I’ve done with Marilla now, worse luck. Yes, I saw it fifteen years ago.”

“None of us were here then,” hazarded Mrs. Phipps, who was beginning to feel more at ease.

Miss Merivale hesitated an instant, realizing that twenty old women had finished forever with the Woollman Home since last she saw it.

“When I finished my professional work,” she said reminiscently, “I thought it would be wise to provide for the future while I had the means to do so, and visited the home with one of the committee. It seemed so bright and cheerful that I asked to be allowed to deposit enough money to enable me to come here and live later on. So here I am.”

The click of needles died away. Mrs. Pettigrew felt a little jealous of a woman—especially an unmarried woman—who had kept such a grip on her own affairs; while Jane Martin wondered if it would have been possible for her to have done something of the same sort. But Miss Merivale admitted to being some kind of a professional, and round the semi-circle spread a thickening doubt as to her claims to respectability.

It was Mrs. Phipps who made the plunge. “And what was your profession, if one may inquire?” she asked with elephantine playfulness.

**M**iss Merivale crossed her feet, displaying a good deal more ankle than was usually to be seen in the precincts of the Woollman Home. They were beautiful ankles and wonderful little feet, trim, strong and shapely. Their owner surveyed them contentedly before she spoke: nor did she seem to notice that all round the group there was a tucking away of less attractive extremities.

“I taught dancing for nearly thirty years, and I danced a little every day myself for all that time.”

Mrs. Pettigrew put on her spectacles and took in every detail of the neat figure. It startled her to realise how daintily old ladies dressed nowadays. The Mandarin bag, the white gloves, the tulle hat—all testified that the world of fashion for advanced ages had moved on, and past the Woollman Home. It made her regretful and, in a queer way, just a little ambitious.

“I taught deportment too,” went on the thin, clear voice. “You can’t dance without deportment. The first thing my girls and boys had to learn was how to enter a room, for to begin with they sometimes preferred the window. I taught them how to bow and wear white gloves and hold their handkerchiefs against the young ladies’ dresses when dancing. When the new steps came in, I thought they were simply indecent compared to the

schottische and minuet and lancers and Sir Roger. Don't you agree with me?"

They agreed unanimously, with covert glances at the speaker's feet and ankles. Memory was at work in a dozen gray heads. Strains of half-forgotten music sifted down from the green branches, and through the gathering fog of oblivion a multitude of young and smiling faces were peering. Not often were the thoughts of this aged circle carried so far back. It was like searching through a disused storeroom and opening old trunks in which one found lavender-scented frocks and silk slippers, scribbled programs and countless reminders of the days of the minuets.

"Then you stopped teaching some time ago?" said Jane Martin.

"Yes—and I've been traveling ever since. I wanted to see the world before I settled down."

This was doubly interesting, and several tongues became loosened. A woman who had taught dancing and seen the world must without doubt have a dramatic and perhaps slightly improper past—but, if so, they were inclined to be forgiving. Scanning Miss Merivale's face, they recognised that it must formerly have been beautiful, and were all at once conscious of how much more she knew than themselves. Jane Martin silently hoped she would talk about her love affairs before she perceived the conversational restrictions of the Woollman Home. A little later the bell rang for supper, and as Mrs. Phipps crossed the lawn she lagged behind the rest and made a furtive step or two from the third figure of the Lancers.

**M**iss Merivale lay awake a long time in her cubicle that night. Already it had been transformed into a dainty little chamber, very different from the others, and so far as her quarters were concerned she was well content. The question that really moved in her mind was whether her seventy years were not, after all, too young for the Woollman Home. At this age she felt much more restless than she anticipated and she had discovered in her new surroundings a certain drabness that seemed, at first, unchangeable. It was no fault of the Home, she admitted that, and she could not decide whether it would be kinder to attempt to move her new companions to at least a semblance of youthfulness, or to let herself be swallowed up in the unchanging round of their humdrum lives. And she didn't fancy the latter at all.

Next day it rained and there was no semi-circle under the big tree. In the middle of the afternoon, came a tap at Miss Merivale's door, and Mrs.

Phipps entered with a hesitancy that sat curiously on her large soft body. She settled in the spare chair, and pressed her thick fingers together.

“I—I wanted to speak to you a moment in private,” she said in a throaty whisper.

Miss Merivale’s brows went up, but she was heartily glad of a visitor. “Yes? I’m very glad to see you.”

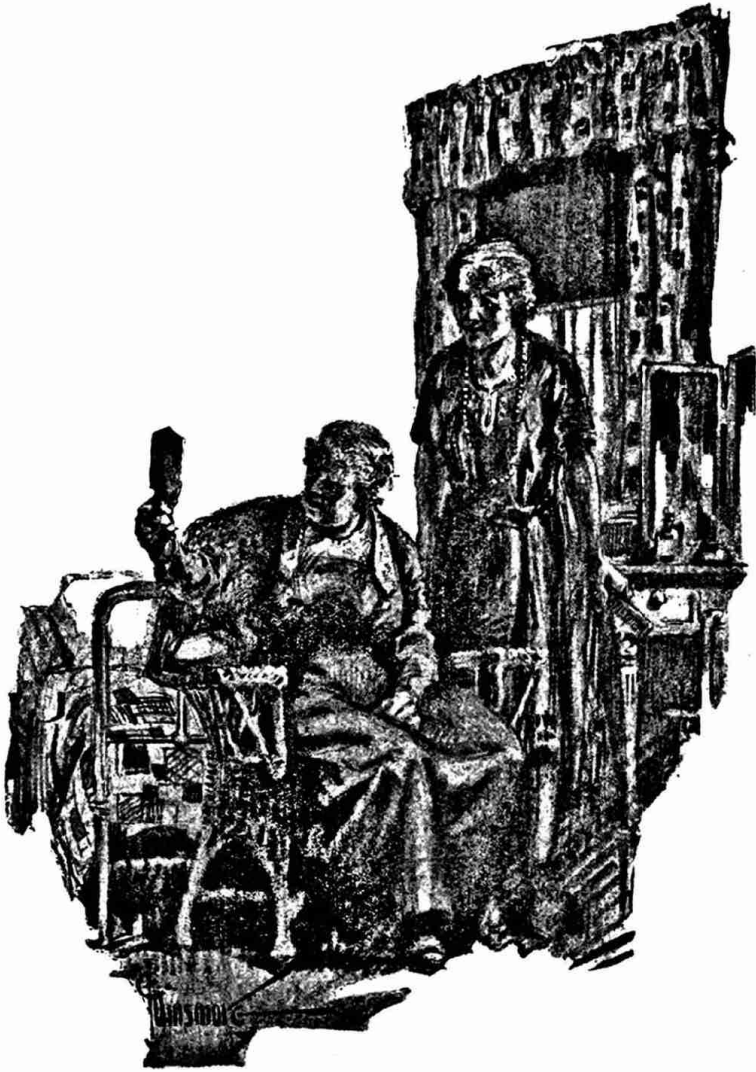
Mrs. Phipps laid a hand on her bony skull. “I hope it won’t put you out, but it’s about your hair.”

Miss Merivale sat up stiffly. “Don’t you like it?”

“Like it!” was the desponding answer. “I just love it! And what I want to ask, if it isn’t a liberty, is whether you can do mine in the same way?” She finished a little breathlessly, with memories of days when the thick blue-black tresses—the glory of the girl Anne Phipps—hung a yard below her strong young shoulders.

Miss Merivale gulped. What seed had *she* sown in this dry ground? Then she nodded quickly with a twinkle in her bright gray eyes, and got very busy. In a few minutes the uncompromising outline of the bony skull had disappeared, and over the broad forehead a cluster of silver curls drooped low, melting in soft luxurious waves on either side. She stepped back, and, with frank criticism, regarded the effect, while Mrs. Phipps remained as though carved in stone.

“I’ll do it better next time, but that certainly does you more justice. You must have had beautiful hair—in fact it’s beautiful yet.”



*Mrs. Phipps stared in the glass, her aged eyes glistening softly. It was forty years since she had had her hair done.*

Mrs. Phipps stared in the glass, her aged eyes glistening softly. It was forty years since she had had her hair done, and the light touch of those skilful fingers had reached her heart. Memories, countless and tender, had been stirred into life. She backed into the hall, her lips trembling, and smiling her thanks with an unwonted moisture on her sallow cheeks. At the top of the stairs she encountered Mrs. Pettigrew.



Ten minutes later came another knock at Miss Merivale's door, but this time a very faint one, and Mrs. Pettigrew stood, overwhelmed with bashfulness, her lips parted and a worldless petition on her waxen features. She met Miss Merivale's whimsical look, and her gaze wandered to the dressing table. There ensued a little silence, finally broken by a faint chuckle.

"Would you like yours done too?" asked the magician.

Mrs. Pettigrew nodded speechlessly, and, closing her eyes, sank into a chair. It was perhaps fortunate that she could not notice Miss Merivale's expression as the latter set to work on the straggling fringe. Presently she heaved a sigh of content.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before at the Home. Did you think we were dreadful frumps?"

"No, I didn't think about it at all." She picked up the end of a scanty lock, regarding it dubiously: "I'm afraid I don't know quite what to do with your hair."

"Couldn't you do it like Mrs. Phipps?"

"There isn't just enough for that." She paused, then added encouragingly, "I might make you a prettier cap."

**M**rs. Pettigrew sighed, then brightened: "That would be a lot better than nothing."

She watched the nimble fingers and sent quick inquisitive glances at the small, capable face. "Your coming is going to make a deal of difference here, because we've never had anyone just like you. We all stopped some time ago having anything to do with things outside, but you've kept right hold. We're pretty hard put to it to find any thing to talk about, and the result is we do a lot of romancing—me like the rest of them. But there won't be any romancing in front of you, because you *know*; so you'll have to do most of the talking for a while."

The magician bit her lip. "I'm sure I'd believe anything you said, Mrs. Pettigrew."

"You can—now," replied the other woman, in a flood of candor, "but you wouldn't have a month ago when I told the others about my brother being boiled and eaten by the savages of Australia—when he was living in

Brixton. I'm saying all this so that when you notice there isn't much conversation you'll know why."

Miss Merivale laughed, but her face was a little weary. "I'm sure there's plenty to talk about. How do you like this?"

On Mrs. Pettigrew's thin fringe she set a dainty cap of pointed lace and soft net, to which—greatly daring—she had added a few purple velvet pansies filched from her own workbag. The old woman put her head on one side, scanning her image with complete approval.

"It's beautiful," she said "and thanks ever so much; but I'm almost sorry I let you do it."

"Why?"

"Everyone in the place will want one like it, and you'll be all tired out."

The magician continued to smile, but her lips tightened a little. "Oh, no, I won't," she answered composedly.

So it came about that in something less than a week Miss Merivale was, undisputedly, the leading occupant of the Woollman Home, and, though not aspiring to any such giddy eminence, she accepted it without question, feeling more and more assured that it could not last long. One by one the aged guests approached her with hesitating suggestions for their own beautification. By the end of the second week all those who were short of hair had become the proud possessors of caps, and all the caps were different. Miss Daggett's remnant bag was ransacked by ambitious fingers, its product reappearing in forms diverse and grotesque, and a glance down the long table at mealtime revealed a dwindling perspective of venerable coquetry.

But during this period Miss Merivale had made a disconcerting discovery. She was not nearly as old as she thought she was. For the first time in many years it had not been necessary to do anything for herself, and she now felt unaccountably skittish. She shrank from assuming the combined office of hairdresser and milliner in chief to the Woollman Home. The burden of age seemed to be hung round her neck, and she knew that ere long it would pull her down to the drab level of this unchanging environment. She had never found it possible to live with her relations, being too restless, assertive and independent; and, fifteen years ago, had impulsively chosen the Woollman Home as the only alternative. But the slow process of age was, in her case, deceptive, and left her still mistress of

unreckoned years. She was in the curious position of having a time balance yet to be expended.

In consequence of Miss Merivale's growing revolt, as well as her entire ignorance of the limitations of age, on one fine afternoon, when Miss Daggett was conveniently out shopping, a circle of venerable women formed with much cackling on the lawn behind the Home. They were dressed in their best, with particular attention to stockings and shoes. The latest style in hair-dressing and caps might have been observed, and one half their number wore handkerchiefs tied on the left arm. In the middle stood Miss Merivale, her head up, her flat bosom distended, and brandishing a small, white baton—the emblem of old-time authority. Just outside the circle sat Mrs. Phipps, her face strangely distorted, breathing convulsively against a jew's harp.

The spirit of gaiety was not, however, omnipotent. Under the friendly tree, and aloof from their chattering companions sat a little group whose hearts were proof against this siren call. Such vagaries might perhaps be in order, but they were undoubtedly undignified. It is possible that Mrs. Jadwin, for instance, would have given anything to be able to dance, but knew better than to depend on her brittle bones, and so screened her frailty behind a stiff expression of disapproval. Mrs. Bostwell, on the other hand, was frankly critical, while Susan Duck, who never agreed with anyone, stared at the proceedings, her mouth wide open. Miss Merivale's dance had its wall-flowers, nor did they vary discernibly from the standard and recognised species.

Came a moment of hesitation on the lawn—then the baton went up. Mrs. Phipps' fat forefinger began to twiddle, her excitement being such that it struck her nose as often as it did the harp, while her laboring lungs evoked weird and phantom sounds. The circle subdivided itself into twos and fours. Miss Merivale's eyes sparkled as her aged guests advanced and retreated over the green turf with fluttering caps and dishevelled white hair. Where were rheumatism and stiff joints? Where was the punishment of the years today? Who talked of monotony in the Woollman Home? What single soul felt neglected or forgotten except the wall-flowers?

Faster waved the baton, more gustily expanded Mrs. Phipps' billowy breast, quicker and quicker the maze of dancing feet that threaded as though by magic the alluring steps of the lancers. Here was Jane Martin prancing like a wayward colt, because, forsooth, she was a boy. There was Mrs. Pettigrew, swaying into low courtesies and picking up the edge of her skirt with delicate fingers. Observe Mrs. Jodberry, that tall angular form,

ploughing her way with devastating effect through the ladies' chain in the last figure. What wonder that Mrs. Jadwin's eyes protruded, and Susan Duck repeated "scandalous! scandalous!" the musician gave one last helpless gasp and laid her hands on a heaving waist.



*Her fatigue was infectious. The lancers dissolved. Sixteen drooping forms, over which age had suddenly descended like a cloak, turned thankfully to sixteen wicker chairs into which they subsided with sixteen sighs of utter weariness.*

"I'm done!" she whispered, "I'm done!"  
Her fatigue was infectious. The lancers dissolved. Sixteen drooping forms, over which age had suddenly descended like a cloak, turned thankfully to sixteen wicker chairs into which they subsided with sixteen sighs of utter weariness. Their caps were over their ears in rakish abandonment, their hair was loose to the winds of heaven, their hearts were thumping irregularly. Miss Merivale, who was as fresh as paint, surveyed them with a touch of anxiety. She seemed oblivious of the cold glances of the wall-flowers.

"I hope it hasn't been too much for you."

"No," said Mrs. Jodberry jerkily, "but its quite enough."

The mistress of ceremonies nodded. "Perhaps the lancers are a little too —" she hesitated "—too active; and we might try the minuet next time?"

"Don't you know any sitting down games?" gasped Jane Martin.

Any reply was cut short by the appearance of the matron half way across the lawn. She came up and sent a questioning look around the group. Her face seemed a little disturbed.

“What’s the matter with everybody? You all sit as though you were tired out, except Miss Merivale.”

“We are,” said Mrs. Pettigrew and closed her eyes.

“And no wonder,” sounded the tart voice of Susan Duck.

Miss Daggett glanced at her curiously. She would never have taken for wall-flowers the three who were clustered in superior isolation, but she knew enough of their uncertain tempers to be distinctly solicitous about the others. So, realising that there are some things best left alone, and quite sure that the whole story would be retailed to her in private by successive cracked voices within the next twenty-four hours, Miss Daggett only murmured something about rest after exercise, and moved away. Whereupon Mrs. Phipps turned to Susan Duck.

“Didn’t get very far that time, did you?”

“And since you can’t dance yourself,” put in Jane Martin, whose breath was returning, “you might just as well leave alone them that can.”

The younger set, warned by sensations to which they had long been strangers, went to bed early that night; but it was a notable fact that only half a figure of the lancers turned out for breakfast next morning. Miss Merivale’s eyes roved guiltily down the table, while Miss Daggett’s face was expressionless. The latter had heard the story half a dozen times during the previous evening, and was forced to smile when the three wall-flowers sailed into the room enveloped in a great righteousness, followed closely by Jane Martin who held herself stiffly erect but walked with obvious difficulty. The matron, having a method of her own, said not a word at the time. Two days later however, she manoeuvred Miss Merivale into the private office. She had a delicate job on hand.

“I haven’t seen much of you since you arrived, so tell me just how you like it all,” she said diplomatically.

**M**iss Merivale sat, her head a little on one side, a faint smile on her pointed features.

“It’s just as I expected to find it,” she answered evasively.

“I have been a little afraid you might have been disappointed. We’re so much out of the world compared to the life you led up to a fortnight ago. But I must say,” added the matron, “you look better already for the rest.”

Miss Merivale would have given anything to say that she felt so much better that she was ready to leave at once, but she only nodded whimsically and remained silent till Miss Daggett regarded her with growing doubt—and began again.

“I hope you don’t feel at all held down or cooped up,” she said chaotically—and was sorry the minute she said it.

A slow curve rested on Miss Merivale’s lips. “But why should you ask me that? Everyone is very kind and the Home is so comfortable.”

“Its only because you—you seem so much younger than the rest and of course you *are* younger. There are so many things you can still do that they can’t.”

“They can dance—and much better than I expected,” said the little woman thoughtfully.

Miss Daggett drew a long breath. “My dear,” she put in hastily, “that’s one thing I meant to speak about. It was charming of you to take so much trouble, but I really don’t think they’re up to that form of amusement. Couldn’t you teach them some sitting down games?”

Miss Merivale shook her head. “I always stood up to play.”

“Then you’re very fortunate, but you see they can’t. We had to carry ten breakfasts upstairs this morning, and Mrs. Pettigrew could hardly sit up to eat. She hasn’t been down since the night before last.”

The little woman smiled. “I know; I’ve just seen her; but she isn’t angry with me. None of them are.”

“If they were I wouldn’t be anxious. Your caps and hair-dressing are delightful, but the danger is that your friends here will go just as far as you say.”

Miss Merivale made a gesture. “The real trouble is that I’m not old enough yet. I saw it myself before I’d been here a day.”

She stood up as though to end the interview, a straight, little figure full of a certain tough agility: “I know you think that too, dear Miss Daggett, but you needn’t say so unless you want to. The Home is splendid, and you’re just splendid too, and I’m really a little sorry that I’m too young for it, but

I'm rather glad as well—and I'm sure you'll understand, and it won't be necessary to explain anything to the others will it, except that I'm called away on very important business.”

Miss Daggett was completely bewildered. “You don't mean that you want to go, do you? And what about that money?”

“Yes, I'm going. I'll be back in five—no seven years, and take the money's worth then. I have some more put away that will serve in the meantime.”

“But what in the world will you do for seven years?” stammered the matron.

Miss Merivale picked up the edge of her skirt, and made a sweeping courtesy. “Travel,” she smiled.

**S**he slipped off a day later as mysteriously as she came, and Miss Daggett found it so impossible to explain her going that finally the attempt was abandoned. Susan Duck and Mrs. Jadwin were firmly convinced that it was a case of ignominious dismissal, while Mrs. Bostwell was inclined to the opinion that Miss Merivale's morals had been found questionable. But to the faithful sixteen who, guided by a small white baton, had threaded the mazes of a memorable set of lancers, the memory of her was like that of a brilliant meteor that flashed for an unforgettable moment through the sober skies of evening.

It was on the third day after her departure that Mrs. Pettigrew wandered into the cubicle of Mrs. Phipps, bearing in her hand a lace cap decorated with purple velvet pansies. The occupant of the cubicle was in front of her mirror plastering a mass of thick white hair down on her bony skull. Mrs. Pettigrew gazed at her with silent comprehension.

“I was just wondering what to do with this,” she said.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *The Ladies' Chain* by Alan Sullivan]