The Pumpkin Coach

Susan Sallis

Chapter 1

The real reason Alice Pettiford left school when she was sixteen was because she did not have a hope of getting a State scholarship to go to University. So what was the point in hanging on? She had just finished her first term in the Lower Sixth, doing English, History and German, and backing them up with a secretarial course which took place once a week in one of the school attics – which just went to show how seriously shorthand and typing were taken by Dr Grey, the headmistress. Alice could now take shorthand at 100 words per minute and type at sixty, so she could apply for any of the jobs advertised nightly in the Citizen. And though she would miss her teachers, especially English scholar Miss Plant, Miss Stone (known as the Ancient Brit) and Fräulein Schmidt, whom Alice would cheerfully die for, most of the jobs listed in the Situations Vacant columns paid thirty shillings a week, which seemed like a fortune at the start of 1946.

Alice's mother and father never stayed up to see in the New Year – it had gone right out of fashion during the War – but Alice woke when the tugs in the docks blew their hooters, and sat up in bed to rub a peephole in the window. She looked out at the stars above Farmer Davis's field and made a resolution.

'You see, God,' she began – she had bargained with Him all through the War to keep her friends and family safe, and He had done just that, so she was on good terms with Him – 'there are just two scholarships, and one is for a boy, so as far as I'm concerned that means just one scholarship. And we both know who'll get it, don't we?' She tugged emphatically at her fair hair to make her point.

God sighed and said He supposed so. He didn't agree with competition among His children, but that was the way they wanted it.

'So I might just as well leave, mightn't I?'

God sighed again but said nothing, which meant He had a lot of reservations.

Alice tried for compromise. 'Tell you what.' She humped one of her pillows round to the front and hugged it. The space she had cleared in the window rime had frozen over already. 'I won't say anything to Mum for a bit. Till you send me a sign. Will that be all right?'

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God tried to explain yet again about free will and Alice said hurriedly, 'I know, I know. But I'll still make up my own mind.'

God said nothing, which Alice guessed meant she'd gone too far. She closed her eyes, then opened them quickly in case she could get a glimpse of a comet through the iced windows. That at least would be a sign that He had heard. There were no flashes, not even one firework. It was her turn to sigh. But just as she had returned her pillow to the bedhead and snuggled down again, expecting that sleep would come instantly now that there were no doodlebugs, V2s, or broken-engine sounds as the Nazi planes made for Birmingham and Coventry, someone let off a detonator down at the marshalling yard. She opened her eyes wide for a moment, wondering whether that was the sign. But her father was a railwayman and she knew that the shunters who were already assembling goods trains down at the yard were choosing their own way of heralding in 1946.

She smiled, closed her eyes and was instantly asleep.

That was the real reason for 'throwing her grammar-school education on to the back of the fire', as her mother would doubtless put it. But then, after the snow finished falling, for two weeks making a landscape of such exquisite beauty it 'fair took your breath from your body' – that was from Gran – and then changed into grey slush that was utterly depressing, something happened which appeared to make Alice's decision inevitable. It could have been a sign sent by God, though it was against His usual policy. His penchant for non--interference had extended to refusing to stop the War on the grounds that He had not started it. So He was hardly likely to have engineered a little war within the Pettiford family. But a war there was.

Alice had been aware since she was twelve that her mother and father were not the ideal pair, even if they looked it. Dad was rather ordinary, brown hair and moustache, deeply grey eyes; but he looked all right, sometimes almost handsome. But Mum was special; her hair was deep gold, her eyes intensely blue. Alice took after her, but Alice was just fair; Doffie was vivid. However, Dad was not like the men portrayed in Mum's magazines, who would produce flowers and chocolates, black-market or otherwise, walk on the outside of the pavement and protect their beloved from the faintest of chill winds. Dad hadn't been around much during the War, because he had been involved in the troop movements up and down the country and had had to work all hours. So Doffie and Alice between them had got in the coal when there was any, and when there wasn't they'd taken the old pram and walked the three miles to the coal sidings to buy their own and walk back home again. More often than not, Doffie emptied the grate. Alice would have done it but the ashes were usually still hot and her mother was frightened she might burn herself. There were lots of other things: whenever her father forgot to wipe his feet or change into his slippers, Doffie would stare pointedly at the muddy footmarks on the linoleum. Ted had to keep his strength up for work of national importance, so his

wife and daughter would halve their cheese and butter rations and give the rest to him. He didn't know, of course. He was amazed when – after he'd told Doffie smilingly that Gran used her own rations to make him 'proper butter sandwiches' whenever he called in – she erupted.

'We've been giving up our own food for you! And all the time . . . my God, never again! Alice is a growing girl and needs every bit of sustenance. I am appalled that you could take your mother's food from her mouth, your daughter's food from hers—'

Ted, bewildered, was unable to argue with his fiery wife. He stared at her and his slate-grey eyes turned cold. Alice knew what would happen next; so did Doffie. Whenever there was a row, Ted had only one method of defence. He clammed up. He hardly spoke to Alice and he did not speak to his wife at all. He sent them to Coventry.

Alice's heart sank. If only he would shout back, all would be well and Mum would forgive him in about two hours. But this . . . Silence drained her mother of her lifeblood. She would swear he was not going to get the better of her this time. But he would.

Alice tried to mediate. 'Dad, we don't mind. Honestly. You have to keep the trains going—'

Doffie interjected bitterly, 'Single-handedly, of course.'

'And we know that the only way we can help is to support you.'

Ted looked coldly at her and said briefly, 'Keep out of this. You don't know what you're talking about.'

That did it. Doffie went into a purple rage. 'How dare you speak to your daughter in that way! She's being utterly reasonable and you tell her to shut her mouth! I simply won't stand aside and see her insulted—'

Ted raised a placatory hand, and Doffie screamed, 'You touch her and we leave. I've warned you, Ted! Put a hand on Alice, and we're finished!'

He made a sound of disgust and turned away.

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That night, Doffie slept next to the embers of the fire, on the camp bed they had used under the stairs for Alice in the War. Alice had thoroughly enjoyed it, until she realized that if her parents were both killed and she was left alive under the stairs, she would probably have to live with Gran. She did not sleep there again.

Doffie was warm next to the grate but, as she confided to Alice the next morning when they were washing up the breakfast things, it should have been her father sleeping there.

'He had a very poor education,' she said, glancing meaningfully at Alice. 'He probably does not know the meaning of the word "chivalry".'

'He wasn't going to hit me, Mum,' Alice mentioned unwisely.

Doffie took her hands out of the water and looked round like a wounded tigress. 'Whose side are you on?' she asked.

'Yours, of course. But you know how it gets you. Not speaking and everything.'

'It won't this time. I shall simply ignore him, as he is ignoring me. And next time I go to see Gran, I shall tell her a thing or two.'

Alice made no comment. Gran had never considered Doffie to be a suitable wife for her son, and tended to give her a great deal of unwanted advice unless Ted or Alice were there to jolly things along.

At first Alice did not see this as a sign from God at all. All she was concerned about was trying to get Dad to talk to Mum. When he fluffed open the newspaper at mealtimes and held it as a screen in front of his face, she would say cheerfully, 'Anything interesting, Dad? Fräulein Schmidt says she is going to work for the Red Cross in the Displaced Persons camps. She says there are millions of people trying to find their families. She says—'

Dad rustled the paper like a firecracker. 'Nothing about that here. That woman knows a sight too much for her own good, I reckon.'

Alice bit her lip; she had forgotten that her father had always maintained that Fräulein Schmidt was a Fifth Columnist and should be interned.

She said as mildly as possible, 'She's married to a German Jew. That's all, Dad. She had to call herself Fräulein because the school does not admit married teachers.'

'He knows all that, Alice.' Mum spoke wearily. 'We've told him often enough. Don't bother. Ask him whether he wants any bread and butter pudding.'

'Do you want any bread and butter pudding, Dad?' Alice asked obediently.

'No. You have it, Alice. You need building up.'

Mum did not wait for Alice's message. She piled the pudding on to Alice's dish and passed it to her with a smile.

'Did he say no thank you?'

Alice swallowed. 'I didn't hear.'

'I bet you didn't.'

Alice could almost hear Mum's mainspring being wound up. She shivered.

Two days later the spring broke.

It was Sunday, so they were having afternoon tea. Mum had made a caraway seed cake, which Dad always liked, and had put it on the cake stand with a paper doily underneath and the cake slice at the ready.

'Will you ask your father if he would like a slice of cake, Alice dear?' she asked with a slight tremor in her voice.

Ted did not wait. 'No, thank you.' He could have been speaking directly to her, so he added quickly, 'Alice.'

Doffie said almost pleadingly, 'It's seedy cake.' That was what he called it. He had said on many an occasion, 'No one makes seedy cake like you do, our Doffie.'

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Alice knew, of course, that Doffie was concertina'd from Dorothy, but she had asked Dad once why he always prefaced it so possessively. He had been flummoxed. 'Don't know, Chick. Family, you know. We've always done it.'

That was true. Gran always called him 'our Ted'. She even called Mum 'our Dorothy'. And another thing, Dad often called Alice 'Chick'. And Gran called her 'Duck', even though they were railway people, not poultry farmers.

Alice looked at the back of her father's newspaper and willed him to put it down and accept a slice of seedy cake. But the paper remained in place and not a word was spoken.

Doffie poured the tea. Her hand was definitely shaking now. She passed Alice a cup and then held another one in front of the newspaper. Alice could see her gathering herself together to slam through the barriers.

She said, her voice high, 'Your tea, Ted.'

Nothing happened. Nothing at all. The cup began to shake in its saucer but the paper did not move and Ted did not speak.

Doffie stood up and looked over the top of the back page. She held the saucer in one hand, the teacup in the other. 'Can't manage it all by yourself, Ted? Here you are, then.' And she flung the contents – and the cup itself – right at him.

She fled the room and hurried upstairs, while Ted spluttered and threw down the paper, upsetting the milk jug in an attempt to beat the scalding tea from his chin and his shirt front. The bedroom door closed with an almighty crash and two or three flakes of whitewash floated gently from the ceiling, adding to the general disarray of the tea table.

Still, incredibly, Ted said nothing. He made noises – of pain and disgust – but there were no words. Alice, tight against the back of her chair, watched in horror and knew that this was it. Just when they should be getting back to normal after the War, everything was smashed. What Hitler couldn't do, the Pettifords had managed very well for themselves. She started to cry. And at last her father spoke.

'Stop that, our Alice! Get me a cloth and some cold water.'

She ran for a clean tea towel, discovered the enamel washing-up bowl full of dinner pots soaking, scrabbled them on to the soggy wooden draining board and took the dripping bowl into the front room.

Ted had taken his shirt off and was holding his vest away from his body. 'You took your time,' he said. He soaked the tea towel and applied it to his chest. 'What's that floating on the water?'

'Burnt bits from the bread and butter pudding,' Alice sobbed.

'Oh Christ.' Ted closed his eyes. He never swore, so Alice knew he must be in considerable pain. 'What's the matter with the woman?'

Alice's heart sank. Her father had never before referred to her mother as 'the woman'. She was sure it must be the end.

She gave a great cry and cast herself at him.

'What the—?' His question was smothered by Alice's sobbing, but eventually her voice emerged almost clearly. Much later, she was to marvel at how her brain had continued to work through such distress. It confirmed her belief that God worked in mysterious ways.

'Don't leave her! Don't leave her, Dad! I love you! I can't bear it if you go!' she cried.

He swore again, but took her hand in his and held it very tightly. She eased herself away from him slightly but did not get up. 'Listen – listen, Dad. I'm going to leave school at the end of next term. Let me come and work with you in the office. I can do shorthand and typing and filing and – and—'

He was trying to look into her eyes, but her hair was everywhere. He said slowly, 'You and your Mum, you've never been interested in what I do. Why this sudden change?'

'I want to be interested! Then I can tell Mum and—'

'She's bored stiff when I tell her about work.'

'That's because you go on and on about wagons and rolling stocks stuck in depots somewhere when they're wanted somewhere else.'

'Wagons are rolling stock, our Alice.'

'Are they?'

'What did you think they were?'

'Stocks on rollers.'

'Stocks? Stocks of something?'

'No. Stocks like in villages. When you're locked into them and people throw stuff at you.'

'Oh, Alice. And you a grammar-school girl!'

But he was smiling. He was actually smiling. She tried to smile back, but her mouth was still trembling.

'There aren't any jobs in the office, our Alice. And I don't know whether you'd like it there. And I know damned well your mum would hate you working there.'

'I can talk her round, Dad. I can, really. I'll go to Tech and do evening classes. Then maybe one day . . . you never know.'

He looked doubtful. 'Well, you can certainly talk to your mother, I'll say that. If a job comes up, I'll let you know. Will that do?'

'Yes. But only if you promise not to leave us. You must stay till I can make it better.'

He looked surprised. 'What's all this about me going?'

Alice waved her hands. 'Well, the rows and all. Mum can't take it.'

'Then surely it would be Mum who would leave?' He wasn't taking her seriously, there was a little smile under his moustache.

She sighed. 'We've got nowhere to go, Dad.'

'My God. Would you go with her then?'

'I'd have to. I'd have to get a job so that we could live.'

He stared at her for a long time. Then he lowered his knee so that she had to stand up. 'You don't know what you're on about, our Alice. But . . . all right, I won't go. And neither will you and Mum. And we'll see about a job on the railway.'

She stood in front of him uncertainly, then began to clear up the mess. Ted took his shirt into the kitchen and put it in a bucket of water. When he came back, Alice was eating some seedy cake. He had a slice too. Then he took a slice up to Doffie.

That night Alice said, 'Dear God, it was a big sign but it was a good one. I'm quite scared about working for Dad. You'll have to help me. Then I can explain properly to Mum about what Dad does.'

God smiled. He liked his children to talk to each other.

Alice looked out of her window at the rain trying futilely to wash the dark away. She thought of something and beamed happily. 'I must tell Dad that in the beginning was the word. It might stop him sending us to Coventry.'

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