

## **CHAPTER XXIV - A ROMANCE OF TWO OLD MAIDS AND A STOUT BACHELOR**

Came Gavinia, a burghess of the besieged city, along the south shore of the Silent Pool. She was but a maid seeking to know what love might be, and as she wandered on, she nibbled dreamily at a hot sweet-smelling bridie, whose gravy oozed deliciously through a bursting paper-bag.

It was a fit night for dark deeds.

"Methinks she cometh to her damn!"

The speaker was a masked man who had followed her--he was sniffing ecstatically--since she left the city walls.

She seemed to possess a charmed life. He would have had her in Shovel Gorge, but just then Ronny-On's Jean and Peter Scrymgeour turned the corner.

Suddenly Gavinia felt an exquisite thrill: a man was pursuing her. She slipped the paper-bag out of sight, holding it dexterously against her side with her arm, so that the gravy should not spurt out, and ran. Lights flashed, a kingly voice cried "Now!" and immediately a petticoat was flung over her head. (The Lady Griselda looked thin that evening.)

Gavinia was dragged to the Lair, and though many a time they bumped her, she still tenderly nursed the paper-bag with her arm, or fondly thought she did so, for when unmuffled she discovered that it had been removed, as if by painless surgery. And her captors' tongues were sweeping their chins for stray crumbs.

The wench was offered her choice of Stroke's gallant fellows, but "Wha carries me wears me," said she, promptly, and not only had he to carry her from one end of the Den to the other, but he must do it whistling as if barely conscious that she was there. So after many attempts (for she was always willing to let them have their try) Corp of Corp, speaking for Sir Joseph and the others, announced a general retreat.

Instead of taking this prisoner's life, Stroke made her his tool, releasing her on condition that every seventh day she appeared at the Lair with information concerning the doings in the town. Also, her name was

Agnes of Kingoldrum, and, if she said it was not, the plank. Bought thus, Agnes proved of service, bringing such bags of news that Stroke was often occupied now in drawing diagrams of Thrums and its strongholds, including the residence of Cathro, with dotted lines to show the direction of proposed underground passages.

And presently came by this messenger disquieting rumors indeed. Another letter, being the third in six months, had reached the Dovecot, addressed, not to Miss Ailie, but to Miss Kitty. Miss Kitty had been dead fully six years, and Archie Piatt, the post, swore that this was the eighteenth, if not the nineteenth, letter he had delivered to her name since that time. They were all in the same hand, a man's, and there had been similar letters while she was alive, but of these he kept no record. Miss Ailie always took these letters with a trembling hand, and then locked herself in her bedroom, leaving the key in such a position in its hole that you might just as well go straight back to the kitchen. Within a few hours of the arrival of these ghostly letters, tongues were wagging about them, but to the two or three persons who (after passing a sleepless night) bluntly asked Miss Ailie from whom they came, she only replied by pursing her lips. Nothing could be learned at the post-office save that Miss Ailie never posted any letters there, except to two Misses and a Mrs., all resident in Redlintie. The mysterious letters came from Australy or Manchester, or some such part.

What could Stroke make of this? He expressed no opinion, but oh, his face was grim. Orders were immediately given to double the sentinels. A barrel was placed in the Queen's Bower. Sawdust was introduced at immense risk into the Lair. A paper containing this writing, "248xho317Oxh4591AWS314dd5," was passed round and then solemnly burned. Nothing was left to chance.

Agnes of Kingoldrum (Stroke told her) did not know Miss Ailie, but she was commanded to pay special attention to the gossip of the town regarding this new move of the enemy. By next Saturday the plot had thickened. Previous letters might have reddened Miss Ailie's eyes for an hour or two, but they gladdened her as a whole. Now she sat crying all evening with this one on her lap; she gave up her daily walk to the Berlin wool shop, with all its romantic possibilities; at the clatter of the tea-things she would start apprehensively; she had let a red shawl lie for two days in the blue-and-white room.

Stroke never blanched. He called his faithful remnant around him, and told them the story of Bell the Cat, with its application in the records of his race. Did they take his meaning? This Miss Ailie must be watched closely. In short, once more, in Scottish history, someone must bell the cat. Who would volunteer?

Corp of Corp and Sir Joseph stepped forward as one man.

"Thou couldst not look like Gavinia," the prince said, shaking his head.

"Wha wants him to look like Gavinia?" cried an indignant voice. "Peace, Agnes!" said Stroke.

"Agnes, why bletherest thou?" said Sir Joseph.

"If onybody's to watch Miss Ailie," insisted the obstinate woman, "surely it should be me!"

"Ha!" Stroke sprang to his feet, for something in her voice, or the outline of her figure, or perhaps it was her profile, had given him an idea. "A torch!" he cried eagerly and with its aid he scanned her face until his own shone triumphant.

"He kens a wy, methinks!" exclaimed one of his men.

Sir Joseph was right. It had been among the prince's exploits to make his way into Thrums in disguise, and mix with the people as one of themselves, and on several of these occasions he had seen Miss Ailie's attendant. Agnes's resemblance to her now struck him for the first time. It should be Agnes of Kingoldrum's honorable though dangerous part to take this Gavinia's place.

But how to obtain possession of Gavinia's person? Agnes made several suggestions, but was told to hold her prating peace. It could only be done in one way. They must kidnap her. Sir Joseph was ordered to be ready to accompany his liege on this perilous enterprise in ten minutes. "And mind," said Stroke, gravely, "we carry our lives in our hands."

"In our hands!" gasped Sir Joseph, greatly puzzled, but he dared ask no more, and when the two set forth (leaving Agnes of Kingoldrum looking very uncomfortable), he was surprised to see that Stroke was carrying nothing. Sir Joseph carried in his hand his red hanky, mysteriously knotted.

"Where is yours?" he whispered.

"What meanest thou?"

Sir Joseph replied, "Oh, nothing," and thought it best to slip his handkerchief into his trouser-pocket, but the affair bothered him for long afterwards.

When they returned through the Den, there still seemed (to the unpiercing eye) to be but two of them; nevertheless, Stroke re-entered the Lair to announce to Agnes and the others that he had left Gavinia below in charge of Sir Joseph. She was to walk the plank anon, but first she must be stripped that Agnes might don her garments. Stroke was every inch a prince, so he kept Agnes by his side, and sent down the Lady Griselda and Widow Elspeth to strip the prisoner, Sir Joseph having orders to stand back fifty paces. (It is a pleasure to have to record this.)

The signal having been given that this delicate task was accomplished, Stroke whistled shrilly, and next moment was heard from far below a thud, as of a body falling in water, then an agonizing shriek, and then again all was still, save for the heavy breathing of Agnes of Kingoldrum.

Sir Joseph (very wet) returned to the Lair, and Agnes was commanded to take off her clothes in a retired spot and put on those of the deceased, which she should find behind a fallen tree.

"I winna be called the deceased," cried Agnes hotly, but she had to do as she was bid, and when she emerged, from behind the tree she was the very image of the ill-fated Gavinia. Stroke showed her a plan of Miss Ailie's backdoor, and also gave her a kitchen key (when he produced this, she felt in her pockets and then snatched it from him), after which she set out for the Dovecot in a scare about her own identity.

"And now, what doest thou think about it a'?" inquired Sir Joseph eagerly, to which Stroke made answer, looking at him fixedly.

"The wind is in the west!"

Sir Joseph should have kept this a secret, but soon Stroke heard Inverquharitty prating of it, and he called his lieutenant before him. Sir Joseph acknowledged humbly that he had been unable to hide it from Inverquharitty, but he promised not to tell Muckle Kenny, of whose loyalty there were doubts. Henceforth, when the faithful fellow was Muckle

Kenny, he would say doggedly to himself, "Dinna question me, Kenny. I ken nocht about it."

Dark indeed were now the fortunes of the Pretender, but they had one bright spot. Miss Ailie had been taken in completely by the trick played on her, and thus Stroke now got full information of the enemy's doings. Cathro having failed to dislodge the Jacobites, the seat of war had been changed by Victoria to the Dovecot, whither her despatches were now forwarded. That this last one, of which Agnes of Kingoldrum tried in vain to obtain possession, doubled the price on the Pretender's head, there could be no doubt; but as Miss Ailie was a notorious Hanoverian, only the hunted prince himself knew why this should make her cry.

He hinted with a snigger something about an affair he had once had with the lady.

The Widow and Sir Joseph accepted this explanation, but it made Lady Griselda rock her arms in irritation.

The reports about Miss Ailie's behavior became more and more alarming. She walked up and down her bedroom now in the middle of the night. Every time the knocker clanked she held herself together with both hands. Agnes had orders not to answer the door until her mistress had keeked through the window.

"She's expecting a veesitor, methinks," said Corp. This was his bright day.

"Ay," answered Agnes, "but is't a man-body, or just a woman-body?"

Leaving the rebels in the Lair stunned by Victoria's latest move, we now return to Thrums, where Miss Ailie's excited state had indeed been the talk of many. Even the gossips, however, had underestimated her distress of mind, almost as much as they misunderstood its cause. You must listen now (will you?) to so mild a thing as the long thin romance of two maiden ladies and a stout bachelor, all beginning to be old the day the three of them first drank tea together, and that was ten years ago.

Miss Ailie and Miss Kitty, you may remember, were not natives of Thrums. They had been born and brought up at Redlintie, and on the death of their parents they had remained there, the gauger having left them all his money, which was just sufficient to enable them to live like ladies, if they took tiny Magenta Cottage, and preferred an inexperienced

maid. At first their life was very quiet, the walk from eleven to one for the good of fragile Miss Kitty's health its outstanding feature. When they strolled together on the cliffs, Miss Ailie's short thick figure, straight as an elvint, cut the wind in two, but Miss Kitty was swayed this way and that, and when she shook her curls at the wind, it blew them roguishly in her face, and had another shot at them, as soon as they were put to rights. If the two walked by the shore (where the younger sometimes bathed her feet, the elder keeping a sharp eye on land and water), the sea behaved like the wind, dodging Miss Ailie's ankles and snapping playfully at Miss Kitty's. Thus even the elements could distinguish between the sisters, who nevertheless had so much in common that at times Miss Ailie would look into her mirror and sigh to think that some day Miss Kitty might be like this. How Miss Ailie adored Miss Kitty! She trembled with pleasure if you said Miss Kitty was pretty, and she dreamed dreams in which she herself walked as bridesmaid only. And just as Miss Ailie could be romantic, Miss Kitty, the romantic, could be prim, and the primness was her own as much as the curls, but Miss Ailie usually carried it for her, like a cloak in case of rain.

Not often have two sweeter women grown together on one stem. What were the men of Redlintie about? The sisters never asked each other this question, but there were times when, apparently without cause, Miss Ailie hugged Miss Kitty vehemently, as if challenging the world, and perhaps Miss Kitty understood.

Thus a year or more passed uneventfully, until the one romance of their lives befell them. It began with the reappearance in Redlintie of Magerful Tarn, who had come to torment his father into giving him more money, but, finding he had come too late, did not harass the sisters. This is perhaps the best thing that can be told of him, and, as if he knew this, he had often told it himself to Jean Myles, without however telling her what followed. For something to his advantage did follow, and it was greatly to the credit of Miss Ailie and Miss Kitty, though they went about it as timidly as if they were participating in a crime. Ever since they learned of the sin which had brought this man into the world their lives had been saddened, for on the same day they realized what a secret sorrow had long lain at their mother's heart. Alison Sibbald was a very simple, gracious lady, who never recovered from the shock of discovering that she had married a libertine; yet she had pressed her husband to do something for his son, and been greatly pained when he refused with a

coarse laugh. The daughters were very like her in nature, and though the knowledge of what she had suffered increased many fold their love for her, so that in her last days their passionate devotion to her was the talk of Redlintie, it did not blind them to what seemed to them to be their duty to the man. As their father's son, they held, he had a right to a third of the gauger's money, and to withhold it from him, now that they knew his whereabouts, would have been a form of theft. But how to give T. his third? They called him T. from delicacy, and they had never spoken to him. When he passed them in the streets, they turned pale, and, thinking of their mother, looked another way. But they knew he winked.

At last, looking red in one street, and white in another, but resolute in all, they took their business to the office of Mr. John McLean, the writer, who had once escorted Miss Kitty home from a party without anything coming of it, so that it was quite a psychological novel in several volumes. Now Mr. John happened to be away at the fishing, and a reckless maid showed them into the presence of a strange man, who was no other than his brother Ivie, home for a year's holiday from India, and naturally this extraordinary occurrence so agitated them that Miss Ailie had told half her story before she realized that Miss Kitty was titting at her dress. Then indeed she sought to withdraw, but Ivie, with the alarming yet not unpleasing audacity of his sex, said he had heard enough to convince him that in this matter he was qualified to take his brother's place. But he was not, for he announced, "My advice to you is not to give T. a halfpenny," which showed that he did not even understand what they had come about.

They begged permission to talk to each other behind the door, and presently returned, troubled but brave. Miss Kitty whispered "Courage!" and this helped Miss Ailie to the deed.

"We have quite made up our minds to let T. have the money," she said, "but--but the difficulty is the taking it to him. Must we take it in person?"

"Why not?" asked Ivie, bewildered.

"It would be such a painful meeting to us." said Miss Ailie.

"And to him," added simple Miss Kitty.

"You see we have thought it best not to--not to know him," said Miss Ailie, faintly.

"Mother--" faltered Miss Kitty, and at the word the eyes of both ladies began to fill.

Then, of course, Mr. McLean discovered the object of their visit, and promised that his brother should take this delicate task off their hands, and as he bowed them out he said, "Ladies, I think you are doing a very foolish thing, and I shall respect you for it all my life." At least Miss Kitty insisted that respect was the word, Miss Ailie thought he said esteem.

That was how it began, and it progressed for nearly a year at a rate that will take away your breath. On the very next day he met Miss Kitty in High Street, a most awkward encounter for her ("for, you know, Ailie, we were never introduced, so how could I decide all in a moment what to do?"), and he raised his hat (the Misses Croall were at their window and saw the whole thing). But we must gallop, like the friendship. He bowed the first two times, the third time he shook hands (by a sort of providence Miss Kitty had put on her new mittens), the fourth, fifth, and sixth times he conversed, the seventh time he--they replied that they really could not trouble him so much, but he said he was going that way at any rate; the eighth time, ninth time, and tenth time the figures of two ladies and a gentleman might have been observed, etc., and either the eleventh or twelfth time ("Fancy our not being sure, Ailie"--"It has all come so quickly, Kitty") he took his first dish of tea at Magenta Cottage.

There were many more walks after this, often along the cliffs to a little fishing village, over which the greatest of magicians once stretched his wand, so that it became famous forever, as all the world saw except himself; and tea at the cottage followed, when Ivie asked Miss Kitty to sing "The Land o' the Leal," and Miss Ailie sat by the window, taking in her merino, that it might fit Miss Kitty, cutting her sable muff (once Alison Sibbald's) into wristbands for Miss Kitty's astrakhan; they did not go quite all the way round, but men are blind.

Ivie was not altogether blind. The sisters, it is to be feared, called him the dashing McLean, but he was at this time nearly forty years old, an age when bachelors like to take a long rest from thinking of matrimony, before beginning again. Fifteen years earlier he had been in love, but the girl had not cared to wait for him, and, though in India he had often pictured himself returning to Redlintie to gaze wistfully at her old home, when he did come back he never went, because the house was a little out of the way. But unknown to him two ladies went, to whom he had told



this as a rather dreary joke. They were ladies he esteemed very much, though having a sense of humor he sometimes chuckled on his way home from Magenta Cottage, and he thought out many ways of adding little pleasures to their lives. It was like him to ask Miss Kitty to sing and play, though he disliked music. He understood that it is a hard world for single women, and knew himself for a very ordinary sort of man. If it ever crossed his head that Miss Kitty would be willing to marry him, he felt genuinely sorry at the same time that she had not done better long ago. He never flattered himself that he could be accepted now, save for the good home he could provide (he was not the man to blame women for being influenced by that), for like most of his sex he was unaware that a woman is never too old to love or to be loved; if they do know it, the mean ones among them make a jest of it, at which (God knows why) their wives laugh. Mr. McLean had been acquainted with the sisters for months before he was sure even that Miss Kitty was his favorite. He found that out one evening when sitting with an old friend, whose wife and children were in the room, gathered round a lamp and playing at some child's game. Suddenly Ivie McLean envied his friend, and at the same moment he thought tenderly of Miss Kitty. But the feeling passed. He experienced it next and as suddenly when arriving at Bombay, where some women were waiting to greet their husbands.

Before he went away the two gentlewomen knew that he was not to speak. They did not tell each other what was in their minds. Miss Kitty was so bright during those last days, that she must have deceived anyone who did not love her, and Miss Ailie held her mouth very tight, and if possible was straighter than ever, but oh, how gentle she was with Miss Kitty! Ivie's last two weeks in the old country were spent in London, and during that time Miss Kitty liked to go away by herself, and sit on a rock and gaze at the sea. Once Miss Ailie followed her and would have called him a--

"Don't, Ailie!" said Miss Kitty, imploringly. But that night, when Miss Kitty was brushing her hair, she said, courageously, "Ailie, I don't think I should wear curls any longer. You know I--I shall be thirty-seven in August." And after the elder sister had become calm again. Miss Kitty said timidly, "You don't think I have been unladylike, do you, Ailie?"

Such a trifle now remains to tell. Miss Kitty was the better business woman of the two, and kept the accounts, and understood, as Miss Ailie could not understand, how their little income was invested, and even

knew what consols were, though never quite certain whether it was their fall or rise that is matter for congratulation. And after the ship had sailed, she told Miss Ailie that nearly all their money was lost, and that she had known it for a month.

"And you kept it from me! Why?"

"I thought, Ailie, that you, knowing I am not strong--that you--would perhaps tell him."

"And I would!" cried Miss Ailie.

"And then," said Miss Kitty, "perhaps he, out of pity, you know!"

"Well, even if he had!" said Miss Ailie.

"I could not, oh, I could not," replied Miss Kitty, flushing; "it--it would not have been ladylike, Ailie."

Thus forced to support themselves, the sisters decided to keep school genteelly, and, hearing that there was an opening in Thrums, they settled there, and Miss Kitty brushed her hair out now, and with a twist and a twirl ran it up her fingers into a net, whence by noon some of it had escaped through the little windows and was curls again. She and Miss Ailie were happy in Thrums, for time took the pain out of the affair of Mr. McLean, until it became not merely a romantic memory, but, with the letters he wrote to Miss Kitty and her answers, the great quiet pleasure of their lives. They were friendly letters only, but Miss Kitty wrote hers out in pencil first and read them to Miss Ailie, who had been taking notes for them.

In the last weeks of Miss Kitty's life Miss Ailie conceived a passionate unspoken hatred of Mr. McLean, and her intention was to write and tell him that he had killed her darling. But owing to the illness into which she was flung by Miss Kitty's death, that unjust letter was never written.

But why did Mr. McLean continue to write to Miss Kitty?

Well, have pity or be merciless as you choose. For several years Mr. McLean's letters had been the one thing the sisters looked forward to, and now, when Miss Ailie was without Miss Kitty, must she lose them also? She never doubted, though she may have been wrong, that, if Ivie knew of Miss Kitty's death, one letter would come in answer, and that the

last. She could not tell him. In the meantime he wrote twice asking the reason of this long silence, and at last Miss Ailie, whose handwriting was very like her sister's, wrote him a letter which was posted at Tilliedrum and signed "Katherine Cray." The thing seems monstrous, but this gentle lady did it, and it was never so difficult to do again. Latterly, it had been easy.

This last letter of Mr. McLean's announced to Miss Kitty that he was about to start for home "for good," and he spoke in it of coming to Thrums to see the sisters, as soon as he reached Redlintie. Poor Miss Ailie! After sleepless nights she trudged to the Tilliedrum post-office with a full confession of her crime, which would be her welcome home to him when he arrived at his brother's house. Many of the words were written on damp blobs. After that she could do nothing but wait for the storm, and waiting she became so meek, that Gavinia, who loved her because she was "that simple," said sorrowfully:

"How is't you never rage at me now, ma'am? I'm sure it keepit you lightsome, and I likit to hear the bum o't."

"And instead o' the raging I was prigging for," the soft-hearted maid told her friends, "she gave me a flannel petticoat!" Indeed, Miss Ailie had taken to giving away her possessions at this time, like a woman who thought she was on her death-bed. There was something for each of her pupils, including--but the important thing is that there was a gift for Tommy, which had the effect of planting the Hanoverian Woman (to whom he must have given many uneasy moments) more securely on the British Throne.