

LBRIS

We know
books

Gillespie and I



JANE HARRIS

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In the spring of 1888, it so happened that I moved from London to Glasgow, following the decease, at Christmas, of my aunt, whom I had nursed all through the autumn and early winter. During those cold, dark months of sickbed vigil, London had become oppressive to me and I grew to associate the place with death and dying. After several months of mourning had elapsed, I began to yearn for a change of scene, and so I decided to undertake a trip of some description, using a portion of the funds conferred upon me by my maternal grandfather, who had died several years previously, leaving me a lump sum and a small annuity.

It was to Scotland that I turned my sights. I had never visited there, but my mother was Scottish, in origin, if not inclination, and my stepfather – also a Scot – resided near Helensburgh. I rather suspect that, in going north, I nurtured some romantic notion of discovering my Caledonian heritage. Perhaps it might be considered callous to undertake such an apparently carefree, touristic trip so soon after one's close relative has passed away, but please understand that neither my mind nor my heart were carefree. Fresh air was what I craved: fresh air and distraction, to escape the odour of hothouse funeral flowers, and to purge my mind of bad memories.

As you may remember, the first Glasgow International Exhibition was staged in the year '88. For several months,

the newspapers had talked of little else, and it occurred to me that some solace might be found in a sojourn to the magnificent spectacle that was said to bestride both banks of the River Kelvin. Thus, in the second week of May, having closed up my aunt's little house in Clerkenwell, I took the train to Scotland. Travelling alone held no fears for me. I was thirty-five years old, and quite accustomed to making my own way in the world. Of course, in those days, the very idea of going hither and thither, unaccompanied, would have been viewed by many as unbecoming, or as a symptom of lowliness or poverty – which was not, in fact, the case. I was young, independent and modern, and although I was deeply affected by the death of Aunt Miriam, I certainly never saw myself as helpless, which is why I always took advantage of my own vigour. Admittedly, one had to be careful: gazing neither left nor right, and never (Heaven forbid!) looking any man, gentle or otherwise, in the eye.

The journey from the south seemed never ending, and dusk was falling as we approached our destination, the train rattling on through the landscape of hills and fields, with the sound of cinders pelting the roof of the carriage. We passed village after village – some fringed by heaps of waste, others by stagnant pools – then more fields, blanched in the smoke from our engine. Soon, the fields disappeared, swallowed by the night and the lamp-lit suburbs. At last, our speed slackened; the buildings shot up higher on each side, plunging us into darkness, and my travelling companions began to gather their belongings, as the train rumbled, canting from side to side, out onto a bridge. When the gloom lifted, I glimpsed, through silvery girders, a stretch of copper-coloured water: the Clyde. The river teemed

with vessels and, all along the quays, lights were blinking, whilst, above us, the reflected glow of countless furnaces turned the clouds sulphurous yellow.

That summer, the Exhibition in Glasgow was to create an influx of visitors from all over the world. By chance, my arrival was well timed: early enough in the year to secure half-decent lodgings, yet just a few days after the brouhaha of the opening ceremony with its crowds (large, enthusiastic) and royal visit (dumpy, indifferent). Once I had settled into my accommodation – two rooms in the attic floor of a terraced house not far from the West End Park – I spent a moderately distracting week strolling around the exhibits: the Fine Art and Sculpture Rooms in the Eastern Palace; the thrilling assault to the senses, both aural and nasal, in the Dynamo Shed; the Queen's Jubilee gifts (dull but, presumably, for those that need it, *terribly* reassuring); a reproduction of the Bishop's Palace which, upon investigation with the tip of my umbrella, revealed itself to be made entirely of painted canvas; and – my favourite, illicit haunt – Howell's tobacco kiosk with its wondrous international selection of cigarettes: Piccadilly Puffs; Shantung Silks; Dinard Dainties; *Tiffy Loos*! Oh, how I longed to stretch out on one of those divans up in the lounge and partake of nicotinic delights! However, this was many years ago; the world was a less tolerant place than it is now, and thus I had to content myself with ladylike forays to the front counter 'on behalf of my father' to purchase little darlings that I would later enjoy in private.

Not all my time was spent in the park. I found that walking seemed to alleviate my spirits, and so, once the novelty of the Exhibition had begun to fade, I started to explore the

centre of Glasgow, to familiarise myself with this Second City of the Empire, this place of many hills – and it was on one of these invigorating excursions that I first encountered two ladies who, as it transpired, turned out to be close relatives of Ned Gillespie.

This would have been, perhaps, in late May. I cannot recall the precise date but do remember that it was an unusually hot day and, feeling too stuffy in my accommodation, I had taken myself for a walk into town. The streets – with their pearly awnings and gay bustle of hats and parasols – were all a-shimmer in the heat, and swarming with ‘foreigners’, with the result that Glasgow had assumed the air of a cosmopolis, resembling, perhaps, Seville, Paris or even Naples, on a fête day. In places, the city appeared to be a building site, with offices, tenements and churches under construction on all sides. The silhouettes of wooden cranes jutted skywards and, on almost every street, there appeared patches of waste-ground, piled high with planks and mounds of stone, or gable ends of half-built tenements, with hearths already provided for persons yet unborn. Whilst walking along the busy thoroughfares, I was delighted to overhear snatches of conversation in a dozen different accents and languages: there were the Scots, of course, and the English, and the Americans, but I also encountered French, German and Dutch, and another tongue, which, at first, I could not identify, until it dawned upon me that what I was hearing was the language of the Gaels, the Highlanders of Scotland and, from across the water, the Irish.

In Buchanan Street, I had paused to inspect a display of table linen in the window of Wylie and Lochhead, when

something incongruous came to my attention. The pavement upon which I found myself was in shade, but the opposite side of the street was awash with sunshine and, brightly mirrored in the glass before me, I saw a woman in a black capote bonnet, stretched out on the ground, whilst a girl crouched beside her. At first I took this for some impromptu piece of street entertainment: not at all a far-fetched conclusion, given that, as a result of the Exhibition, the city was bristling with *plein-air* theatricals of one sort or another. I turned to gain a better view. There, indeed, was a lady, perhaps in her early sixties, lying on the pavement near the entrance to the Argyle Arcade. However, now that I could see clearly, I ascertained that she was not a ‘comédienne’, but that she had suffered some kind of collapse. This was evident from the genuine dismay on the face of the girl at her side, a pretty golden-haired creature in print frock and tall-crowned straw hat. The girl gazed around wildly and then hailed a youth in dusty clothes who happened to be passing. I could not overhear what was said because at that moment a cab sped by, but after a few words were spoken on both sides, the boy turned and dashed up Buchanan Street, no doubt in search of help.

Meanwhile, the scene on the pavement had attracted the attention of passers-by, and a small crowd began to assemble. A bossy-looking dowager swooped in with a vial of smelling salts, but when the application of these beneath the victim’s nose had no effect, our beldam was obliged to fall back, defeated. Thereafter, a tall gentleman bent down and thrust the collapsed matron’s discarded tapestry bag beneath her neck: no doubt a chivalrous act designed to keep her head off the ground, but one that forced her chin

towards her chest and tipped the capote bonnet askew. The girl tightened its ribbons and then fastened her companion's collar, which had come undone.

Evidently, the rougher elements of the throng were treating the emergency as part of the day's entertainment. They called out to the girl and to each other, and their comments ranged from the well intentioned ('Pinch her cheeks!') and 'Summy away and fetch a doactor!') to the rather less altruistic: 'Anybody got any sengwiches?' – a question that seemed, to me, to typify the gallows humour of the Glaswegian.

It was at this point that I decided to see if I could be of any assistance. Over the previous few years, I had attended several lectures run by the St John Ambulance Association, and was very familiar with its textbook, *First Aid to the Injured*. My interest in the subject was partly that of the casual enthusiast and partly prompted by my poor aunt's failing health. I will not claim to have been an expert, but I knew enough to see that the fumbling ministrations of those gathered around the victim might do more harm than good.

Without further ado, I hurried across the road, stepping between bystanders until I had reached the figure on the ground, whereupon I crouched down and commenced to inspect her stout person. Her lips were parted; her eyes closed, as though in sleep. Her young companion was fanning the air, uselessly, and weeping. From a distance, this girl had looked to be about fifteen years old, but I saw now, as she glanced up, that she was a young woman, perhaps in her early or middle twenties. When I asked what had happened, she shook her head.

'I don't know! She fell down. But she won't wake up!'

'Please don't worry,' I told her. 'I'm sure she'll be quite fine.'

And so saying, I began to feel for a pulse. Perhaps I was looking in the wrong place, or perhaps the matron's wrist was too plump, but I could detect nothing. The young woman was staring at me with great anxiety.

'Are you a nurse, madam?' she asked.

Not wishing to disappoint her by replying in the negative, I simply ignored her question and addressed the crowd sternly. (They had been leaning in for a better view of proceedings.)

'Stand back please! Give us air!'

There was a modicum of rearward shuffling, but I saw at once that it would be impossible to make them retreat to any distance. Therefore, I returned to my examination of the patient. I had already decided the most likely possibility: that she had fainted in the unaccustomed heat. There was, furthermore, a chance that she might have banged her head upon falling, and rendered herself unconscious. However, as I peered down at her face, I saw that matters were graver still, for her lips had turned blue. A bad sign, I knew, but – I will admit now – for the life of me, I could not remember what, exactly, this indicated. Was there something amiss with her heart, perhaps? Or was it the lungs?

The poor fair-haired woman was clearly on the verge of panic and so, rather than appear at a loss, and thereby frighten her, I began to carry out procedures that would have been advisable in any case, trusting that a diagnosis would come to me ere long. Firstly, I unfastened the capote bonnet; this, I passed to the young woman, to give her

something to do, other than flap her hands and weep. Next, I unbuttoned the lady's collar. Then, supporting the back of the skull, I removed the carpet-bag 'pillow' from beneath her neck. This prompted some rumbling objections from the gentleman who had so recently thrust it there, but I silenced him with a look.

The matron's head was clammy. I ran my fingers through her pale, thinning hair, to check for injuries, but could detect no sign of blood or swellings. I pressed my ear to her chest and perceived a faint heartbeat. That, at least, was good news. And yet, those blue lips, still darkening!

As a last resort, I held my hand and ear to her mouth and discovered, to my surprise, that the patient was not breathing. She was alive – but not breathing. How could that be? And then it came to me. Almost certainly, there must be some sort of obstruction in her mouth. I had once witnessed a practical demonstration in which my friend Esther Watson, a lady lecturer from St John, had checked the oral cavity of a supposedly unconscious person (in fact, her husband Henry, who had sportingly volunteered to recline on the carpet). Esther had explained that such a procedure was necessary in case the tongue or vomitus had blocked the throat. Remembering her example, I pressed down on the matron's chin, thereby causing her jaw to drop and her lips to part. Then I leaned forwards to peer inside her mouth.

Perhaps I should point out that I was not relishing any of these developments. Upon rising that morning, I had hoped to spend the day in quiet contemplation of shop windows, with, perhaps, the addition of a visit to a tea room. It did not occur to me for a second that I might, by mid-afternoon, be considering at close quarters the orifices of an eld-

erly citizen. However, having embarked upon my physical examination, I found myself compelled to proceed. Annie (that is to say, the fair-haired young woman, as I was later to find out her name) had fixed me with a tearful gaze. The crowd had already dubbed me 'Florence Nightingale', and were calling out words of encouragement. I felt compelled to live up to my name.

However, peer as I might, I could detect nothing in the lady's mouth. Why, there was not even a tooth in her head! The recess of her throat was too dark to see, but her tongue lay flat and was not sagging back to block her air passage, and there was no sign of any vomitus. I remembered, then, that, during the St John lecture, Esther had, as a final precaution, inserted a finger and thumb inside her husband's oral cavity and felt around for obstructions. Could I bring myself to do such a thing? It seemed I could, for my fingertips were already sliding between the woman's lips, prompting a collective intake of breath from the crowd, and one or two moans of distaste. Admittedly, it was not a pleasant sensation. She was hot inside and sticky. My fingers probed beneath the tongue and behind the gums, edging towards her gullet. Nothing. I was just about to withdraw my hand when one of my fingernails brushed against something right at the very back of her mouth, something slimy, but hard to the touch, and which, unmistakably, did not belong in a person's throat.

With the utmost caution, I stretched my finger further, perhaps by a quarter of an inch. There! I could feel it now with my fingertip: a solid object, as unyielding to the touch as ebony. No time to consider what this thing might be. I knew only that it must be removed at once, for

undoubtedly this was what prevented her from breathing. Her lips were already darker blue: if I did not act quickly, she would soon be dead. I would have to get enough purchase on the obstruction without pushing it further down her throat, which could prove fatal.

Gently, gently, I extended my arm. The crowd moaned once more as my hand disappeared, beyond the knuckles, into the woman's face. Hidden from view, deep in her gorge, my fingertips investigated the slippery edge of the mysterious item. It was almost impossible to get a grip on it. Then, abruptly, my middle finger slid behind some sort of ridge, and hooked there. I gave a soft tug. The thing shifted, moved upwards slightly, so that I was able to press my thumb against it. Much encouraged, I pulled again, this time with more urgency and – to my great surprise – my fist came flying out of her mouth with the great sucking whoosh of a Kilner jar as the seal is broken. The crowd gasped and lurched backwards, staring with obvious distaste at my hand. I followed their gaze. And there, clutched between my thumb and fingers, was a full upper set of false teeth, in Vulcanite and porcelain! Presumably, the woman had fainted, and the dentures had slipped back to seal her gullet like a stopper. I gazed down and saw – for the first time – the rise and fall of her bosom as she breathed once more. Her eyelids fluttered, then opened. The crowd forgot their disgust and cheered. Laughing through her tears, the pretty young woman cried out: 'Elspeth! Elspeth! Oh! You're awake!'

The lady gave me a rather distrustful glance, then turned her head towards her companion and whispered hoarsely: 'Annie! Where's my handbag?'

(As if I might have stolen it!)

The young woman picked up the bag to show her. Another ragged cheer went up, but now that the crisis had ended and – alas – nobody was dying, people had begun to drift away. I gazed at the teeth in my hand, wondering what to do with them. Elspeth herself was too confused to take them from me, so I held them out to Annie, who gazed at me blankly for a moment and then, emptying her own bag onto the pavement, began to sift through its contents, finally producing a rather grubby handkerchief, in which she wrapped the denture.

I thanked her, and she nodded. 'Aye, you're welcome.'

What a delightful local accent she had! I had imagined that, since she was reasonably well dressed, she might be rather differently spoken. But it was quite charming to hear such a pretty Glaswegian brogue.

From her prone position, Elspeth squinted at me. 'Have we been introduced, madam?' she asked, faintly.

'This lady's a nurse,' Annie explained. 'She made you better.'

At this, I felt shamefaced. The time had come to tell the truth. After all, my intervention had been a success. I had saved a life! I stood up, brushing the dust from my skirts, saying: 'To be perfectly honest, I'm not exactly a nurse. I simply know a little about how to tend to the injured.'

Annie frowned. 'Oh?' she said, examining me afresh, apparently disconcerted. Her reaction caused me to wonder whether she would have been so trusting of me had she known the truth all along.

Elspeth was gazing at me, still befuddled.

'I've seen her before,' she said.