Gillespie and I

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Introduction to *Gillespie and I*

by JANE HARRIS

Many years ago, I hatched a crafty plan for what I thought would be a 'simple' novel to write: a dozen or so linked short stories, all on a Scottish theme. I did complete several tales and some were published in anthologies, but in the end, the project never came together. I put the remaining unfinished stories in a box in the attic. Years later, searching for inspiration, I hauled out this box and read through its contents: my notes and fragments of abandoned narratives. One such fragment, much expanded and revised, eventually grew into my first novel, *The Observations*.

When the time came to embark upon a second book, I went back to these same old stories. In one file, I found a scrap of paper upon which I'd scribbled a few words: artist, Glasgow, nineteenth century. These words didn't amount to an idea, they were just a time, a place and a profession, but I sensed that I had found the right starting point. At the outset, I imagined that this novel might feature a female artist, and her struggles to succeed in a masculine world: a Bessie MacNicol or Margaret MacDonald MacKintosh. However, the concept soon changed direction. I decided to set the book in Glasgow's West End, which I know well, having lived there several times since I was a child. Something about that area of the city has always fascinated me: it is, in parts, beautiful, in other parts, seedy. One particular district, sometimes known as 'The Square Mile of Murder' has, over the years, been the site of many grisly crimes. As part of my research, I returned to my hometown and, in walking its streets, began to feel haunted by darker, more sinister voices from the past. As the project evolved, I found myself writing about an Englishwoman who is befriended by a Glaswegian painter and his family, and her account of a deplorable crime that culminates in a notorious

Victorian court case. Artist, Glasgow, Nineteenth Century: from these seeds grew what was to become *Gillespie and I*.

As I write, the time has come to start dreaming up another idea. The one that currently excites me most doesn't originate in the attic stories, but I like to think that they are still up there, waiting, and that, somewhere amongst those fragments, I might find the beginnings of a few more books.

PREFACE

Tuesday, 11 April 1933

LONDON

It would appear that I am to be the first to write a book on Gillespie. Who, if not me, was dealt that hand? Indeed, one might say, who else is left to tell the tale? Ned Gillespie: artist, innovator, and forgotten genius; my dear friend and soul mate. I first became acquainted with Gillespie in the spring of 1888 and during the course of several years thereafter we were connected through the most intimate of friendships. During this time, I learned to understand Ned – not simply through what he said – but also through his merest glance. So profound was our rapport that I was, on occasion, the first to behold his completed paintings, sometimes before his wife Annie had cast her gaze upon them. Ned and I had even agreed to co-author a volume on his life and work; but, unfortunately, that book was never written, due to his tragic and premature death at the age of thirty-six, just as (in my humble opinion) he was about to reach the very zenith of his creative powers.

Reader, if you wonder – as I suspect you may – why you have never heard of Gillespie, this supposed genius, then be aware of one thing: that, before he died, Ned burned almost all of his work, save for a handful of paintings which were in private ownership and thus inaccessible to him. I believe that he attempted to recover some of these canvases, and to my certain knowledge, one moonlit night, would have stolen back a portrait of Mrs Euphemia Urquart of Woodside Terrace, Glasgow, had not he been interrupted in the act of forcing a water-closet window by the Urquarts' butler, who (apparently cut short in solitary labours of his own) had been sitting in the dark; and who – despite the handicap of having his trousers at his ankles – grasped the intruder's shoulders as they emerged beneath the sash. A momentary struggle ensued, but

soon thereafter Ned wriggled free and bounded away across the back green, chuckling (perhaps in relief at his escape?), and the butler was left holding only a tweed jacket, aromatic with pipe tobacco. A few bills in the pockets revealed Ned's identity but, happily, the police were not minded to pursue any investigation.

The Urquart portrait therefore survives, along with a few others, but most of the paintings were reduced to ashes. It is to my everlasting regret that amongst those ruined canvases were Gillespie's most recent and finest – if bleakest – works. I have no doubt that those precious masterpieces marked a new departure for him and would have given us a glimpse – yes! of the future! – and also of Ned's struggles, both within himself and with his ill-fated wife and family, a group of persons who, sadly, were a burdensome factor in his life as much as they were a source of inspiration to him.

You may also wonder why I have been silent for so long, and why it has taken me all these years to put pen to paper. Perhaps I needed to gain some distance from a sequence of profoundly affecting events, not least of which was that Ned, in addition to wiping out his artistic legacy, also took his own life. By that time, I was thousands of miles away, and powerless to help him. Confident of an eventual reconciliation, I never suspected that we were moving towards such a rapid unravelling, not only of our relationship (what with all that silly white-slavery business and the trial) but also of his entire fate. However, let us not get ahead of ourselves. I will come to all that in due course.

Do you know: there are times when the past is so vivid in my mind that it seems more tangible to me even than my real life? Perhaps the act of committing this narrative to paper will free me of certain recurring dreams and (God willing!) diminish my eternal aching sadness about Ned Gillespie.

I

May 1888

GLASGOW

I

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 bestraddle 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 forfend!) 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 'comedienne', 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 'Sumdy 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.0)

'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 elderly 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.

'No,' sighed Annie. 'This is the lady that made you better. Just rest now.'

At that moment, the dustily clad youth returned, accompanied by a gentleman whose leather bag and general air of imperious,

bad-tempered conceit revealed him to be a doctor. In fact, I was relieved to yield authority to him. The strain of the past few minutes had begun to catch up with me, and I felt a little light-headed. I gave him a brief account of what had taken place, and he raised an eyebrow when he heard how long Elspeth had been unconscious, without breathing.

'Perhaps two minutes, you say?' He looked me up and down as he tried to get my measure. 'You are medically trained, madam?'

'Not exactly. Not medically trained, no, but – '

'I thought not,' he said, distinctly unimpressed. 'None the less, I'd wager you've saved this lady's life.'

Then he knelt down to tend to Elspeth, who submitted, like a child, to his examination. Annie – having gathered up her scattered belongings – had stood up, and was skittishly untying and retying the ribbon strings of her hat. I decided to absent myself quietly and politely.

'Well, I must go now. I'm so glad to have been of some use to you today.'

'Och, thanks for your help,' said Annie, and I was about to take my leave when she added: 'By the bye, how *do* you know all those things? Listening for a heartbeat and all the rest?'

I hesitated.

'Well, you see, I was looking after someone who was ill, and in the interest of being more useful, I attended some lectures by the St John Ambulance Association. The instructors demonstrated all sorts of procedures and techniques – '

'Oh well, that's good.'

'Yes – but sadly, what I learned was not enough to save my poor aunt. She died, just before Christmas.'

'Och, I'm sorry!' said Annie. 'I didn't realise.'

'Please – don't apologise. Sometimes, I do still dress in mourning – except that I had the misfortune, the other day, to be caught in that dreadful thunderstorm without my umbrella. There was not a cab in sight, and – well – I had to walk all the way back to Queen's Crescent in the pouring rain. Crape is such a difficult

fabric, I find: it just shrivels and rusts in the slightest shower.'

Elspeth, who had sat up to accept a glass of water from one of the shopkeepers, croaked: 'Queen's Crescent? At George's Cross?'

I admitted that this was, indeed, where I lodged.

'That's just around the corner from us,' said Annie.

'Invite her to call,' whispered Elspeth. 'Tomorrow.'

'Perhaps the lady's too busy.' Annie turned to me. 'I'm sorry, I don't know your name. I'm Annie – Annie Gillespie.'

'Nonsense,' came the matron's husky voice. 'She's not too busy.'

'And that's my mother-in-law, Elspeth – Mrs Gillespie.'

'How do you do?' I said. 'My name's Harriet – Miss Harriet Baxter. But, as for tea – I couldn't possibly – '

'Annie! Tell her!'

The young woman raised an eyebrow, and gazed at me, without enthusiasm. 'I'm afraid we have no choice in the matter,' she said.

And so it was that I was invited for tea, the very next day, at Stanley Street.

Momentous occasion!

Or was it? Upon reflection, I believe that I did feel rather pleased, but only in the way that one does when invited to break bread with a Native. Suddenly one feels an entirely new connection to the place where one finds oneself. It no longer feels like such foreign soil. And a world of hitherto unknown possibilities seems to open up.