

Title

JANE'S PARLOUR

By

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PeBook, 2014

To ...

Brian

About this eBook

“Jane's Parlour” by Anna Buchan (O. Douglas)

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ISBN 978-961-6944-95-3 (pdf)

ISBN 978-961-6944-96-0 (mobi)

ISBN 978-961-6944-97-7 (ePub)

PeBook

Popular eBooks Publishing Co.

Menges, Slovenia

Website: PeBook

Published in electronic format, September, 2014 by PeBook - Popular eBooks Publishing Co.
Available electronically at: eBookstore Bird

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JANE'S PARLOUR

I.

*"I'll aye ca' in by yon toun
And by yon garden green again."
Robert Burns.*

There was only one spot in the whole rambling length of Eliotstoun where Katharyn Eliot felt that she could be sure of being left at peace for any time. That was the small circular room at the end of the passage which contained her bedroom and Tim's dressing-room; it was called for some unknown reason "Jane's Parlour."

No one knew who Jane was. There was no mention of any Jane in the family records; Elizabeths in plenty, Elspeths, Susans, Anns, Carolines, Helens, but never a Jane. But whoever she was Katharyn liked to think that she had been a virtuous soul, who had left a fragrance behind her, for there was always a feeling of peace, a faint, indefinable scent as of some summer day long dead in that rounded room with its three narrow windows (each fitted with a seat and a faded cushion), its satiny white paper, discoloured here and there by winter's damp, on which hung coloured prints in dark frames. A faded Aubusson carpet lay on the floor, and in one corner stood a harp beside a bureau, and a beautiful walnut settee—these were Jane's. A capacious armchair (Tim's) was at one side of the fire, and opposite it, a large writing-table which was Katharyn's. There was also an over-crowded bookcase, and a comfortable sofa: that was all that was in the room.

Visitors who managed to force their way into this sanctum—Katharyn only invited tried friends there—would look round the charming shabby place and say, "Why don't you do up this room? It's the sweetest thing."

"No money," Katharyn would reply, but in her heart she knew that though the riches of the Indies were hers never would she lay sacrilegious hands on Jane's Parlour.

It was here she worked, for in the infrequent quiet times of a busy life Katharyn wrote—and published: it was here she read the writers she loved best, old writers like Donne and Ford and Webster from whom she was never tired of digging gloomy gems: it was here she sewed, for she had a talent—too little encouraged her daughters thought—for designing and making clothes, and it was here that she and Tim had their fireside talks and councils.

When Caroline was born Katharyn had made a rule that children and dogs were not to be admitted into Jane's Parlour, and when Tim protested, replied with steely decision that there must be one peaceful place in the house. Before ten years had passed there were five children at Eliotstoun, and an ever-increasing army of dogs, so that, as Tim acknowledged, it was well to have one place where one's feet were free of them.

And, because it was forbidden territory it naturally became the Mecca of the family, to enter it their most ardent desire. It was not that there was anything particularly exciting to see or touch—almost any one of the other rooms was richer in treasures—but there was something at once soothing and exciting about being there: and then, think what a score over the others!

Even now when Caroline was twenty-two, and Rory the baby, fourteen, the room still held its mysterious attraction for the family.

"It's about the only place they hold in awe, this little backwater of a room," Katharyn told her husband. "That's why, if I have to scold seriously, I send for the culprit to Jane's Parlour,"

and Tim, who never scolded, said, "Jolly good idea!"

It had been a great surprise to everyone when Katharyn Battye announced her engagement to John Timothy Eliot. Beautiful and accomplished, a brilliant marriage had been expected, and her friends deplored that she should throw herself away on an obscure Border laird, while Tim's friends asked each other mournfully what Tim, who seldom read anything but a newspaper or a magazine, would do with a wife whose chief delight it was to delve in the dullest tomes, and who actually wrote herself? All agreed that early and complete disillusionment must be the result. But they were all wrong. Katharyn made an excellent mistress of Eliotstoun, a delightful mother to her five children, and a perfect wife to Tim. So unlike were they that they were constantly surprising and amusing each other. Each respected the other's enthusiasms and remained aloof from them. What Katharyn felt for horses Tim felt for poetry—an amiable tolerance that desired no nearer acquaintance; but Tim was inordinately proud of his wife's cleverness, and Katharyn admired everything Tim said or did.

Katharyn was writing in her sanctum this September morning, perched on one of the window seats, an ink-bottle precariously placed beside her. She seldom sat at her writing-table, because, in winter she liked to be close to the fire, and in summer close to the windows, and as she would not use a fountain pen she often left an inky trail behind her.

It was a warm morning with no autumn tang in the air. It had been an extraordinary summer for these parts, a long succession of hot days that had almost dried up the burns, and had left Tweed a mere shadow of itself. Lifting her eyes from her writing Katharyn saw that Caroline was talking to someone on the lawn—a middle-aged woman in a grey print dress and shady hat; and at the sight she leapt to her feet, scattering the pile of papers on her knee, saving the ink-bottle by a miracle, and leaning out of the window cried:

"Alison! Come up, my dear. Bring her up, Car." A couple of minutes and Katharyn was greeting her old friend with "How glad I am to see you. You've been away an age—three months, I believe."

"Well, it's nice to be missed. And good to see you all again, K. What a wonderful summer it has been. Delicious for cruising, but I found it scorching in Kent."

"I daresay," said Katharyn. "Kent is more or less used to being scorched, but as you see, we've been scorched in the Borders—and we didn't like it."

"Ungrateful creatures," said Alison Lockhart, settling herself in Tim's chair and looking round the room with the air of greeting an old friend. "You surely get more than enough rain as a rule, can't you be thankful for good weather when it comes your way?"

Katharyn waved a hand towards the open window and said:

"I ask you, did you ever see Eliotstoun look like that? The lawn's all brown and bare and the borders so disjaskit—the word is Hogg's."

"And a very good word it is! I don't think the borders are bad, considering that everything has been flowering with the greatest enthusiasm all summer. You can't expect to have it both ways."

Katharyn laughed and agreed.

"Of course we can't; and it has been splendid in lots of ways. The children have enjoyed constant picnics and uninterrupted tennis, so it follows that I've had more time to myself than usual in the holidays—but tell me, when did you get back to Fairniehopes?"

"Only last night, and here I am already. I think I must have missed you, my dear, for when I woke this morning my first thought was, I'll see Katharyn to-day! So off I came the minute I'd had my breakfast, and heard how things were going. When I come back I'm amazed at my folly in ever wanting to leave this adorable countryside."

"Of course," said Katharyn, "because you are a Borderer, born and bred. I, who labour under the disadvantage of being English, might be forgiven having a desire to depart to my

own country—but the real truth is I'd rather be here than anywhere."

Alison nodded wisely. "That's Eliotstoun, and, particularly, Jane's Parlour. There's magic in it. When you came here as a bride—such a lovely long slip of a girl, accustomed to all that was best and most interesting in the way of society—I wondered if it were possible that you could settle down happily in this quiet neighbourhood with Tim.... But settle you did—and Jane's Parlour had something to do with it."

"And the children," Katharyn added, "and my writing, and—most of all, Tim. And now I'm so thronged about with duties that I sometimes feel like the old woman who lived in a shoe!"

"Because," said her friend, "you take on far too much. You are President of nearly everything in the district: W.R.I.; Mothers' Union; County Nursing—it's ridiculous. With your almost Victorianly large family—by the way, how are they all? Car is looking well. A pretty girl, though she'll never have the looks you had as a young girl. Does she still want to go on the stage?"

Katharyn puckered her brows as she said:

"Oh, determined. We rather hoped that a term at the Dramatic College would make her give up the idea, but not a bit of it. She loved it, lapped it up like a hungry cat, and means to go back in October and take her diploma, or whatever you take there, and then try to get a small part in some play."

"Well, my dear, don't look so dejected. If she has a talent for acting—"

Katharyn moved impatiently, and said, "Oh, I know, but acting is like no other profession. It breaks up a girl's life so. She can do nothing with other people, always rehearsing, and having meals at odd times, and not free till everyone else is going to bed. For those who are born to it, who have it in their blood, it must be absorbing, the only life, though always a most anxious and wearing existence, but for Car it's simply absurd. If she were a heaven-born genius one wouldn't dare put obstacles in her way, but she has only a pretty little talent which isn't enough. I've tried to make her see it, but she won't. Already it's making a barrier between us, she thinks we're trying to thwart her for our own selfish reasons, grudging the money and so forth. I was so far left to myself the other day as to say I wished I saw her married to some decent man—I've a horror of her producing some affected posing youth as her future husband—and she said, 'The last thing in the world I want to marry is a decent man.'—Poor darling!"

Alison laughed. "Well, you asked for it, didn't you? She lives with your mother in London?"

"Yes, and that's funny too. You know my mother, how unapproachable she seems to almost every one, how awe-inspiring she can be! Car's description of her grandmother's face when some of her friends visited her in South Street! All the same, living with her puts a wholesome restraint on my rebellious little daughter. Oh, dear, I do so want the child to be happy."

"And Helen? Has she leanings towards the theatre?"

Katharyn shook her head. "Helen is too well amused with life at present to think seriously about anything. We rarely see her. She has hosts of friends who take her about and give her a wonderful time. Tim and I don't much like it, but—what can one do? The Gordons asked her to stay with them in London for six weeks, and other people took her to Cowes, now she has gone to some people called Deeling who have taken the Gordons' place on Speyside, to attend the Northern meetings. I don't wonder people like Helen, she is a poppet—but I wish we knew more about her friends. Did you ever hear of Deelings? Mrs. Gordon wrote to me about them and said they were particularly nice, but I don't know. They seem very noticeable people, much paragraphed and photographed: we often see Helen in groups reading left to right,

generally quite unrecognizable!"

"Those photographs in papers often are," said Alison. "But I suppose they must amuse some people, and they help the men who take them to make a living. But imagine little Helen being so conspicuous. No, I don't think I know any Deelings, but my circle isn't large. If Mrs. Gordon vouches for them they'll be all right—what about my friend Sandy?"

"You'll see him at lunch, and Tom and Rory too. You will stay, won't you? After all these months it would be too cruel to cheat us with a morning call. I'll ring up Fairniehopes and tell them you won't be back till evening."

"And that," said Alison Lockhart, "is how you defeat yourself. You plan out a morning's work, a casual friend turns up whom your kind heart won't allow you to send away, and the day is lost to you."

"A casual friend hardly describes you, my dear, or you wouldn't be sitting in Jane's Parlour, listening to my worries about the children, which I'd tell to no one else. I count a day well lost that brings you. As a matter of fact, I'm afraid I'm only too pleased to be disturbed! I constantly find myself making errands downstairs, simply to get away from the task of writing. Why do I do it? Mostly for money, I fear, though there is a certain amount of pleasure in it if things go well. And I have a small but faithful public. I used to write simply for the love of it, but if the money weren't so welcome I doubt if I'd attempt another book. Perhaps, since it has grown so mechanical it would be honest to give it up; I don't know. Things get worse and worse, Alison. Times are so bad that some of the farmers simply can't pay their rents. And we have a lot to keep up, as you know, with two boys at Eton, one at Oxford, two girls who need endless help over and above their allowances. Tim says hopefully that things show signs of beginning to improve, but I've precious little hope of it myself.... Tim spends next to nothing on himself, and he let most of the shooting this year—a thing he simply hates having to do. I try to do with as little as possible, though what I get must be good for I hate cheap clothes. Happily, tweeds last practically forever."

"Everybody," said Alison, "is more or less in the same box. You're better off than many, you can still live in a dignified way in your own house. I went to see the Armstrongs when I was passing through London—"

"Oh, tell me about them! I've been feeling wretchedly guilty about not making more of an effort to hear of them. Is it true that Alice has started a boarding-house?"

"Yes, in Bayswater. She had the furniture from Armstrong, except some fine pieces that had to be sold, and, it seemed the only thing she could do. She has got the place very nice, and is prepared to do her utmost. Immensely plucky of her, I think."

"A boarding-house!" said Katharyn. "I'd almost rather keep a hen-farm. Hens can't complain about how you feed them, and boarders can—and do."

"Armstrong has been bought for a hotel, someone said."

"Yes, furnished, I hear, regardless of cost, with the very latest in bedroom suites, carpets your feet sink into, and running water in every room. Armstrong! What about the boys? I've thought of them so often."

"Ralph's finished with Oxford, you know, and is trying to find a job. Poor Phil has had to leave school—he's seventeen—and he, too, has to find something to do. I saw them both. And sorry I was for them, country boys cooped up in Bayswater in the height of summer. I think the thought of them is their mother's heaviest burden at the moment."

"It can't be allowed," said Katharyn. "They must come here at once. Two boys make no difference to speak of, and our boys will like having them. Everybody must set to and try to find them suitable jobs. What are old friends for? ... I'll address an envelope this very minute and that will remind me to get it away by the afternoon's post. What's the address?"

"10 Cambridge Gardens. I confess I'll be glad to think of those boys having some fun. It's

bad enough for older people, but the young have such large expectations, I hate to see them cheated. I'll write too, and send them some money for fares and so forth. As you say, what are old friends for.... Funny, it never occurred to me to ask them to Fairniehopes, and at once it seemed the natural thing to you to ask them here."

"That," said Katharyn, "is because of Sandy and Tim and Rory. I know their passion for their own country-side and what it would mean to them to be shut up in London. Besides, my dear, in spite of my grumbles I have much to be grateful for, and this is a way of saying a small "Thank you."

II.

"We can weel do the thing when we're young

That use canna do weel when we're auld."

JOHN CLUNIE

Alison Lockhart looked round the Eliotstoun luncheon-table with a satisfied smile as she said, "After all there is no place like home."

"Be it ever so humble," added her host. "Does that mean that for the moment you've had enough of 'pleasures and palaces'? You've been yachting with a millionaire, haven't you?"

Miss Lockhart helped herself to curried eggs, and said:

"Well, hardly that. There can't be many young millionaires in these days, what with death-duties and one thing and another, but my host was certainly comfortably off. Young Leonard Mathieson, son of the late Sir Eric Mathieson—you know?"

Tim nodded. "I don't know anything about the son, but old Sir Eric was a marvel. Began life as a poor boy without a particle of influence, made every penny he possessed, and held the strings of half a dozen big concerns when he died lately at seventy odd."

"But, Aunt Alison," Car's clear voice asked, "how did you come to be with such a party?"

"You mean, how did a dowdy, oldish female come to be among a lot of gay young people on a pleasure cruise? I'll tell you. Sir Eric didn't marry till fairly late in life, and then he married a cousin of my own, Maud Gough. They had this one son, who is my godson. He and I are very good friends, and he begged me—yes, begged me—to go and support his mother in this cruise, and I who love the sea, and am not above a taste of luxury when I can get it, was very pleased to accept. It was all very delightful, and I found the company of eight young people most inspiring. They certainly know how to give themselves a good time, these boys and girls, and manage to squeeze every drop of juice out of the orange of pleasure. And they've a great deal more in their heads than I gave them credit for. We went to the most heavenly places, and they were really keen and appreciative. But in spite, perhaps because of my enjoyment, I had an uneasy feeling that it was all wrong that any one should have enough money to take his own party in his own luxurious yacht—I don't mind the people in the Cruises—most of them work hard and deserve their holiday—to sail on those halcyon seas, and drink deep of beauty when in Britain—I say Britain for it's the place that matters most to me, but other countries are as bad, if not worse—decent men by the thousand are all losing their self-respect and seeing their wives and children live as no one ought to be asked to live at this time of day, because there isn't work for them to do. When I thought of them I lost appetite for the yacht's delicacies."

Tim grunted, and Katharyn said, "Yes, I sometimes wonder how one can ever think of anything else. But knowing you, Alison, I'm pretty sure that a good many schemes for giving poor children a country holiday were the richer because of your good time."

"Oh, well"—Alison finished her curried eggs and laid down her fork—"one must salve