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The Ladies of Missalonghi

Written by Colleen McCullough

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COLLEEN
McCULLOUGH

*The Ladies of
Missalonghi*



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*For Mother,
who has finally attained her dream of
living in the Blue Mountains*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For the information of readers who notice that Missalonghi is spelled with an “a” rather than the “o” now commonly accepted as correct, in Australia at the time this story takes place, the old-fashioned “a” was more usual.

“CAN YOU TELL ME, Octavia, why our luck never seems to change for the better?” asked Mrs. Drusilla Wright of her sister, adding with a sigh, “We need a new roof.”

Miss Octavia Hurlingford dropped her hands into her lap, shook her head dolefully and echoed the sigh. “Oh, dear! Are you sure?”

“Denys is.”

Since their nephew Denys Hurlingford ran the local ironmongery and had a thriving plumbing business as well, his word was law in such matters.

“How much will a new roof cost? Must it be a whole one? Couldn’t we have the worst sheets replaced?”

“There isn’t one sheet of iron worth keeping, Denys says, so we’re looking at about fifty pounds, I’m afraid.”

A gloomy silence fell, each sister cudgelling her brain in search of a source for the necessary funds. They were sitting side by side on a horsehair-stuffed sofa whose better days were so far in the past that no one remembered them.

Mrs. Drusilla Wright was hemstitching pulled threads around the border of a linen cloth with microscopically fine, meticulous skill, and Miss Octavia Hurlingford was occupied with a crochet hook, the work dangling from it as exquisitely done as the hemstitching.

"We could use the fifty pounds Father put in the bank for me when I was born," offered the third occupant of the room, anxious to make amends for the fact that she saved not a penny of her egg and butter money. She was also working, sitting on a low stool producing lace from a tatting shuttle and a ball of ecru thread, her fingers moving with the complete efficiency of a task known so well it was sightless, mindless.

"Thank you, but no," said Drusilla.

And that was the end of the only conversation occurring during the two-hour work period of Friday afternoon, for not long afterwards the hall clock began to chime four. While the last vibrations still lingered in the air, all three ladies proceeded with the automatism of long custom to put away their handicrafts, Drusilla her sewing, Octavia her crocheting, and Missy her tatting. Each lady disposed of her work inside an identical grey flannel drawstring bag, after which each lady disposed of her bag inside a battered mahogany sideboard sitting beneath the window.

The routine never, never varied. At four o'clock the two-hour handwork session in the second-best parlour came to an end, and another two-hour session began, but of a

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different kind. Drusilla moved to the organ which was her only treasure and only pleasure, while Octavia and Missy moved to the kitchen, there to prepare the evening meal and finish off the outside chores.

As they clustered in the doorway like three hens unsure of the pecking order, it was easy to see that Drusilla and Octavia were sisters. Each was extremely tall and each had a long, bony, anaemically fair face; but where Drusilla was sturdily large and muscular, Octavia was crabbed and diminished by a long-standing bone disease. Missy shared the height, though not so much of it, being a mere five feet seven to her aunt's five feet ten and her mother's six feet. Nothing else did she have in common, for she was as dark as they were fair, as flat-chested as they were fulsome, and owned features as small as theirs were large.

The kitchen was a big bare room at the back of the dim central hall, its brown-painted wooden walls contributing their mite to the general atmosphere of gloominess.

"Peel the potatoes before you go out to pick the beans, Missy," said Octavia as she strapped on the voluminous brown pinny which protected her brown dress from the perils of cooking. While Missy peeled the three potatoes considered sufficient, Octavia shook up the coals smouldering in the firebox of the black iron range which occupied the whole frontage of the kitchen chimney; she then added fresh wood, adjusted the damper to cull more draught, and put a huge iron kettle on to boil. This done, she turned to

the pantry to get out the raw materials for next morning's porridge.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed, emerging a moment later to display a brown paper bag whose bottom corners bled a flurry of oats that floated to the floor like turgid snowflakes. "Look at this! Mice!"

"Don't worry, I'll set some traps tonight," said Missy without much interest, putting her potatoes into a small pot of water, and adding a pinch of salt.

"Traps tonight doesn't get our breakfast on the table, so you'll have to ask your mother if you can run to Uncle Maxwell's to buy more oats."

"Couldn't we do without for once?" Missy hated oats.

"In *winter*?" Octavia stared at her as if she had gone mad. "A good big bowl of porridge is cheap, my girl, and sets you up for the whole day. Now hurry, for goodness sake!"

On the hall side of the kitchen door the organ music was deafening. Drusilla was an appallingly bad player who had never been told other than that she was very good, but to play with such consistent ineptitude required remorseless practice, so between four and six every weekday afternoon, Drusilla practised. There was some point to it, as she inflicted her lack of talent on the largely Hurlingford congregation at the Byron Church of England each Sunday; luckily no Hurlingford had an ear for music, so all the Hurlingfords thought they were very well served during service.

Missy crept into the parlour, not the room where they

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did their handwork, but the one reserved for important occasions, and where the organ lived; there, Drusilla was assaulting Bach with all the clangour and thunder of a jousting knight his rival in the lists, seated with her back straight, her eyes closed, her head tilted, and her mouth twitching.

“Mother?” It was the smallest whisper, a filament of sound in competition against whole hawsers.

However, it was enough. Drusilla opened her eyes and turned her head, more in a spirit of resignation than anger.

“Well?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but we need more oats before Uncle Maxwell shuts. The mice got at the bag.”

Drusilla sighed. “Bring me my purse, then.”

The purse was fetched, and sixpence fished from its flaccid recesses. “*Bulk* oats, mind! All you pay for with a proprietary brand of oats is the fancy box.”

“No, Mother! Proprietary oats taste much better, and you don’t have to boil them all night to cook them, either.” A faint hope entered Missy’s breast. “In fact, if you and Aunt Octavia would rather eat proprietary oats, I’ll gladly go without to make up the difference in expense.”

Drusilla was always telling herself and her sister that she lived for the day her timid daughter showed signs of defiance, but this present humble bid for independence only ran up against an authoritarian wall the mother didn’t know she had erected. So she said, shocked, “Go without? Most

definitely not! Porridge is our winter staple, and it's a lot cheaper than coal fires." Then the tone of her voice became friendlier, more equal-women. "What's the temperature?"

Missy consulted the thermometer in the hall. "Forty-two!" she called.

"Then we'll eat in the kitchen and spend the evening there!" shouted Drusilla, beginning to give Bach another belting.

Wrapped up in her brown serge overcoat, a brown fleecy scarf and a brown knitted bonnet, with the sixpence from her mother's purse tucked down into the finger of one brown woollen glove, Missy let herself out of the house and hurried down the neat brick path to the front gate. In a small shopping bag was her library book; opportunities to sneak in an extra trip to the library were few and far between, and if she really scampered, no one need ever know she had done more than go to Uncle Maxwell's in search of oats. Tonight her Aunt Livilla would be manning the library herself, so it would have to be an improving sort of book instead of a novel, but in Missy's eyes any sort of book was better than no book at all. And next Monday Una would be there, so she could have a novel.

The air was full of a soft, fine Scotch mist that dithered between fog and rain and covered the privet hedge along the boundary of the house named Missalonghi with fat round drops of water. The moment Missy stepped out into

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Gordon Road she began to run, only slowing to a rapid walk at the corner because that wretchedly painful stitch was back in her left side, and it really did hurt. Slowing down definitely eased her discomfort, however, so she trotted along more sedately and began to experience the glow of happiness which always came when she was offered this rarest of treats, a chance to escape on her own from the confines of Missalonghi. Picking up her pace again the minute the stitch disappeared, she commenced to look around her at the familiar sights Byron had to offer on a misty late afternoon of a short winter's day.

Everything in the town of Byron was named after some aspect of the poet, including her mother's house, Missalonghi, christened after the place where Lord Byron had expired untimely. This bizarre urban nomenclature was the fault of Missy's great-grandfather, the first Sir William Hurlingford, who had founded his town hard on the heels of reading *Childe Harold*, and was so pleased that he had actually discovered a great work of literature he could understand that ever after he had rammed indigestible amounts of Byron down the throats of everyone he knew. Thus Missalonghi was situated in Gordon Road, and Gordon Road ran into Noel Street, and Noel Street ran into Byron Street, which was the main thoroughfare; on the better side of town George Street meandered for several miles before plunging over the edge of the mighty Jamieson Valley. There was even a tiny cul-de-sac called Caroline

Lamb Place, situated of course on the wrong side of the railway line (as was the house named Missalonghi); here dwelled a dozen very brassy women divided between three houses, and here came many masculine visitors from the fettlers' camp just up the line, as well as from the huge bottling plant that marred the town's southern outskirts.

It was one of the more puzzling and interesting facets of the first Sir William's intriguing character that on his deathbed he had firmly enjoined his surviving progeny not to interfere with the course of Nature by changing the function of Caroline Lamb Place, which in consequence had remained distinctly shady ever since, and not just due to its chestnut trees. In fact, the first Sir William had been addicted to what he always described as "an orderly system of naming things", and had called all his daughters by Latin names because they were popular in the higher ranks of society. His descendants kept the custom up, so there were Julias, Aurelias, Antonias, Augustas; only one branch of the family had tried to improve upon this policy by starting, with the arrival of their fifth son, to call their boys by Latin numbers, thereby glorifying the Hurlingford family tree with a Quintus, a Sextus, a Septimus, an Octavius and a Nonus. Decimus died at birth, and no one wondered at it.

Oh, how beautiful! Missy stopped to marvel at a huge spider's web beaded by the soft feelers of mist that trailed pulsating up out of the invisible valley on the far side of Gordon Road. There was a very large sleek spider at the

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web's middle, apologetically escorted by her tiny mate-of-the-moment, but Missy felt neither fear nor revulsion, only envy. Not merely did this lucky creature own her world intrepidly and securely, but she flew the original suffragette banner by not only dominating and using her husband, but also by eating him once his purpose was scattered over her eggs. Oh, lucky, lucky spider-lady! Demolish her world, and she would serenely remake it to inborn specifications so lovely, so ethereal, that impermanence could never matter; and when the new web was finished, she would arrange the next series of consorts upon it like a movable feast, the modestly robust husband of today just off-centre, and his successors getting littler and littler the farther they were from Mother at the hub.

The time! Missy began to run again, turning into Byron Street and heading for the row of shops which marched down either side of one block in the centre of the town, just before Byron Street became grandiose and produced the park and the railway station and the marble-fronted hotel and the imposing Egyptian façade of the Byron Waters Baths.

There was the grocery and produce store, owned by Maxwell Hurlingford; the ironmongery, owned by Denys Hurlingford; the millinery shop, owned by Aurelia Marshall, née Hurlingford; the smithy and petrol pump, owned by Thomas Hurlingford; the bakery, owned by Walter Hurlingford; the clothing emporium, owned by Herbert Hurlingford; the newsagency and stationery shop,

owned by Septimus Hurlingford; the Weeping Willow Tea Room, owned by Julia Hurlingford; the lending library, owned by Livilla Hurlingford; the butchery, owned by Roger Hurlingford Witherspoon; the sweet shop and tobacconist, owned by Percival Hurlingford; and the Olympus Café and Milk Bar, owned by Nikos Theodoropoulos.

As befitted its importance, Byron Street was sealed with tarmacadam as far as its junctions with Noel Street and Caroline Lamb Place, provided with an ornate polished granite horse-trough donated by the first Sir William, and possessed of proper hitching-posts right along its awninged section of shops. It was lined with very beautiful old gum trees, and contrived to look both peaceful and prosperous.

There were very few private dwellings in the central part of Byron. The town made its living from summer visitors anxious to escape the heat and humidity of the coastal plain, and year-round visitors who aspired to ease their rheumatic aches and pains by soaking in the hot mineral waters some geological freak had placed beneath Byron ground. Therefore all along Byron Street were many guest-houses and boarding-houses – mostly owned and run by Hurlingfords, of course. The Byron Waters Baths provided a most agreeable standard of comfort for those not precisely penny-pinched, the vast and prestigious Hurlingford Hotel boasted private baths for the exclusive use of its own guests, while for those whose pecuniary resources just stretched to bed and breakfast in one of the

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cheaper boarding-houses, there existed the clean if spartan pools of the Byron Spa, just around the corner on Noel Street.

Even those too poor to come to the town of Byron at all were catered for. The second Sir William had invented the Byron Bottle (as it was known throughout Australia and the South Pacific); a one-pint, artistically slender, crystal-clear bottle of Byron's best spring water, gently effervescent, mildly but never disastrously aperient, distinctly tasty. Vichy water be damned! said those fortunate enough to have travelled to France. The good old Byron Bottle was not only better, it was also a great deal cheaper. And there was a penny refund on the empty too. Judicious buying of shares in the glassworks had put the final polish on this extremely inexpensive to run but remarkably lucrative local industry; it continued to thrive and to make enormous sums of money for all the male descendants of the second Sir William. The third Sir William, grandson of the first and son of the second, currently presided over the Byron Bottle Company empire with all the ruthlessness and rapaciousness of his earlier namesakes.

Maxwell Hurlingford, in direct line from the first Sir William and therefore a hugely wealthy man in his own right, did not need to run a grocery and produce store. However, commercial instinct and acumen in the Hurlingfords died hard, and the Calvinistic precepts which governed the clan dictated that a man must work to have

grace in the eyes of the Lord. Rigid adherence to this rule should have made Maxwell Hurlingford a saint on earth, but instead had only managed to create a street-angel cum house-devil.

When Missy entered the shop a bell tinkled raucously, that being a perfect description of the sound Maxwell Hurlingford had devised in order to gratify his ascetics as well as his prudence. He emerged immediately the bell summoned him from the nether regions out the back, where resided the bran and chaff and wheat and barley and pollard and oats in towering stacks of hempen bags; not only did Maxwell Hurlingford cater to the gastronomic needs of the human population of Byron, he also victualled its horses, cows, pigs, sheep and chooks. As one local wit said when his grass failed, Maxwell Hurlingford got you going and coming.

His face bore its normal expression, sour, and his right hand a big scoop whiskered with webby strands of fodder.

"Look at this!" he snarled, waving the scoop at Missy in an uncanny imitation of his sister Octavia bearing her mouse-pillaged bags of oats. "Weevils all over the place."

"Oh, dear! The bulk oats too?"

"The lot."

"Then you'd better give me a box of proper breakfast oats, please, Uncle Maxwell."

"Just as well horses aren't fussy," he grumbled, putting the scoop down and squeezing behind the grocery counter.