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Opening Extract from...

An Unlikely Agent

Written by Jane Menczer

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The mist covers everything; all around him there is an endless white hush, broken only by the dreary slap of the waves. He waits, feeling the chill sink into his bones. The emptiness and the waiting are so familiar that it has started to seem as if he has always been here, suspended in this nothingness, drifting on the slow tides of his body.

Then, in the very instant that someone whistles to give the signal, he sees MacIntyre moving through the blankness. Startled by the sound, MacIntyre stops and listens. The faint blur of his head turns this way and that with a deliberation that is almost theatrical, but he detects nothing. Quiet settles over them again and for a few moments they both stand completely motionless; even the vapour seems stilled. From somewhere high above a gull keens faintly. MacIntyre takes a tentative step across the shingle, hesitates, and strides on towards him.

Wary of being seen, he crouches down behind a rock, leaning against it to relieve the stiffness in his knees. His fingertips meet the barnacled dome of a limpet and he turns it speculatively, countering its tightened grip until, seized by impatience, he wrenches it away from its anchorage. He presses his hands hard against the rock; beneath its cold, slick surface there is a weight and solidity that is somehow gratifying. When MacIntyre passes by a few feet away, the feeling intensifies; he is rooted, secure in his purpose, his whole being channelled to a point of will.

MacIntyre is stooping, his neck and shoulders dragged down by a bulky satchel slung crosswise against his chest, but he steps along quite jauntily, singing under his breath. The song seems tantalisingly familiar, and as his mind begins to scan and puzzle his gaze eddies away through the swirling whiteness. Then, abruptly, he snaps back and his eyes lock on to MacIntyre, vanishing into the dark mouth of the cave. He heaves a long sigh and folds his hands in front of him. It has all proceeded to plan. Now he must wait. There is no other way out; sooner or later one of them will reappear and, really, it does not matter which.

It is very cold standing here; the dead are cold like this. And all this will end in death, like a neat line ruled across a page, with nothing to follow.

His head turns. He hears a sound like a gull mewing; it is a woman's voice, dampened by the fog. She is calling and then waiting and then calling again. He cannot see her yet, but of course she is moving this way. She ought not to have come here; he is tired of complications, tired of these people and their silly, pointless gestures.

A gunshot rings out inside the cave. He readies himself. There is a clamour of footsteps and then a man emerges at breakneck speed, running straight at him. He grabs the man's coat by the collar, looks him in the eye and pushes the knife into his throat. The man's pupils flare in shock and his eyes film over as he drops forward, choking and gurgling, his blood spattering the sand. He draws a few last rasping breaths, shudders violently and then lies still.

For a short time the assassin stands with his head bowed. Then, bending down to rest one palm on the shingle, he eases himself into a squatting position and cleans his knife on the dead man's jacket, gentling the blade to a silver sheen before straightening up and setting it snugly in his belt.

Another cry: a seabird's shriek. He knows she's watching him. When he turns round he will see her there, bewildered and afraid; he will be obliged to give her an explanation. The prospect exhausts him and so he closes his eyes and stands perfectly still, feeling the mist on his eyelids.

And his mind moves away from him again, and he is thinking of what comes next, now that all of this is done: the scurrying forward, the keeping on while the clocks keep ticking and the politicians jabber away. For he is part of the machinery that mustn't be stopped, the wheels within wheels that drive the march onward.

He opens his eyes, he sets his lips into a smile, and then he turns towards her.

One

1905

Since it has fallen to me to relate MacIntyre's story, it is necessary to begin by telling my own, or at least that portion of it that is relevant to the matter in hand. My first encounter with MacIntyre was brought about by a chain of circumstances that commenced, inauspiciously enough, on a bright May morning, nearly six months before the day on which we lost him; though if one were to look further into the past, as I have been compelled to do very frequently of late, one might trace the first tiny ripples in the current that drew me towards him right back to the days of my girlhood.

I was at that time employed as a secretary in a small firm, a position that I had held for nearly ten years, and would have been astounded had I known that this period of my life was shortly to come to an end. Yet how much more it would have astonished me to learn that I had become an object of interest to people whose existence I should scarcely have credited; that my future was no longer subject to the workings of chance; and that an intricate and insidious mechanism had been set in motion by invisible hands, a mechanism that was shortly to propel me into a sequence of

remarkable adventures of the sort that I had hitherto encountered only in books.

On my way to work I had lingered a little, enjoying the early sunshine and the scent of lilacs coming into bloom. I alighted from the tram at five minutes to nine, somewhat later than was my custom, and darted across the Holloway Road to the familiar, grimy-looking building with advertisements for New Pin soap and Pinnace cigarettes blazoned across its exterior. Without pausing for breath I sped up three flights of stairs to a poky landing on the topmost storey and turned the handle of the single, plate-glass door, which bore the legend *Plimpson and Co.* in bold white letters. To my surprise, however, it remained firmly shut. Relieved that I was not to be caught out in my poor timekeeping after all, I took the key from my reticule, turned it in the lock and passed through the door, wriggling out of my coat as I went. However, as I reached to hang it up, I saw that Mr Plimpson's hat was already on its hook and realised to my dismay that he must be in the office after all. I opened the blinds, reflecting how peculiar it was that my employer had locked himself inside his own business premises and allowing myself a brief moment of speculation as to whether this had been done unintentionally, or whether in fact he might be trying to evade an irate customer. Such a necessity would not have been unprecedented, though on two of the three previous occasions on which it had arisen he had simply avoided the office for a few days, leaving me to soothe the clients' injured feelings as best I could. The third, more memorable episode I shall come to in its proper place.

I tore off my gloves, seized my pen and notebook from the top drawer of my desk and knocked briskly on the door to the inner room, just as the clock on the mantelpiece chimed nine. Inwardly, I berated myself for my lack of discipline; I took great pride in being punctual and always made sure that I was in the office at least ten minutes before the hour struck. In the usual course of things Mr Plimpson took little notice of my comings and goings, but during the past few days he had become uncharacteristically short-tempered, scolding me for committing all manner of bureaucratic misdemeanours,

every one of which was either imaginary or caused by his own absent-mindedness. Indeed, I could not recall his ever having been quite so on edge; only the previous day, I had brushed against a stack of ledgers which, to my considerable annoyance, he had piled up on my desk, and sent them crashing to the floor. Immediately, he had burst into the room wearing such a look of terror that my own heart had begun to race. He had attempted to make light of his agitation by scolding me for my clumsiness, but his voice had been thin with relief, and when he had reached into his breast pocket for his cigarette case his hand had trembled.

I knocked again, and, hearing nothing, turned the door handle and peered into the room. Mr Plimpson was pacing up and down on the faded Turkey rug as though intent on mapping out its pattern with his feet. He looked as if he had been in the office all night; his cheeks and nose were flushed an unhealthy red, a sheen of perspiration glistened on his forehead and there were wet marks beneath the arms of his shirt. The blinds were still drawn and I hurried across to open them, for the air in the room smelled strongly of tobacco smoke intermingled with a fug of other stale and unpleasant odours.

"Stop!" cried Mr Plimpson, rushing to intercept me. "Don't touch the blinds, Miss Trant . . ." As if recollecting himself, he stopped short. "Ahem! That is, as you may have noticed, I have not been at all well of late, and the doctor has advised me to avoid getting too much sun. It tends to bring on my headaches, you know."

His voice trailed off and he dropped onto the chair behind his desk with a groan. I watched with some anxiety as he sat staring into space and stroking his moustache, for I was perturbed by the wildness of his appearance, and more particularly by the fact that I could detect whisky on his breath at such an early hour. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"Miss Trant, I have some news . . . 'Tisn't good news, I'm sorry to say. I am at present experiencing some business troubles . . . nothing too serious, you understand." He loosened his tie and licked his lips, his eyes darting about the room as if he were weighing up

what he would say next. "As a result of various ill-judged investments made, I freely admit, on the advice of a once loved and trusted . . ." he paused, appearing to grope for the word before continuing, "friend, the firm has incurred some bothersome debts. Unfortunately, that donkey of a landlord has chosen this moment to raise the rent on these premises. Ergo, the books do not balance. Ergo, we shall have to move elsewhere. To Deptford, in fact."

I found myself suddenly short of breath and was obliged to sit down; it seemed clear that the situation must be far worse than I had originally suspected. Mr Plimpson, though small in stature, was rather portly. He manoeuvred his bulk with some difficulty round the side of the desk and patted me awkwardly on the arm. I shrank from his touch, but he seemed unaware of my discomfort, for his damp fingers continued to linger on my shoulder.

"You have no cause for concern, Miss Trant, no cause at all. Your job is perfectly safe; I would never dispense with your invaluable services so lightly. Fear not, the fortunes of Plimpson and Co. will rally in due course! There has been a temporary reversal in the markets, nothing more."

Sighing, I bowed my head. "As you can imagine sir, this news is rather a shock to me. Much as I value my situation here, such a move would present me with a number of practical difficulties. I do hope that you will not consider me guilty of ingratitude if I ask for a few days in which to consider my position."

He snatched his hand away from my shoulder as if he had been burnt.

"But Miss Trant, it never occurred to me that you might leave! After all, you are not a married woman. You have no domestic responsibilities, no children. Surely it would present no great difficulty to take new lodgings? I dare say you could find rather a nice little place in Deptford; the rents are very reasonable."

I stood up. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him the reason for my hesitation, but when I looked into his eyes, which were regarding me with the beady intensity of a bird determined to catch a worm, I held my peace.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr Plimpson, but I will need some time to think the matter over. I'll let you know as soon as I have come to a decision."

He exhaled mournfully. "Very well, Miss Trant, you must do as you think best. But it would make me very happy if you chose to stay."

He took my hand in his clammy grasp, leaning over it earnestly as though he were about to kiss it. I drew my arm away and hurried out of the room, murmuring an excuse about a letter that needed to be typed in order to catch the morning post.

I crossed behind my desk to the window and pulled up the sash with trembling fingers. The clip-clop of traffic on the road below was broken through abruptly by the roar of an approaching motor bus, which sped past a grocer's van moving in the opposite direction, causing the horse to rear up between the shafts. The driver of the van got to his feet and shook his fist at the receding bus, yelling a string of curses that were drowned by the rumble of its engine. I drew several deep breaths of the sooty air, then sat down at my desk and laid my head on my arms.

Though he had been a friend of my father, Mr Plimpson knew nothing of my domestic circumstances. It struck me that he might attribute my hesitation about moving to Deptford to a lack of enthusiasm for my work, whereas in fact the prospect of losing my job filled me with despair, for I feared that a woman of my age and limitations would be unable to find a suitable position elsewhere. Yet I was not free to act as I wished, for in contemplating such a significant change in my life I was obliged to consider someone besides myself.

I did not reside alone, as my employer seemed to suppose, but shared lodgings with my mother. Ten years earlier, my father's untimely death had left us in a state of near penury and in order to pay off his debts we had been compelled to sell our house in St John's Wood, together with most of the furniture. My aunt Sophie, my mother's elder sister, whose husband had died some years before, had attempted to rescue us from our plight by inviting us to live with her and her daughter in Hertfordshire. I was at that time still at

school and she had pledged that she would support us until I had completed my education and been trained as a teacher. However, it was not to be. My mother had long held a grudge against Sophie who, she asserted, held her in contempt for marrying beneath her. Claiming to act out of loyalty to my father, she objected with such violence to the notion of leaving the district in which she had dwelled since her wedding day that all my aunt's plans had to be abandoned. Instead, much to my dismay, we took up residence in a seedy boarding house just a few streets away from our old home.

Aunt Sophie, it seemed, had also inherited the family tendency towards stubbornness. She wrote me a letter in which she explained in a sorrowful tone that until my mother had come to her senses, acknowledged the foolishness of her behaviour and apologised, "family pride" would permit her to have nothing further to do with either of us. She kept her word; though I wrote several times pleading with her to relent, we did not hear from her again.

Mother had never been strong; her health deteriorated under the strain imposed by the misfortune that had befallen us and she lay confined to her bed for days at a time. I was obliged to leave the small private school that I attended on a scholarship and was sent to work in a department store. Then, a few months after my father's death, Mr Plimpson had offered to train me to become his secretary.

Ever since, we had struggled to preserve the veneer of shabby gentility that Mother insisted was of the utmost importance. She clung to her memories of the old days with pathetic determination, and the fact that our lodgings were located in the familiar surroundings of St John's Wood did much to reconcile her to the shabbiness of our rooms and all the other daily ignominies that boarding house life compelled her to endure. I was aware that to force her to abandon all this, to leave behind the ghost of my father's memory for an unknown district on the other side of London, might well be too much for a woman of her delicate sensibilities to bear, and the prospect of broaching the subject filled me with dread.

I looked up at the framed photograph of my father and Mr Plimpson that hung on the opposite wall. It was an object to which

I had grown so accustomed that I scarcely saw it any more, though when I had first come to work at Plimpson and Co. I used to pretend that if only I stared at it with sufficient intensity, my gaze might have the power to bring my father back to life. But time is a great healer; gradually I had stopped indulging in this ritual, and familiarity – and my increasing short-sightedness – had conspired to cause my perception of the two figures in the photograph to blur.

Impulsively, I took down the picture, exposing an oblong of much whiter paint on the grubby stretch of wall. The two men, wearing evening dress, stood side by side, beaming at the camera. Mr Plimpson was slimmer than of late and had a great deal more hair, and my father looked carefree and boyish; very different from the way I remembered him. Peering more closely, I was struck by a detail that I had missed entirely; what I had taken for so long to be handkerchiefs in the gentlemen's breast pockets were in fact white lilies. I responded instinctively to the realisation by humming a few bars of my father's favourite song.

Oh! Lilly, sweet Lilly,
Dear Lilly Dale,
Now the wild rose blossoms
O'er her little green grave
'Neath the trees in the flow'ry vale.

The clock struck the half hour and I stood up, guiltily aware that I had sat dreaming at my desk for at least twenty minutes. I was loath to disturb Mr Plimpson, lest in his excited state he should begin a second, more agitated discussion about the matter of my staying on, so I resumed the ongoing task of devising a new filing system for the firm's correspondence, a conundrum with which I had been wrestling ever since I had started the job. To begin with I had been sufficiently innocent to believe that I would be able to invent a method of organising my employer's affairs within a day or two, yet I soon found that his business dealings were so confused and obscure (sometimes, I allowed myself to suspect, deliberately so) and of such a mixed character that it was well-nigh impossible to resolve them into any kind of order. Nevertheless, I had persisted in trying

to do so, and I still drew a perverse satisfaction from the performance of this Sisyphean labour. I removed several deed boxes from the cupboard and began to sort through their contents, and was soon thoroughly bogged down in a mental quagmire of conjecture and classification. The minutes plodded by, but despite my best efforts I made little progress.

At twelve o'clock the office door opened and Mr Plimpson emerged, stumbling on an uneven floorboard. I observed that he had made some effort to smarten himself up; his jacket was buttoned snugly over the bulge of his stomach and he had plastered his fringe of greying hair over his scalp with scented oil.

As soon as he saw the open window he dropped down onto his knees. "Miss Trant! Pull down the blinds!" he hissed.

I did as he asked and, puffing and blowing, he heaved himself back into a standing position. He walked unsteadily up to my desk and leant across it, regarding me sternly through bloodshot eyes. At such close quarters the reek of alcohol and cheap scent was almost more than I could bear and my fingers itched to whisk my handkerchief out of my pocket so that I could cover my nose.

"Miss Trant, I am sorry to say that I was not quite straight with you before – about the headaches, I mean. I didn't want to frighten you, but I have been wrestling with my conscience and for your own safety I feel obliged to tell you that most unfortunately Plimpson and Co. has become embroiled in some dealings with what I have lately discovered to be a highly disreputable and unscrupulous . . . er, firm. I truly believe that the individuals concerned will stoop to nothing to get what they want. Ergo, it would not be sensible for us to draw attention to our presence here; ergo, we must keep the blinds closed and the door locked at all times. And whatever cunning pleas or unpleasant threats may be addressed to you, you must admit nobody onto these premises!" He thumped on the desk for emphasis. "*Nobody*, under any foreseeable or conceivable circumstances whatsoever, is to come into this office. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, considerably taken aback by this tirade.

Apparently satisfied that he had impressed on me the necessity for caution, Mr Plimpson tottered towards the door, remarking rather thickly and with forced brightness, "Such lovely weather we're having, Miss Trant. I'm off to meet a client now – a little light luncheon – always does the trick. Be sure to lock the door behind me. I shall be gone for the rest of the day and therefore entrust the running of this great enterprise to your capable little hands. Remember, my dear, we must tread with caution, but with our heads held high."

As he went out onto the landing he tripped and narrowly avoided plunging down the stairs. I sat listening to his precarious descent until he was safely on the ground floor, then got up and locked the door.

I was not sure how seriously to take Mr Plimpson's fears; after all, he had been drinking, and even when completely sober he was the sort of man who tended to exaggerate in order to instil in his auditors a sense of his own importance. Moreover, I was aware from bitter experience that he was capable of working himself up into a dreadful state if things were not going his way. Feeling thoroughly oppressed by the dinginess of the room, I crossed to the window and opened the blinds again, reflecting that it was surely more conspicuous to leave them closed and that, furthermore, it was unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble of spying on us, situated as we were on the third floor of the building.

I passed a dispiriting afternoon straining my eyes over a collection of yellowing import receipts from Germany, which had mysteriously appeared in a box of correspondence from a factory manager in Birmingham. My thoughts were awhirl with visions of the approaching conversation with my mother, and several times I was obliged to stage a painstaking reconstruction of a train of thought in order to retrieve a sheaf of letters or receipts that I had wrongly categorised. At twenty minutes to five, still surrounded by drifts of paper, I suddenly lost patience, bundled the unsorted documents back into the deed boxes and put them away in the cupboard. Dejectedly shrugging off the conviction that my efforts

had only served to worsen the chaotic state of Mr Plimpson's affairs, I pulled down the blinds, locked up the office and caught the tram back to St John's Wood.