

Ladies' Night

by Molly Becker

Two women stood outside Great St Mary's, rubbing their hands together and stomping their feet to stay warm on the chilly February night. After months of planning, there was nothing to do now but wait.

Lillian was the one to finally break the silence, asking the only question that mattered.

"Do you think they got it?"

Footsteps sounded on the cobblestones, and they got their answer.

Three hours earlier, Florence had filed into the candlelit Hall alongside her host for the evening, a lecturer in history at Jesus College. She had only been speaking with him for a half hour as they sipped port before dinner, but they had already covered the unseasonably cold weather, guesses about the dinner menu, and a discussion about the man's aunt, who was recovering from a short but severe illness in Lincoln, before circling back to the weather. Florence could already tell that this was going to be a long evening.

Florence had been to four Ladies' Nights around Cambridge since her marriage three years ago, all arranged by her husband. Mark had met Florence in a bookshop, her nose buried in a biography of naturalist Mary Anning. By the time the time they had reached Florence's doorstep after a long walk discussing Anning's contributions to natural science, Mark had fallen in love with Florence's mind, and she had fallen in love with him for it.

Mark loved to arrange these Ladies' Night invitations for Florence, imagining that she was having the conversations he knew she craved about art, history, and science. In reality, she and her hosts rarely discussed anything more intellectual than which Cambridge building she found most beautiful.

Tonight, though, this was finally to her advantage. "The College's silver is just so beautiful," she said to her companion, widening her eyes as she looked up at him. "I would love to know more about it." The Fellow sagged with relief. He had been at a loss for what to discuss with his friend's young wife, but as a passionate keeper of the College's history, this was solid ground. As he launched into a history of the College silver, past and present—a topic he thought could safely take them through the first course and perhaps, if he was lucky, into the second—Florence tucked into her meal, satisfied that she would get the answer she needed.

'This course is sole "bonne femme," which means "in the manner of a good housewife,"' the Fellow seated next to her smugly explained to Alice.

“How interesting,” Alice, a lecturer in French at Somerville College, Oxford, responded, her tone as polite as possible under the circumstances. She knew that the other women had been most concerned that Alice’s part of the plan, but they needn’t have worried—Alice already felt like she had plenty to pick a fight about at this meal.

When Alice had left Cambridge in 1936, almost twenty years earlier, she had no intention of ever going back. Cambridge had given her an education, for which she was grudgingly grateful, but she could never forgive the feeling that she wasn’t fully welcome, simply because she hadn’t been born a man. She didn’t understand how Jean, her best friend since their days at Girton, could bring herself to stay. But, as Alice herself well knew, Jean had always seen the best in places, and in people.

After almost twenty years of friendship, Alice was fairly sure she knew Jean better than anyone. But even she was shocked when Jean had told her about her idea over coffee on a rainy afternoon in Oxford. Alice knew Jean had raised money for New Hall before, ten years ago when she had published *A Cambridge Scrapbook* and donated the proceeds to support the small new foundation for women’s education in Cambridge. But this new plan was bold, dangerous, and would raise much more money than the proceeds of *A Cambridge Scrapbook* ever could. How could Alice say no?

As the waiters circled the table, collecting the plates, Alice felt Florence’s arm brush hers and a note fall into her lap. Glancing down and reading the hastily scrawled directions, Alice smiled and turned to the Fellow next to her, ready to do her part.

Lillian was fully aware that her role at these meals was to be the entertainment, and she was happy to oblige.

Not that Alice hadn’t provided enough of a show already, storming gracefully out of the Hall after an increasingly loud and contentious argument with the Fellow seated next to her (about French etymology, Lillian thought, although she wasn’t sure on the details). It was a shame Alice had chosen the academic path—she would have thrived on the stage.

But it was Lillian’s job this evening to be the star. When Jean had come to her with her hairbrained scheme, she had agreed simply for the sake of recapturing the feelings that being on the stage had given her. You weren’t exactly the centre of anyone’s attention as the mistress of a Cambridge boarding house, and she desperately missed having the chance to shine.

Over the last few weeks of planning for this evening, though, Lillian had developed a strange sense of tenderness and responsibility towards Florence, Jean, and even Alice. Lillian had always wanted to be an actress and she had been lucky enough to live out that dream. If this would help the next generation achieve their own dreams, of education and equality, she would give the performance of her life.

Lillian cleared her throat, revelling in the feeling of all eyes turning towards her.

Jean watched as Lillian enchanted the table with tale after tale of her life on the stage, knowing that this evening was already in the process of becoming quite the tale of its own. Even if they didn't pull off the plan, Cambridge would be talking about this Ladies' Night, and Alice's dramatics, for months. Jean would have felt bad about tarnishing her friend's reputation if she didn't know Alice had loved every second of it.

Alice found Cambridge stifling, but Jean loved her life teaching history at Girton to students who reminded her of herself and Alice twenty years ago, bursting with life and yearning for knowledge. Most days, she could almost convince herself that the disparity between her students' experience and what the men at other Colleges were given didn't bother her.

But the founding of New Hall in 1954 had sparked a passion for change that she could no longer ignore. She had done her part with *A Cambridge Scrapbook*, but it wasn't enough. When Jean had heard that they were finally fundraising to build the new College, she began to plan.

It all came down to this final step, and to her. Jean knew she wasn't enchantingly pretty, like Florence, or bold and outspoken, like Alice, and she definitely wasn't the star of the show, like Lillian. But blending into the background was a talent, too.

Her host, a Fellow in English, was laughing loudly, focused on Lillian. Excusing herself quietly, Jean got up from the table and slipped out of the Hall to find her best friend. Nobody noticed she was gone.

The wooden chest was clearly heavy; it made a reassuring thunk as Jean and Alice set it down in the middle of the empty street in front of Florence and Lillian. All four held their breath as she bent down and opened the lid.

Over 100 years old and polished to a shine even though it was no longer regularly used, the Jesus College pensioners' tables silver gleamed up at them from the wooden chest.

"Well," said Jean, looking up at her co-conspirators. "I think that will fund a few buildings, don't you?"