

ELISABETH McNEILL

MONEY TROUBLES & TURN BACK TIME



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and
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TURN BACK TIME

Elisabeth McNeill is an established freelance journalist and broadcaster who has written five non-fiction books and thirteen novels. She now lives with a miniature dachshund, who thinks he is a Great Dane, in the oldest inhabited village on the Scottish Borders, where she spent most of her schooldays.

GATES, ALBERT GEORGE, 'HOWIE' – Peacefully at his home Castledevon, Galashiels, on April 23rd, 1936, Albert George 'Howie' Gates, aged 84, deeply mourned by his only daughter Helen and son-in-law Reginald Hunt. Funeral service at St Paul's Church, Galashiels, 2 p.m., April 28th, followed by interment at Galashiels burial ground.

One

“Well, goodness me! I thought he’d be awa’ years ago,” said Mrs Lilian Grossett with a detectable note of satisfaction in her voice as she smoothed out the crumpled pages of a *Scotsman* that her daughter Phemie had brought home from the wastepaper basket of an architect’s office in Shandwick Place where she worked as a cleaner.

“Who?” asked Phemie. A gaunt, life-soured woman in her thirties, she was peeling potatoes in the sink beneath the window of their miserable flat overlooking Leith Walk.

“Howie Gates, an awkward old sod if there ever was one,” shouted Mrs Grossett, who was so crippled with arthritis that she couldn’t turn her head to speak to her daughter but directed her utterances loudly at the opposite wall.

“Never heard of him,” said Phemie shortly, throwing the potatoes into a battered pot and furiously pouring cold water over them. She always acted as if everything that happened was calculated to annoy her but tonight she was especially tired and more than usually exasperated with her mother’s obsessive interest in the Births, Marriages and Deaths – but most of all, the Deaths – column of the newspaper.

“But I have, and you’d be interested too if you kent what I ken . . .” Mrs Grossett had a sharply malevolent intelligence and enjoyed taunting her daughter.

"Would I?" said Phemie in a sarcastic tone but it was obvious from the way she was standing at the sink staring out of the window that she was waiting to be told what it was her mother knew. Mrs Grossett wasn't going to satisfy her curiosity too swiftly, however.

"Oh aye, I ken a bit about Mr Howie Gates and his *only daughter*, Helen," she said and rustled the sheets of the newspaper resentfully as if she'd caught it out in a huge lie.

"Let's see," said Phemie, rising to the bait and walking across the lino-covered floor to where her mother sat hunched up in a fraying wickerwork chair. The flat was chilly, dark and poorly furnished, the home of two bitter women who were only scraping a living in a hard world.

"There it is," said the mother, pointing to the entry headed 'GATES', "That's him. Mair money than he could ever spend . . . rolling in it. Where's the other yin I wonder?"

Phemie took the paper and read the entry aloud emphasising some words and muttering others . . . "*Gates*. At his home . . . *Castledemon* . . . *Helen* . . . That seems ordinary enough. What other yin?"

Her mother gave a lopsided grin as she took the newspaper back. "His other lassie, the one I kent. And Mrs Maitland kent her too. I wonder if Maitland's seen this?"

"She's like you, she doesnae miss much." A note of interest had entered Phemie's voice and she stood waiting for more information but her mother was out to tantalise, and, shaking the newspaper sheets out, pretended to become absorbed in the Stock Market report.

Phemie gave in. "Was she one of Maitland's clients? Is that what you're saying?"

"Aye, she was."

"No' this daughter?" Phemie leaned over and put her

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index finger on the name *Helen* in the notice. "No' her?"

Mrs Grossett shook her head. "No' her, another yin wi' a fancy name – Leonie. I've aye minded it . . . She came to Mrs Maitland's."

"But it says here this Helen's his only daughter."

"Then it's wrong, because he had another yin and her name was Leonie. I mind her fine. A bonny lassie wi' yellow hair."

Phemie's eyes were round with interest now. "What happened?"

"She brought a bairn to Maitland, and Maitland found a place for it."

"Where did it go? It might still be alive. If this Howie Gates was as rich as you say, that bairn could be in line for some money."

"I dinna ken where it went." A shuttered look came over the old woman's face.

"Was it a boy or a girl?"

"It was a wee laddie."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. My mind's no' gone yet."

During this conversation, years seemed to drop off Phemie. Roughly she shook her mother's shoulder, saying, "Come on. Think hard. What year was it?" The old woman frowned for a bit before she said, "It was the time my sister Jeannie got married and you came back to live with me."

"I came back to you when I was eleven . . . at the beginning of 1915. I'd been wi' auntie Jean for three years. That means if the bairn's still alive he'll be twenty-one. That's old enough to claim any money his grandfather left. I wish I could find him!"

Helen Gates, petite, timidly ladylike and dressed in funereal black, was sitting in the window of the Castledon drawing

room staring out over rain-soaked gardens when her husband Reggie came in and handed her *The Scotsman*.

"Have you seen the notice?" he asked in a low voice, gently laying one hand on his wife's thin shoulder.

She looked up out of swollen eyes. "Not yet. Is it all right?"

"Yes, I just thought you'd want to see it . . ."

She unfolded the paper and ran her eye down the Deaths column till she came to GATES.

"It seems very dignified, but perhaps we should have mentioned Leonie as well as me – 'and the late Leonie', something like that," she whispered after reading the entry.

Reggie snorted. "Come on, Helen, Leonie's been dead for over twenty years. From the day she was buried, your father never mentioned her name. Most people who read that notice won't even have heard of her. Don't worry about it, my dear."

"All right, Reggie," she said meekly.

Her husband put an arm around her and gave her a tentative hug. "You've had a bad time," he said, "but it's over now."

She gave a little sob and tears slid down her cheeks. "I've still to get through the funeral, Reggie, I'm dreading it. I'm so nervous."

Her husband assumed the attitude of lord and master. "There's nothing to be nervous about, my dear, everything's arranged and I'll be there. You can rely on me," he told her.

Eyes swimming, she looked up at him. "Can I? Can I really?"

Embarrassed, he shuffled his feet on the carpet, dropped his arm from her shoulder and stood back. "Of course, of course," he said, and then, muttering something about business, made a speedy retreat.

When he had gone, walking with exaggerated care,

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putting each foot down as soundlessly as possible, almost tiptoeing in fact, Helen resumed her vigil at the window but she was not seeing the vista of trees and river in front of her, instead she was remembering her father's last days. How difficult he'd been, and how angry.

Old Howie Gates had taken a long time to die from the stroke that felled him. During his last weeks, he could not speak, but his ferocious stares were as terrifying as ever. They even made his lawyer stammer as he said, "Don't worry about anything, Mr Gates. Your will's perfectly in order and up to date," for he knew Howie cared more about his money than about anything else in the world.

Helen remembered how her father spat in contempt, a foam of spittle forming round his cracked blue lips. Obviously there was something he wanted to say but he couldn't get the words out.

On the last day, feeling her father's angry eyes fixed on her, Helen had bent down and whispered, "Is there anything I can do for you, Father?"

His chest heaved and his useless hands fretted at the edge of the sheet as he struggled to find words. She forced herself to put her ear beside his mouth. "Find Leonie's boy . . ." he had groaned with an immense effort. It was the first time he had uttered his elder daughter's name since she died, and tears sprang into Helen's eyes when she heard him.

Within minutes he was dead.

The next morning, before it was light, Phemie Grossett was up and bustling about. She roused her mother by putting a cup of tea on the window ledge beside her bed and said, "Drink that. I'm going out."

"At this time o' the morning? Where to?"

"To my work. I want to get finished early. There's somebody I want to see."

Besides cleaning the architect's office at night, Phemie

went out early every morning to polish the door brasses of several lawyers' offices in Queen Street.

Her mother groaned as she levered herself in the bed and took the teacup in her gnarled hand. "Where are ye goin' Phemie? It's no' about the Gates bairn is it? I wish I hadnae telt you about that. You'd best leave it alane. Dinna meddle in it!" Her voice trembled as if she was afraid.

Her daughter folded her arms and glared. "Dinna be daft. This is maybe oor big chance. We might make a bit o' money and by God we could do wi' it. I'm fed up rubbing brass and sweeping floors. If this man Gates had a grandson and if I find him, he'll be glad to pay me for putting him in the way of his inheritance, won't he?"

Mrs Grossett shook her grey head, "Listen to me Phemie, forget it. You dinna ken what you're meddling wi'. Mrs Maitland'll no' tak kindly to you askin' questions . . ."

"I'm no' feared for her!" exclaimed Phemie boldly.

"Well you should be. Dinna go, Phem," said her mother fervently. She didn't listen.

Even at that early hour Leith Walk was busy with brightly lit tram cars jangling up and down, sparks flying from their overhead wires, and crowds of hurrying people on foot, making their way to work.

In her worn dark coat and shabby felt hat, Phemie, with yesterday's *Scotsman* in her pocket, joined the throng, slipping between groups of them like a snake. Her white face was set and determined and as she walked she rehearsed in her mind what she was going to say to Cynthia Maitland.

In Queen Street she worked quickly, moving from office to office with her cleaning things and not lingering to admire her gleaming handwork when she'd finished. By the time she gave the last brass nameplate a final buffing, it was nine o'clock and the clerks were already in their desks in the offices behind tall windows overlooking the street.

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It was quite a long walk to St Bernard's Crescent in Stockbridge. Eventually she found herself on the doorstep of number six, a grim-faced building with wrought-iron first-floor balconies held up by deeply grooved Grecian-style pillars. Remembering her mother's warning, Phemie's legs were trembling nervously and her heart racing, but she gave the brass knocker an authoritative thud that echoed in the cavernous hall. After what seemed a very long time, the door was opened by a small fat maid in a white pinafore and frilled cap.

"Yes?" she challenged, glaring at Phemie, who she could see at a glance was not a person of quality.

"I want to see Mrs Maitland."

"She's maybe no' in."

"At this time of the morning? Of course she's in. Tell her Phemie Grossett, Lilian Grossett's daughter, wants to speak to her."

"I'll see if she's in," said the maid and closed the door again. The next time it opened a different woman stood in the hall. She was extremely tall, thin, carefully made-up and well coiffed, even at that early hour, with her greying hair set in deeply marcelled ridges.

"What do you want coming here at this hour of the day?" she said to Phemie in a voice that was excessively haughty and cultured.

"Let me in and I'll tell you. Or do you want me to talk about it out here on the step?"

Reluctantly Mrs Maitland stood aside while Phemie entered. Then she closed the door and led the way to the drawing room on the right of the hall. The room was cold because there was no fire burning.

Once they were safely inside with that door closed too, she turned to her visitor and said, "Out with it. It's a long time since I've seen you and every time you or your mother come here you've got your hands out after something. Is it money you want? If it is you're out of luck."

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Phemie shook her head. "No, I'm trying to find somebody. My mother minds you having a bairn called Gates to place. I'm trying to find him."

Cynthia Maitland's eyes went like steel but she managed a cold smile. "Why would you be wanting to find that bairn?" she asked in a silky tone.

"He's related to us," lied Phemie.

"You're a damned liar," snapped Cynthia. "You're not the only one that reads *The Scotsman*. I saw the bit about Howie Gates too. Away home and tell your mother that."

"My mother says his daughter had a baby and you got it."

"I got lots of babies, as your mother knows very well."

"Where did his one go?" asked Phemie boldly.

Mrs Maitland threw back her head and gave a scornful laugh. "I don't believe this. Here I am standing in my own house with *you* throwing questions at me. What business is it of yours where it went anyway?"

"It could be in line to get a lot of money. It probably doesn't know anything about this . . ." Phemie waved the paper about as she spoke.

Cynthia Maitland laughed, "I thought so. You're out for money. If anybody's going to claim a reward for telling the Gates bairn who he is, why shouldn't it be me?"

Phemie's face was set. "My mother says you won't get yourself mixed up in it. She says there's things you want to forget."

The other woman stiffened and she took a step forward as if to threaten Phemie but changed her mind. "I hope you're not trying to threaten me. That wouldn't be a good idea. Tell your mother that if this is her idea, she'll live to regret it." She was rattled now and her agitation showed in her accent which was no longer Morningside genteel but pure Stockbridge.

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"It's not my mother's idea, it's mine."

"Well it's a bloody bad one."

"Is it? My mother knows about that baby and other ones as well. What would happen if she talked about them? What would happen to the fine Mrs Maitland who's so very respectable nowadays? I'm not asking *you* for money. I just want to know what happened to that bairn. My mother looked after it for a bit, she says and she was fond of it so she wants to know."

"Was she hell fond of it!" Mrs Maitland had thrown away all pretensions at gentility by this time. "All she was fond of was the money she got for working for me. Tell her that if I get into trouble, she will too."

Phemie was standing her ground however and refusing to be intimidated. "If you don't tell me where that bairn went I'll go to the Gates family and tell them what I know."

"You don't imagine they'll be glad to hear your story, do you?"

"They might. They'd make you tell what happened to it anyway."

Cynthia Maitland walked over the floor to the fireplace and took a cigarette out of a silver box, lighting it from a big table lighter. Inhaling deeply, she turned back to Phemie and said in a different tone, "I can't remember that baby in particular. I found homes for dozens of bairns over the years, why should I remember that one?"

"You kept records. You had to inform the authorities. I could go to them." Phemie felt she was at an advantage now.

"I never liked you, Phemie Grossett, not even when you were a wee girl. You were always sly," said Cynthia in an almost friendly voice.

"I don't care a lot for you either," replied Phemie.

Her antagonist laughed, but it was not a pleasant sound. "It was a long time ago," she said.

"It was early 1915."

"As far back as that!"

"Gates' baby'll be over twenty-one now. Old enough to inherit his share of the old man's estate."

"Lucky baby," said Cynthia drawing on her cigarette.

"Who got it? What happened to it? Did it *survive*?" The last word hung between them like a threat.

"Of course it survived! At least it survived as long as I had it. But it's a long time ago. I'd have to look it up and that might take time. I'll let you know." Cynthia Maitland's voice was almost cordial by now.

"I'm not for waiting," said Phemie firmly, "I'll go to the authorities if I have to wait."

"Dear me, what a terrible hurry you're in. Just stay here then and I'll go upstairs to look it up. But like I said it's a long time ago . . ."

She was away for over half an hour and during that time Phemie sat shivering in the freezing drawing room which was incongruously furnished with expensive, modern, blond-wood furniture built in curving sculptured lines. A deadly chill gripped her for though the fire was made up, it was unlit. In one corner a vast cocktail cabinet stood open, its interior enticingly full of sparkling glasses and gilt-trimmed decanters. Phemie looked at them longingly, wondering if Mrs Maitland would notice if she helped herself to a glass of something that would warm her up, but she didn't dare.

Shuddering she drew her coat lapels up round her neck and clasped her hands under her arms, a picture of misery which made Mrs Maitland smile with cruel satisfaction when she finally returned.

"Here you are," she said, holding out a slip of paper. "This is what you want."

Phemie read what was written on the paper. There was a surname – Cameron – and an address in Leith.