

A Spring in Her Step

by Joy Douglass

Margaret settled back in her seat on the train. She had left a note for Francis, saying she was off to think things over. She couldn't face a discussion about her marriage right now.

It was the letter that started the whole business. She recognized the handwriting immediately--- it was unmistakably from Reggie. She was hesitant to open it and instead, heated the kettle for tea. What on earth prompted Reggie to get in touch with her? So many years had passed, and she had heard nothing of him. Once there was a brief mention in the *Times* about a play he was producing, but that was all---until now.

Finally, she gathered courage, and opened the letter.

My dearest Meggie,

Where shall I start? Do you remember the night we harmonized to the song "Always"? We must have sung it one hundred times till we got it right. Every time I think of you, that song pops up in my mind.

Oh, Meggie. I can see you now, breezing into the library, always smiling, and giving me a big hug. I'd give anything for one of those hugs.

I wanted to tell you that Father died last month. It has left me at loose ends. I would so much like to talk with someone who knew him. Can we get together? I long to laugh with you again. Do you ever think of me? I can't believe you don't.

You aren't far from London are you---North Oxford, is that right? Could you come into town for tea? I'll meet you at Paddington whenever you say.

Always,

Reggie

She understood now. Losing Sir Reginald would be devastating to Reggie, on many levels. Strangely she was stirred by being called *Meggie* again, and it brought memories of long walks back to her college after rehearsals and of Reggie entertaining her with his wild sense of humor and infectious laugh. She recalled moments of hilarity that would overcome them as they chattered aimlessly.

And now, here she was--- settled in a train compartment on her way to London to meet the first love of her life. She had made the decision hastily and given little thought to what she would wear. As she stared down at her comfortable but worn coat, and her comfortable but worn shoes, she knew it had been a mistake to neglect how she looked.

About that time, Miss Gurney and Miss Kingley, tutors at the women's college, also boarded the train, and chose seats in the second car. They were to represent their respective academic departments at a conference in London, and after reviewing the meeting's agenda, resorted to gossip--- mainly about a fellow instructor, Francis Cleveland and their prize student, Barbara Byrd.

Margaret, in the front car, reflected on the events of the past few weeks. *What in the world had gotten into Francis?* She had always understood that he enjoyed being adored by

young women students, who practically swooned when he read Romantic poetry. *But what was he thinking---a respected lecturer on seventeenth century poetry, an Oxford don, attempting to run off with one of those smitten students?* After her initial annoyance, Margaret was relieved and not surprised to know he had been unsuccessful.

The worst part was the embarrassment she faced, such as the day that old Mrs. Killigrew, in her ridiculous hat with a stuffed bird perched on top, came to warn her about the *seriousness* of the entanglement. Then, for several weeks she endured stares and pitying looks when she went shopping or out for lunch. Finally, things settled down, and life returned to a more normal routine. That is. . . until the letter arrived.

She fumbled in her pocketbook to re-read the letter. Was this a mistake, going to meet Reggie? What if she didn't recognize him after thirty years? As they pulled slowly into Paddington, she saw, on the platform, a dapperly dressed gentleman, and when he turned toward her train, his eyes danced with excitement. Of course, she would know Reggie, anytime, anywhere, and at any age. She ran to him, put her hand on his face, looked into his eyes for a moment, and threw her arms around him.

"Oh Reggie! It's so good to see you."

"Darling . . . Meggie."

Miss Gurney and Miss Kingley stepped onto the platform just in time to witness this obvious reunion. "Look," whispered Miss Gurney, "It's Margaret Cleveland!"

Miss Kingley nodded and said quietly, "I think we had better just move along."

"Oh, no, Miss Kingley! Something is highly improper here. We have a duty to our colleague, Francis Cleveland, to investigate this. We are going to follow them."

Margaret and Reggie stood looking at each other for a moment, and then started chattering as if they had seen each other just yesterday. It was as though no time had passed between them. Reggie began, "We'll take the Underground to Piccadilly, then have tea at The Cavendish--- it's just a short walk down Jermyn Street. Oh, Meggie---you can't know how I've longed to see you."

The ladies were also going to Piccadilly, so followed close behind, listening as best they could. It was easy enough to hear Reggie--- he had a big theatrical voice that resonated for quite a distance. Miss Gurney had a plan. "I have it---this is what we'll do. You attend the meeting and I will keep my eye on this situation. We'll meet back here at 4:00."

Miss Kingley appeared doubtful, and walked away, muttering, *Duty? To Francis Cleveland? What's good for the goose is good for the gander, if you ask me.*

Margaret and Reggie proceeded down Jermyn Street, arm in arm, hardly stopping to take a breath from talking. They walked by the fancy shops--- and finally came to the entrance of The Cavendish. Miss Gurney lurked in the background, not far behind.

Reggie was clearly a charming chap and Margaret laughed freely at his stories and impressions of people from their past. They were shown to a table discreetly in the corner of the lounge. Miss Gurney was seated at a smaller table near them. She was struck by how cheerful Margaret Cleveland appeared---very unlike her usual demeanor in North Oxford. It was as if she were thirty years younger.

“Oh, Meggie,” she overheard Reggie say. “You know I still love you, after all these years.”

“I love you too, Reggie--- *Always.*”

And then they began to SING!

Oh, no--- thought Miss Gurney. *They are not singing in The Cavendish!* But they were.

“We’ve still got it, Meggie. We’re a good team.” Then, in a louder voice, Reggie said, “Oh, my darling, let’s run away together”

“Yes . . . yes . . . where will we go?”

With that, Miss Gurney had heard enough. She finished her tea, paid the bill, and marched out of the hotel. Miss Kingley, already waiting at Piccadilly, was anxious to hear every detail of the afternoon.

In the meantime, Reggie and Margaret talked seriously. “I’m so sorry about your father,” she began. “I was very fond of him.”

“And he, of you, my dear.”

She reached out and tenderly touched his arm.

Reggie then recalled the early days, when the handsome Francis Cleveland first came into their lives. “We all thought he was gorgeous---but you, Meggie, you saw something else in him. I remember the day you came into the library, wearing a plaid coat, with a bright yellow scarf. You looked so happy. You said you were meeting Francis at the greenhouse, and going for a walk along the river. I walked part of the way with you and you practically skipped down the path when you saw him. I knew I had lost you at that moment.

“But Reggie, you do know that I loved you then. It’s just . . . that there was always . . .”

“I know,” he interrupted--- “I know.”

On their way back, they passed a women’s dress shop. Reggie pointed to a mannequin in the window wearing a plaid coat---”just like the one you wore the day you rushed off to meet Francis.”

Margaret quickly said, “I could use a new coat.”

They entered the shop. She slipped it on, and there was no question. It was perfect. For the first time, in a long time, she liked the way she looked. “I’ll take it,” she said, without hesitation.

Reggie eyed something in another aisle, went off, and came back holding a small bag. “Don’t you think this coat needs something around the collar?” With that, he draped a beautiful yellow scarf around her neck, adding, “This is my gift.”

They continued toward Piccadilly, Margaret looking very fashionable and Reggie enthusiastically saying she looked years younger. Her plan was to spend the evening

with her sister in London, and return to North Oxford next morning. As they waited for her train, Margaret said, almost as an afterthought, “By the way... how’s Tom?”

“Tom’s great. He’s opening in a new play this weekend.”

“Oh, look, here’s my train! Bye, Reggie”

“Bye, my love---Let’s do this again.” He blew her a kiss.

Meanwhile back in North Oxford, Francis Cleveland was unprepared for what he was about to hear. When he entered Fuller’s Restaurant that evening, he was approached by Miss Gurney, who stood taller than she had a right to--- almost eye to eye with Francis.

“Mr. Cleveland, I must report to you that I have seen Mrs. Cleveland this afternoon.”

“You saw Margaret? But where?”

She proceeded to tell him everything...everything and every word she had witnessed. Francis’ face grew grimmer by the minute. When she had finished, he said, “Reggie? Are you certain she was with a man named Reggie?”

“Precisely! And they declared their love for each other, and even talked of going away together.”

Francis spent the remainder of the evening pacing the floor, muttering, “What a fool I have been, thinking I could run away with Barbara Byrd. Why I have Margaret. And now---I may have lost her.”

Next morning, Margaret boarded the train from Paddington to North Oxford. She had slept well and was full of the excitement from yesterday’s meeting with Reggie. She wore her new plaid coat, and yellow scarf. This time, as she settled into her seat, she was not thinking negative thoughts. For one thing, upon reflection, she was glad she had resisted the temptation to grab that stuffed bird off old Mrs. Killigrew’s hat and throw it into the fire. The story would have amused the gossip exchange, however.

Today she thought only of thirty years ago--- when she first met Francis. He was tall and impossibly handsome, and when she heard him recite poetry in class, with that beautiful voice--- admittedly with some affectation--- she fell in love. And the day that Reggie recalled, when she wore the plaid coat and yellow scarf, and skipped down the path to meet Francis--- was the day Francis first read to her alone sitting by a tree, along the river.

There was a spring in her step as she walked from the station, and as she neared the house, almost skipped toward the door. “Hello, I’m home!” she called.

“Margaret!” Francis took a minute and gasped. “You look so beautiful. So very beautiful.”

“Hello, Francis!” There was a sweet smile on her face.

“Margaret---I’ve been so foolish. What have I done? And now I’ve been told that you have met with Reggie.”

“What? How have you heard that?”

“Never mind---but is it true? Is it true that you still love Reggie?”

“Yes--- of course, I love Reggie. But Reggie is ‘in love’ with Tom.”

“Tom?”

“Yes!”

“Reggie . . . and Tom?”

“Yes, Francis. Reggie and Tom!”

“Well--- I never! You *knew* that?”

“Of course--- I always knew.”

“Then you’ve come home. Oh, Margaret, I regret I have behaved so badly. I don’t know how to make it up to you. What can I DO?”

Margaret thought for a moment, then said quietly, “Read to me Francis.”