



Set in  
1870

# In A Class Of Their Own

## The Story So Far

JANE and MEGS BEGBIE are at the centre of women's campaigning in Edinburgh. Jane is attempting to start a cookery school with the help of HENRIETTA KENNEDY and her daughter HARRIET.

Megs has thrown her support to SOPHIA JEX-BLAKE's campaign to enrol in Edinburgh University to study medicine.

Their niece, the scientifically minded but mischievous AMABEL COWIE, is staying with her aunts whilst she attends school in the city.

Due to their campaigning, Sophia and a six others, including ISABEL THORNE and EDITH PECHEY, have

been permitted to matriculate, attracting consternation from the medical community.

ALEXANDER RUSSEL, editor of "The Scotsman" newspaper, is public in his support for Sophia's cause, and even assigned protection to her, to try to keep harassment to a minimum.

When Sophia makes a call on Jane's friend, LUCILLA GRANT, who is very ill, her husband WALTER forbids their son ARTHUR from visiting Jane and Meg due to their connection.

Arthur is dismayed when his friend JEROME FAIRWEATHER spitefully reveals that Arthur and Sophia have been corresponding . . .

Even with Alexander Russel's support, Sophia was never free of suspicious watchers . . .

**A** RTHUR GRANT stood impatiently as his parents exchanged farewells with the Rector. He could see how tired his mama was and he worried she'd be overcome by one of her spasms. Following the suggestion made by Miss Jex-Blake, Arthur had approached his uncle who had consulted Professor Simpson about a practitioner for his mama's condition.

The man suggested had been acceptable to both his parents.

Arthur was grateful for the months of ease this

doctor had given his mama, but her condition was worsening again.

Either his papa did not see the decline, or he refused to acknowledge it.

Since the day last year when Jerome Fairweather had revealed that Arthur knew Miss Jex-Blake, his relationship with his papa had been more fraught than he would have believed possible.

"A good showing, Grant." The Rector interrupted Arthur's morose thoughts and with a start he grasped the hand held out to him.

"Thank you, Rector. We none of us could compete

with Liddall, though."

"Liddall? Our Dux and all the rest." The Rector cast a glance to where the school's golden boy was holding court surrounded by doting relatives.

"However, a Second Academical Club Prize is not to be disregarded, young man. You'll go far."

Mr Harvey then shook hands with Arthur's papa, bowed to his mama and moved along to speak to Jerome's parents.

"I wonder if Jerome will repeat the year?" Arthur's mama asked as she turned away from the throng.

"Hmm," Mr Grant mused. "It's not as if people didn't warn the lad."

"With these women snapping at their heels for entry to the medical faculty, the young men needed to show their mettle.

"It wasn't the year to be nearly good enough."

"It was not a wise idea for his parents to assume their name alone would carry weight with the medical establishment, Walter."

"The moment for entering the profession on the coat-tails of one's father is passing."

Arthur hardly dared look in his papa's direction.

It was the most pointed assertion of Dr Wyvern's incompetence he'd heard his mother make.

"I think I've seen everyone I wished to see at this Exhibition, my dear."

"Of course, Lucilla, we must not over-tax your strength. Arthur?"

"I am ready, Papa."

They made their way through the assembled parents and pupils and paused again when they met the Kennedys.

Arthur thought Harriet looked particularly lovely in a dress of primrose taffeta. She was listening in rapt attention to a story Jerome was telling her mama.

Arthur had no understanding with Harriet, of course. They were too young and in no position to reach any.

But Arthur had come to rely on her. Her support had enabled him to keep up his sisters' spirits, too.

She glanced at him from beneath the brim of her hat and he smiled.

He drew hope from the hole she was gouging in the yard with the point of her parasol.

Perhaps Jerome's tale was actually irritating her.

"Aha!" Mr Kennedy boomed. "Here we have a man in possession of a Second Academical Club Prize. Well done, young Grant."

"Thank you, sir," Arthur responded, but shyly.

He might not be as friendly with Jerome as he had been, but he did not want to rub the other's nose in his exam failure.

Perhaps Mr Kennedy didn't know.

"I hear you'll be entering the rarefied world of medicine in the autumn."

"I have been following the arguments raging over the Hope Chemistry Scholarship issue," Mr Kennedy added.

"The Scotsman' has been publishing some devilishly warm correspondence."

"Nonsensical stuff," Arthur's papa said, with feeling. "Russel must know he's on a losing wicket."

"Really?" Mr Kennedy asked. "I had thought you and Alexander Russel were close. He's raising funds to compensate the young woman who lost out."

"I wouldn't want to look back in my old age and know I snatched such a prize from a better candidate."

"I must say, I find Russel's editorials full of sense and wisdom. Yes, wisdom, I think."

"I do not agree with you. The Hope Scholarship was established to help the best man . . ."

"Ah, there we have the rub, do we not, Walter?" Mr Kennedy said, as he raised a hand and waved.

Arthur saw the Kennedy boy loping over the yard.

"I fear, sir, in a house of intelligent, capable women, I've given up clinging on to male patriarchy. Henrietta wouldn't permit it."

"If Miss Edith Pechey scored the highest marks, then the scholarship should have been awarded. I

myself made a donation."

Arthur saw the blood flush his papa's cheeks.

Whatever arguments the men had were usually aired in closed dining clubs.

It was unheard of for one of their own to make such a charge in mixed company.

Mrs Kennedy exchanged sympathetic glances with Arthur's mama before putting a hand on her

No women had applied for entry this year

husband's arm.

"My dear, this is not the place. Besides, Harriet and I direct our energies to Jane Begbie's school of cookery, and not to becoming doctors."

"Have you no thought to follow in their footsteps, Harriet?" Arthur's mama asked, and he watched the genuine surprise appear in Harriet's eyes.

"Why no, Mrs Grant. It would not suit me! I dislike unpleasant smells."

Jerome laughed. Arthur was taken aback by the grateful look Harriet sent in his direction.

"We did offer to engage a tutor to bring Harriet's chemistry up to the necessary level, but she is adamant medicine is not for her," Mr Kennedy said.

"You fill me with foreboding, Kennedy," Arthur's papa said.

"If it is bad that the medical authorities must bow to the pressure of the women themselves, how will they cope when thrusting parents push their daughters on to them?"

Mr Kennedy drew a deep breath and Arthur saw the way Mrs Kennedy's fingers whitened as she tightened her clasp on his arm.

"You must know that they are having trouble filling the spaces available?"

Kennedy contented himself with saying, and began to shepherd his party towards the gates.

Arthur was mortified.

It was beginning to come out that there were insufficient male candidates of a high enough standard.

However, no women had

applied this autumn, as the treatment of those at the university had been so bad.

As Jerome turned back to find his family party, the Kennedys and the Grants moved towards the exit.

Mrs Kennedy lent an arm to Arthur's mama and the two men fell into step.

Harriet's siblings straggled around, and Arthur was at last able to

secure a few undisturbed moments with her.

"You did not tell me your parents were pushing you towards medicine," Arthur blurted out.

He realised how accusing it sounded.

Harriet's glance when Jerome had laughed at her joke rankled more than he was prepared to admit.

"No, but there is always so much to discuss about your family and so little time in which to discuss it," Harriet said.

She twirled the parasol in front of her and Arthur saw that there was still grit clinging to its ferrule.

"I am sorry to have taken up so much of your time," Arthur said and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"But I do think you could have confided in me. I had thought we were friends."

"Arthur, don't be a goose. There was never any real prospect of my being forced into the University."

"I am in awe of Miss Jex-Blake and her friends, but I perfectly understand the years and years of study they have pursued to reach this moment."

Harriet gave a start.

"Oh, there's Maud. Will you excuse me? I must find out where she bought those boots."

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Sophia sighed. She had carved out a day in which to study, but the post had arrived and on its heels came Edith Pechey with the two ladies who had brought their number up to seven.

"Good morning," she said, without inviting her visitors to remove

▶ their hats or find a seat.

That, she thought as her eyes scanned the teetering piles of correspondence, would be awkward at best.

"Sophia, Mary and Emily have news of Lucilla Grant which we feel you ought to hear immediately." Edith peeled off her gloves and stuffed them into her bag.

"So she has died," Sophia said bleakly.

What else could have brought them here, when she had made it known how far behind in her work she was?

"No, but it is a matter of hours now," Mary Anderson said.

She was barely concealing some excitement and Sophia wondered what.

"We were discussing Mrs Grant's circumstances," Emily Bovell said with a little more diffidence.

"We thought her case might be useful for countering the arguments of the medical establishment about whether women want to see female practitioners."

"I . . ." Sophia began but uncharacteristically found herself without words.

A vision of Arthur Grant, so young and talented, so anguished, rose in her mind's eye.

How would he view such an article? The ladies clearly thought she should write it.

Arthur would be sure to regard it as a betrayal of the confidences they had exchanged, and might even think she had cultivated his friendship for the purpose of furthering her cause.

There was a knock on the door and the landlady ushered Mrs Thorne in.

Sophia began to wonder whether the whole group would be here shortly.

"Isabel," she said, "you find us discussing whether Lucilla Grant's death would be a suitable moment to have our friendly editor print something about women wanting to see female practitioners."

"Really?" Isabel said in her usual mild-mannered way. "I wonder."

The younger ladies leapt

in with their thoughts, but Sophia was silent.

"As I see it," Isabel said when they'd exhausted their arguments, "it would be an error of judgement."

"Why?" Mary asked.

"We are already treading on sensitivities. Pointing out the incompetence of the man – Wyvern, was it? – will only cause the male establishment to come together in his defence."

"Besides, we none of us consulted with Mrs Grant, did we?"

Four pairs of eyes turned as one to look at her and Sophia shook her head.

"I visited Mrs Grant, but it was not a consultation. Isabel makes a good point."

"We are enjoying support from moderate people. It might be a mistake to endanger that by accusations against a respected doctor."

"Respected!" Edith spluttered.

"Well, Edith, many women do consult him. Will they easily agree that their money has been spent on his fees to no purpose?" Isabel shrugged.

"Sophia, I came to collect some of your correspondence."

"I have completed all my own assignments and I could answer a few of the letters for you, if that would be helpful."

Isabel had offered to deal with some of the extraneous matters before and Sophia had resisted.

Could Sophia trust her to make the sort of answers she herself would give?

"Mrs Thorne, take care that you do not make yourself indispensable as an administrator. For, as I know, it eats into the time available for study."

Sophia leaned across her work table and lifted the paperweight from the top of one bundle of letters.

"I have set these to one side."

"Some have waited a week or more already and I would be grateful if you were able to respond."

Isabel took the bundle and glanced at it.

"But these are from well-wishers and require the barest of attention. It

will be less than an hour's work. Do give me one of the piles needing a little thought or diplomacy."

Sophia saw the flash of real irritation in Isabel's eyes, but could not bring herself to give up any of the more exacting letters.

"No, no. I would not trespass on your time. I will get through it all. I have before."

Even as she spoke the words, Sophia was regretting them.

Why could she not fully engage with these people?

What would be the value of keeping control of the correspondence if she were to fail her exams?

"Very well. I'll take these," Isabel said as she pushed the bundle into her bag. "I almost fell over one of those urchins who hang around outside."

"I gave him a fierce shove and had the satisfaction of seeing him land in the ditch."

"Well done, Isabel," Mary said. "They are a nuisance, but I lack your courage."

"Do you carry an umbrella?" Isabel asked.

"Sometimes. Even in Edinburgh, it doesn't rain every day." Mary raised her eyebrows.

"I think we need to have one at all times," Isabel said forcefully.

"I am wary of these lads and I do not find the constables are looking my way when one of them steps too close."

Sophia didn't respond. Alexander Russel had a man or two keeping watch over the watchers and his findings had shaken her confidence.

It would soon be time to share them with the other women, but not yet.

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Sophia came out of her lodgings and smiled at Alexander Russel, who was waiting to accompany her to the post office.

"Let me take the satchel for you, Miss Jex-Blake. Full to the brim yet again."

Russel tucked the bag under one arm and waited for Sophia while she shook out her skirts.

"I had no notion when I

arrived here that I would find myself nervous of making such expeditions." Sophia gazed around and caught sight of the ring-leader among the urchins who haunted her street.

"No, it must be lowering for a person of such independent spirit," Russel agreed.

"However, you are wise not to go out alone at present. I heard from Jamieson yesterday."

Sophia waited while he ordered his thoughts.

"Jamieson is one of my best men."

"He must be, because I have not yet found him out," Sophia agreed.

"Yesterday, he was forced to intervene when Mrs Thorne left your lodgings."

"A gaggle of men, probably medical students, goaded the lads into shouting at her."

Isabel had not sent any message about an incident.

"We are often shouted at," Sophia said.

"Usually the aggressors are students, not the lads. I thought the lads were set on by someone only to watch us."

"I believe you are right, but when young men get into that sort of taunting of each other, perhaps it made the urchins forget their instructions."

"The point is, Miss Jex-Blake, they gathered clods of mud and were preparing to throw them at Mrs Thorne. Jamieson intervened."

Sophia came to a halt.

The interference in their daily lives was escalating and while all of the group were robust, it was a matter of great concern.

"I think it will be necessary for the ladies to move in twos and threes," she said in a small voice.

"And you," Russel said vehemently.

"I will instruct Jamieson to make himself visible when you wish to travel."

"Are they, or you, any wiser about who these boys are reporting to?" Sophia glanced up at a lamppost.

At least, she thought, we do not have to walk around in the dark.

"I have made some

