

And Then There Were Three

by Francesca Ryan

“I must say I didn’t expect to see you here”.

It wasn't much of a greeting. Raddy could barely conceal her coolness. Mabel’s narrow eyes glittered as she took it in.

“You never seem to have much time for her back in the day, continued Raddy. “Why start now?” Mabel arched her thin eyebrows in mock enquiry.

“Once a Saint Elmo's girl, always a St Elmo's girl, as Dr Gull always used to say my dear.”

“Even a scholarship girl? You always made it clear what you thought about that,” Raddy batted right back.

She watched as Mabel made her way back across the small Chapel of rest, security figure in tow. Cow, muttered Raddy to herself. She brightened on seeing the spry figure of Mary Field, her familiar dark Bob now a sleek silver cap. It had been many years since they last saw each other. ‘Fieldy’ slid into the space beside her and squeezed her arm.

“Our Mabel poisonous as ever?”

“Oh, worse” said Raddy. “Being Home Secretary hasn't exactly softened her heart. If she ever had one that is. Do you remember the time we dunked her for cheating?”

The two women were suddenly thirteen again, tiptoeing down a narrow corridor with Cotty and Simpy. Mabel was gagged, swaddled tight in a blanket between fellow third formers. Four of them. The Four Marys. Self-styled avengers with the same Christian name, they were on a mission to punish any St Elmo’s girl caught out in wrongdoing. Dark hoods obscured their faces. They bundled Mabel into the washroom. She was a cheat, and a sneak. They dunked her head into a basinful of water, then carried her back to her bed in the dorm. Of all the retributions they had carried out, Raddy was the least proud of that one; but Mabel was a bully as well as a cheat. She and her insufferable friend Veronica, or The Snobs as they were known, had made many a girl sob quietly into her pillow after lights out.

Raddy was wild when she was young. Wild in her passionate quest to right injustice; a reckless architect of the many secret missions of the Four Marys. Always carried out under the hooded cover of anonymity. But what they had done to Mabel practically amounted to waterboarding. She shook her head at the memory.

Some things were better left in the past. Especially now that 'Raddy', Mary Radleigh, was now Baroness Mary Radleigh, QC. The famous human rights lawyer, and now member of the house of Lords.

Lying in the pale wicker coffin in front of them all, was Mary Simpson. A large black and white portrait showed the dark curly haired girl they knew as Simperts. Taken too soon by a long painful illness.

"She was a model for all of us."

Cotty's earnest face she read the tribute, was as plain as it had been at thirteen years old, thought Raddy. The plaits long gone, but the spectacles still unflattering.

"She was my inspiration. Beautiful, inside and out." Everyone knew that Mary Cotter's third novel *The Snows of Yesteryear*, was a roman a clef about her beloved wife Simpy. A Sunday Times bestseller, Cotty's work had the gift of being both popular and well regarded. The character of politician Morda Lindun was widely assumed to be based on Mabel Lentham.

Later, after the wake was over, a second bottle of Talisker was being emptied. They gave Simperts one last toast.

"And then there were three," said Fieldy as she knocked it back.

"It's a long way from the Lower Third to the last third of life, isn't it. Tears begin to fill her eyes. "I know I'm blubbing", she said ruefully. "But it's not just for Simpy. It's for me. I don't think I deserve to be a Mary." Cotty passed her a tissue.

"Don't talk rot. You always were a bit on the dramatic side, you know."

"You didn't really know me though," Fieldy hiccupped. "If you did, you would all have expelled me long ago. It was me who cheated in Algebra, not Mabel."

Raddy looked thoughtful.

"Well, if it's confession time, do you remember that time I was late back for the spring term? You thought I was ill. No. I 'd been caught shoplifting in Bental's. It was only Daddy's intervention that stopped it becoming public. Freemasonry favours." Cotty's eyes turned towards her, full of pain.

"Well, if it comes to that, she said grimly, it would be me that deserves to go to gaol."

Fieldy drained the last of her whiskey. "What on earth for? "

"I helped her you know." said Cotty quietly. "I helped her along. You don't think I was going to let my Simpy suffer like that? Decided to give her that little bit more than usual. It was enough though. She went peacefully."

Raddy looked at her kindly and put her hand on hers.

"If it ever came to it, you know I'd represent you. Public sympathy would be on your side. Although I don't think we could rely on the mercy of our current home secretary."

"Mmm. Perhaps not" said Fieldy. "Cocoa, anyone?"

