Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: The Mouse’s Umbrella by Donna Moore

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**Donna Moore**

The Cat and Mouse Act was introduced because um people at the time were starting to feel more sympathetic towards the suffragettes because they were being um force-fed in prisons and so the Cat and Mouse Act was the government's reaction saying well we can't have people being sympathetic we can't have these women dying in jail because they're going on hunger strike so we'll do this we'll let them out and then we'll get them again when they're healthy.

Donna Moore: The Mouse's Umbrella

November 4th 1913

Alice shivered and pulled the thin blanket up over her chin the wooden slats creaked underneath her slight frame she sighed and watched the little puff of warm breath turn into fog in the cold room. Winter sun shined weakly through the dirty window high in the wall and the thick stone walls stripped any heat from the thin shaft of light. The cold bored its way into Alice's flesh icy fingers reaching out to glaum at her bones. She breathed out again trying to form rings like her Uncle Albert did with his smelly pipe smoke. Thirty days. Could she stand thirty days here? Keys rattled outside she sat upon the bed pulling the blanket around her the heavy door opened and a well-cushioned woman strolled into the room a sturdy black umbrella over one arm soft leather gloves on her hands a do-gooder? Some sort of prison visitor? The newcomer adjusted her pince-nez and stuck her chin into the air her sharp eyes seemed to take in the high window the two beds the rickety chair in the corner the metal washbowl and Alice in one sweeping glance. She turned back to the wardress who stood behind her face, impassive. 'I see my usual quarters are unavailable, turnkey. I suppose this will do.' The wardress flushed. 'And don't bother bringing me any luncheon. As usual, I won't be partaking.' She waved the now flustered wardress away. No lunch? Alice wanted to shout at this woman not to be so stupid.

As the door slammed shut and the keys rattled in the lock once again the new arrival turned to Alice giving a smile that made Alice feel as if she'd been gifted an extra blanket. The smile faded 'Oh dear, oh dear,' said the woman taking Alice’s chin in her hand and turning her head firmly but gently from side to side. 'We can't have this.' She strode to the door, petticoats rustling, and banged on it with the side of her hand. The metal shutter opened and the wardress peered in. 'I’ve changed my mind I do want luncheon delivered after all.'

She turned back to Alice and pulled off her gloves holding out a hand covered in what looked like dried blood. 'Florence Crossman' she said. Alice hesitated. 'Don't worry about that my dear it's only red paint.' She grabbed Alice’s hand and shook it with great enthusiasm, almost wrenching Alice’s arm from the socket.

Alice had never had her hand shaken before. 'Alice, m'aam,' she said.

She gave her a half curtsy, then cursed herself, silently.

She was still angry with this woman for refusing food with her fancy clothes and her fancy voice; what could she know of hunger?

The woman felt around the navy blue hat she was wearing a bunch of bright red cherries on the top bobbed. 'Well, Alice for heaven's sake don't treat me as if I’m the Queen of Sheba. I’m a prisoner here, just like you.'

She removed her hat and held up a pearl-ended hat pin. 'They should have taken this off me.' She turned the full force of her smile on Alice once again. It softened her oblong face making her look like a queen Alice had once seen in a painting.

Florence scanned the room twirling the hat pin round in her spade-like fingers. The red paint that covered her hands was all over the cuffs of the blouse she wore under the thick coat. Florence tucked the hat pin into the seam of the thin mattress on Alice’s bed. 'They won't find it there.' She pulled off her coat and sat on the bed smoothing out her skirt. 'Now my dear you look like a child, why are you here?'

'A child? I’ve just turned 18 m'aam. An' I stole a fish supper, they gave me 30 days.'

'For stealing a fish supper?'

'well, naw'

Alice felt her stomach churning with shame, 'the thirty days wis for gi'in the polis a doin' when he caught me.'

Florence laughed loud and long slapping her knee with glee as she hee'd and hawed.

Alice enjoyed hearing that laugh. 'What about you ma'am, ...Florence?'

'Oh let me see... I think I got nine months for breaking the windows of the City Chambers but it was so long ago and I’ve been in and out so much since my sentencing that I forget...'

'What do you mean...in and out?'

'The Cat and Mouse Act, my dear.'

Alice shook her head she didn't know what the woman meant.

'Mr Asquith's delightful new law. We go on hunger strike and become weak, they let us out to regain our strength, then they arrest us again after a week or so. If they can catch us. I’ve worked out that I should be in and out 66 times before I actually finish my sentence.'

She beamed 'Of course by that time I’ll probably have 66 further offenses under my belt since I am rather good at escaping from whatever little mouse hole I’m hiding in.' She held up her paint-covered hands, 'this time they caught me red-handed.' She hee’d and hawed once again. 'I was caught painting the outside of the Botanics.'

How could this woman think going hungry was a joke 'Hunger Strike?'

'At least they don't force feed us here like they do in Perth prison.'

Nobody would ever have to force Alice to eat.

November 7th 1913

Alice awoke to find Florence unpicking the hem of her coat. Florence hadn't eaten for over two days now and her face was looking drawn and her movements were slow. She turned to Alice holding up the paper and pencil she'd pulled from inside the hem of her coat.

'I thought I’d write to my friends let them know how I’m getting on, would you keep an ear out for the turnkey my dear?' Alice nodded. 'How are you going to get a letter out?' 'my friend Mary Crawfurd will be coming to visit she'll sneak it out for me.' Florence held out a pencil and a sheet of paper. 'She'll take one out for you too, if you want to write to your people.'

Alice took the pencil and paper and looked down at them, not quite knowing what to say. 'Naw, it's fine, Florence.'

Florence studied her 'But you told me how much your mother would worry, don't you want to let her know how you are?'

Alice shrugged 'I cannae write. And, even I could, ma maw cannae read.'

Florence pursed her lips. Then she nodded. 'Right my girl, we'll see what we can do about that once I finished my letter.'

She lifted the coat that was still on her lap, its hem now frayed and torn, and unpinned an enamel badge from the lapel. Alice had noticed it before. A flag with stripes of green white and purple. Each stripe had something written on it. Florence held out the badge, 'in the meantime you can copy these words.'

Alice turned the badge over and over in her hand 'what does it say?'

Florence pointed to each of the words in turn. 'Votes. For. Women.'

November 9 1913

'Are you sure you're up to this Florence?'

'Of course my dear, besides they'll be letting this mouse out of her cage in a day or so, who knows when I’ll be back. Carry on reading.'

Florence sat on the edge of the bed ramrod straight but drawn and pale. The lines on her face looked as though they had been engraved and her eyes had lost their twinkle. Alice traced her finger across the words as she read aloud, her voice was slow, heavy, hesitant. Footsteps sounded outside and a key turned in the lock. The Governess entered the cell accompanied by two wardresses struggling with an iron object and a sack. They dumped both unceremoniously on the floor. An umbrella stand: cold grey, robust, and no-nonsense, with a tray at the bottom. Scrolls and flowers cut into the metal gave it a gallus air.

Alice stood up her hands fluttering nervously around the edge of her apron, head lowered trying to fade into the thick stone walls. The Governess ignored her. 'Florence are you sure you won't eat?' 'Quite sure.'

The Governess sighed. "Aye, I thought as much. You asked for some entertainment for Alice when you're... out... and when she's not stitching in the workroom. This umbrella stand belongs in my office. It needs cheering up a wee bit. I thought Alice might like to paint it.'

She turned and strode out of the cell. At the door, she hesitated and turned back. 'Florence, is there...'

'Thank you, I neither need nor want anything.'

The Governess nodded. She had been dismissed.

Alice opened the sack. She prised each tin of paint open with the end of one of the brushes. 'Look Florence, look at this yellow - it's like sunshine and this braw red what colour should I use to paint the umbrella stand?'

Florence gave her a tired smile. 'Alice you may paint it whatever colour your heart desires, now if you don't mind my dear I want to sleep for a while.' She closed her eyes. Alice watched her for a moment, troubled, then lined up the paint pots in front of her. White, pillar box red, black, sunshine yellow and duck egg blue.

November 10 1913

'Florence you can open your eyes and look at it noo!'

Florence gave a pained laugh, 'bring it over here child, I’m too weak to come and see.'

The umbrella stand clanked on the stone floor as Alice heaved over. 'I didnae have the right colours but I did my best. See, Florence?'

Alice ran a hand along the front edge of the stand, 'the white was easy, there was a tin of white. That's purity, you telt me. The green was tough but I added a wee bit of yellow to the pale blue. Hope. That's what you said the green means. I couldn't get the violet though and I tried all sorts of mixtures.' She gestured to the plain stone walls now decorated with stripes and dots of varying hues. 'So I had to settle and for mixin' red and white.' She sighed, 'it's just pink, that's all but it's meant to be violet and that means.' Florence was silent. Alice struggled to bring the violet word to the forefront of her mind.

'Dig-ni-ty. Aye, dignity. And you told me what that means and well... that's you, Florence you're dignity.'

But Florence’s eyes were closed. 'Get the Governess, Alice.'

Alice ran to the cell door and banged, banged, banged.

December 3rd 1913

'Are you ready to go my dear?'

Alice nodded buttoning up her thin coat. The rain was rattling the small windows in their frames.

'Unlike me you won't be back.' Florence raised one stern eyebrow as she picked up Alice’s hat and handed it to her, 'will you?'

'Aye, well, I’ll be coming to visit you but I’ll no be back to stay.'

'Now remember that Mary Crawfurd is expecting you tomorrow. Bath Street.'

'Thanks for getting me that job, Flossie.'

Florence snorted. 'I’ll Flossie you, my girl. And they'll help you with your reading and writing.'

Alice put her hat on and pinned it into place. 'Thanks, Flossie. I don't know what I would have done without you in here. I missed you when you wis out. I almost wanted the cats to get haud of their mouse again.'

'Away with you, my girl.'

The rain continued to hammer the window. Florence pulled her umbrella out from under the bed. 'Take this, I shan't need it for a while.'

January 8 1914

Alice placed the brown paper squares into a neat pile on the table in front of Mary and Ethel. Mary leafed through the sheets, 'Votes for Women' was neatly and carefully painted in black paint on each one.

'Thank you, Alice.'

Mary patted her hand

'You've done a grand job'

'Can I go out wi' you?'

Mary and Ethel exchanged glances. 'Florence would have our guts for garters.'

'Aw please Mary I’ll no tell her.'

Mary stood up and picked up her coat well you can go along ahead and stick them to the windows Ethel and I will follow and do the smashing but you must keep your eyes peeled for the police and promise me that you'll run home once the sticking is done.

'Why are we bothering with sticking these to the windows if all yous two are going to do is break them anyway?'

Mary’s lips twitched. 'Brown paper deadens the sound. Hopefully Ethel and I will get halfway along Argyle Street before the police are made aware.'

She handed Alice a tin of golden syrup and a brush here we use this instead of glue it's cheaper and more effective. Alice’s mouth watered as she looked at the tin - shiny gold and green and white with bees buzzing around the head of the resting lion. She walked out of the room, brown paper in one hand, syrup tin in the other, wide eyes still fixed on the tin imagining the sweet goodness inside. Sometimes she still didn't understand these women.

'Oh, and Alice?' Alice turned. Mary was looking at her, head tilted to one side bird-like. 'Whatever's left of the syrup take it home.'

Alice ran out of the building before Mary could change her mind.

It was dark and quiet in Argyle Street. Alice looked around for signs of the Polis, but she was alone. She tip-toed to the first shop window and placed the pile of brown paper on the cold ground in front of her. It was a milliner's - women's hats decorated with flowers and feathers, frills and furbelows. Alice prised open the syrup tin and stuck her nose inside, inhaling the sweetness. She crouched down and picked up one of the sheets of brown paper, brush poised over the tin. She put the brush into her pocket and stuck the tip of her index finger into the syrup before pulling it carefully out and placing a miserly dot of syrup in each corner of the brown paper.

After syruping four sheets of brown paper this way she sucked her finger not wanting to waste a drop of the golden goodness. She carefully posted each sheet to the window and stood back to admire her handiwork. 'Votes For Women.' 'Votes For Women.' 'Votes For Women.' 'Votes For Women.' A good job done, using the minimum amount of syrup. It wasn't as though the paper would be up long anyway. She could see Helen and Ethel waiting on the other side of the road, stones in hand.

Alice skipped onto the next window.

February 10th 1914

Alice sat down next to her mother on the shabby sofa with its faded red and green roses. The letter was written on the backs of old envelopes.

'Dear Alice' She read aloud, her finger moving over the words. 'As you will see, I am writing to you from Perth prison. Unfortunately when the cats caught me this time they brought me straight here rather than to Duke Street. It's far more unpleasant here there's no sympathetic Governor, and I knew what I was in for the moment I refused to eat. Luckily they'd forgotten to take my hat pin off me when they came to force-feed me and I managed to stab two of them in the back of the hand before they could hold me down and force the feeding tube into my nose. It was rather satisfying to hear their yelps. As you can imagine, I did not give in gracefully and I rather think I gave one of them a bloody nose. I do hope so anyway. I shall gloss over what happened next, Alice but it was not pleasant. I know that I must put up with it again and the very idea fills me with both apprehension and defiance but do not fear my dear. Never Fear. With any luck they will give up this force-feeding nonsense and this mouse will be out of this rat hole soon enough. Don't come and visit me here Alice it's not a pleasant place. I will see you very soon and we will go to that little ice cream parlour again. With much love your friend, Flossie p.s please tell Mary and Agnes that I will write to them soon and that there is a woman here who broke the windows of the Prime Minister's car with a large turnip. What a firebrand she is!'

February 16 1914

As Alice opened the door of the WSPU headquarters in Bath Street, the warmth came out to welcome her in, away from the cold dreich day. There would be a fire in the fireplace and the tea urn would be on and there was always fresh baking on a Monday. Alice’s mouth watered as she took off her coat and hung it on the coat rack along with Florence’s umbrella. She always carried it - rain or no rain. Alice was ready with her usual round of greetings but only Mary and Agnes were there. Mary’s eyes were red-rimmed and Agnes’s usually neat hair was escaping from its pins. Alice knew something was not right. Had she spelled a word wrong in a letter? Or forgotten to lock the office door when she left on Friday? Mary patted her hand then gripped it tightly squeezing and releasing, 'I’m so sorry Alice. Florence died in the prison yesterday. It was pneumonia. They got food in her lungs when they force-fed her.' Alice said nothing. She took her coat from the rack leaving Florence’s umbrella hooked over one of the wooden arms. As she left the building she tried to remember Florence’s face the first time she had seen her but all she could remember was Florence’s face the last time she had seen her.

When I was asked to write a story um for the 21 Revolutions, I really struggled because there's so much in the archive that it was really difficult to choose something. But then I realized that the object that I’ve picked was right in front of my face every time I come into the library. It's a really shoogly looking umbrella stand um painted in very faded colours of sort of a turquoisey green white and a sort of a pinky colour and it was given to the prisoners by the Governor of Duke Street Prison who was sympathetic to their cause and when Duke Street Prison was being demolished in the 1950s a social worker who was walking past the the building um saw it in a skip outside so she dragged it out and eventually it found its way to us. It's in a bit of a dilapidated state but I just think the history of it is so amazing, I love the idea that the suffragettes painted it for something to do while they were in prison. I’d, I’d read quite a lot about the suffragettes anyway I love the idea of the the suffragettes um history and I’m really interested in in that period and these really feisty women struggling for something that they really really believed in against all of the odds and against a lot of public opinion at the time. And I read a lot of the books that we've got in the library and there was a woman who stabbed people's fingers with a hat pin um when she was in jail so I really liked her and I’ve sort of amalgamated a couple of characters and the main character in it Florence Crossman is actually it's my grandma's name so she wasn't a real woman, but my grandma was that sort of feisty feisty woman. But I also wanted to bring in most of the um suffragettes were middle-class women because they had the time and they had the money to um to fight the good fight if you like um and I wanted to bring in a working-class girl there were a few working-class suffragettes and they did really wonderful things for the cause and I wanted to bring one of those into the story and that's where Alice comes from.

**Laura Dolan**

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