

# **The Shocking Assault upon Sophronia**

## **Morgan's Cranberry Aspic**



**By Erica Obey**

The shriek rang out just as the babble of the Morgansburg Thanksgiving Faire and Penny Social reached its peak. The cry echoed across the late asters and chrysanthemums in the garden of the Methodist church, where the Fire Chief, Mike Malone, sat in a moth-eaten turkey suit above a dunking pond, inviting youngsters to shoot him with blunderbuss-shaped water pistols. It

rattled through the white elephant tent, shaking both the fanciful banner that dubbed it the Little Treasures Emporium and the Toby jugs and mismatched tea sets within.

Inside the Parish Hall, the shriek wreaked havoc on the Penny Social, setting the table of prize aspics I was guarding atremble. I leapt to my feet at the prospect of botching this task as spectacularly as I had my unhappy forays into knitting, sewing, baking, and other such essential social skills. The good ladies of the Morgansburg Ladies' Auxiliary and Home Bureau had long made such allowances for poor Mary Watson – as I was termed – doubly saddled as I was with a Ph.D. and an aptitude for technology unbecoming in a college librarian. But I had done yeoman's work when it came to bringing the archives of the Historical Society into the digital age, the ladies never failed to remind people – which translated roughly into saying that I was pretty much the only person in Morgansburg outside the local college who knew how to use a computer.

“Relax,” said Byrne, the Campus Security Chief, without looking up from his rapt contemplation of a Spaghetti-O aspic crowned with chopped Vienna sausages. “Jell-O's tough as nails. Should be classified as a weapons grade material, but the Pentagon doesn't want you to know that.”

I nodded, reassured. Byrne and I had warily progressed from being sworn antagonists to trivia partners at the local roadhouse, and then to something that could loosely be described as friends. But every time I began to consider my friend Doyle's arch suggestions that Byrne was interested in something more from our relationship, I'd run up against one of these odd reminders of a clandestine military past. On the other hand, when it came to such arcane tidbits, I trusted Byrne implicitly.

For those of you that do not know what a penny social is, it is a form of fund raiser peculiar to small towns, which could best be described as half raffle, half silent auction. One purchases the obligatory sheet of raffle tickets, and then one deposits them in one of the historic cut-glass bowls aligned in front of the array of aspics in order to bid on that particular one. The more tickets you put in the bowl, the greater your chances to win.

This year's selections included the standards: A tomato aspic made of Bloody Mary Mix with spiced mayonnaise nestling in a basket of canned asparagus at its center. A blob of cocktail sauce did the same duty atop a rather painful-looking shrimp salad that had already begun to wilt into rivulets. Several antipasto aspics took advantage of the recently-harvested fall vegetables, molding them into masterpieces of chicken and mayonnaise in roughly the shape of WWII's fabled Big Boy. The liver/sausage pineapple studded with sliced olives was not, strictly speaking, an aspic, but such was its beldame-like fascination that it was afforded pride of place each year, and the crystal bowl beside it was always stuffed with tickets.

At the end of the evening, the winning tickets are pulled with a ceremony worthy of the Oscars. And just as it is considered good form to buy at least one item from the Little Treasure tent to be donated back the following year, it is considered good form to put at least one raffle ticket in each bowl, so that none remains unsold and no-one goes home empty-handed. The latter was the crucial point as far as I was concerned. Strategy mattered when deciding which aspic to bid on – for, first and foremost, you must understand that an aspic is not a fruitcake. Fruitcakes, along with summer sausages, candied dates, and other food that arrived in gift baskets could be, if not regifted, pressed to the back of the refrigerator for a year until one could decently examine the sell-by date and throw them out. Not so, an aspic. An aspic's decay was striking and humiliating, forcing all to bear witness to its crumbling demise. I still shudder at the memory of

pineapple rings and maraschino cherries sliding Dolefully away to reveal the ham and canned corn they had tricked me into bidding on. The trick was to find something innocuous enough that you could take a modest slice for a couple of days and pronounce it refreshing, if not delicious, before the whole thing could be decently tossed down the disposal.

Just before the shriek rang out, I had been culling the table for the closest thing I could find to the lime Jell-O and canned pears that I remembered from my grade-school cafeteria. It seemed a simple enough task, but last year I had had a near-miss with a lemon/lime vegetable salad that had revealed a vein of hard-boiled eggs at its core when sliced. This year, I was considering a minty-looking green confection when Byrne strolled up.

“Salmon dill mousse, thickened with sour cream,” he had warned me by way of greeting, before he purchased an additional sheaf of tickets and stuffed them all into the bowl of the Spaghetti-O masterpiece.

“Seriously?” I asked, as I watched.

“Luxury compared to the MREs in the Army,” he said. “I have seen olive loafs put to uses that should be forbidden by the Geneva Conventions. Compared to that, the Chef is four-star. I got a whole pantry full of Chef Boy-R-Dee at home. Not to mention a fair supply of Hormel deviled ham and corned beef hash. Come the apocalypse, I’m sitting pretty.”

“You could just buy a generator,” I pointed out.

That was the moment the shriek rang out – and this year’s Thanksgiving Faire and Penny Social assumed its rightful place in the annals of Morgansburg legend.

Blanche Morgan Philipse stumbled out of the Church Kitchen. “Sabotage!” she cried. “Someone has destroyed Sophronsia’s cranberry aspic.”

The news could not have been more appalling had someone crushed all the eggs in the Fire Department Easter Egg Roll. The highlight of the Thanksgiving Faire was when the Ladies Auxiliary and Home Bureau rolled out Sophronsia Morgan's cranberry aspic in all its trembling beauty – prepared exactly according to the recipe book that Sophronsia Morgan, the new bride of the first Morgan heir, had brought with her from France, where aspics had been all the culinary rage on refined European tables. Such a gesture had not gone over well with the staunchly Republican sensibilities of the United States in the wake of the recent Revolution, and Sophronsia Morgan had faded from the annals of Morgansburg history amid rumors of having made a bad end. But her recipe book remained, a charter member of the Ladies' Auxiliary and Home Bureau's Hall of Fame.

Sophonisia's aspic as recorded in song and story, was in fact a delicate thing of beauty: a rich cranberry sculptural swirl surrounded by lady's fingers in pale gelatin and topped with a silver ornament depicting the three graces. Now, it was nothing but a scarlet mess that spilled over the splayed ledgers on the Ladies Auxiliary's desk, seeping angrily across the keyboard of the ancient computer's keyboard and into its hard drive. I was glad I hadn't brought Doyle along today. He would have likely been unable to withstand the shock.

As the Chief of Security at St. Clere College, Byrne was what amounted to law enforcement here in Morgansburg, and he took charge. "You sure the aspic was the main target?" he asked.

"What else could it be?" Blanche said.

He nodded toward the ruined ledgers and computer. "Did the Ladies Auxiliary receive an audit request from the County Comptroller's office like all the other departments in the Village?"

“Horrid men! Wouldn’t hear of giving us an exception, even after I explained to them that we were in the *midst* of preparing the aspic. It’s very tricky making sure it sets, and one does not like to be distracted. But those nasty men just threatened us with jail if we failed to comply...” Blanche’s eyes widened. “Oh, dear Lord. Is *that* what happened? Did they just burst in here and *seize* them?”

“I doubt it,” Byrne assured her, with a long look at the ledgers and the computer. “Especially since the aspic seems to have destroyed both the electronic and paper records they requested. I don’t suppose you have backups for any of this?”

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I arrived back at my apartment with a relatively innocuous 7-layer dessert, which I might actually be able to eat portions of if I carefully scraped off the whipped topping – and found my television screen alight with the sprawled body of a woman in an apron sewn from flour sacks, curled protectively over a pile of framed photographs and faded blue ribbons on the floor of the Church Kitchen. Both the woman and the photos she protected were soaked in what seemed to be blood. It was a sight that would bring panic to many people, but when your BFF and housemate is an AI bot named Doyle whom you have programmed to write murder mysteries, you grow used to strange avatars appearing on your electronic devices. Still, a glass of Pinot Grigio was warranted before I lent it any further consideration.

“You seem to have been busy while I was gone,” I called up Doyle using the voice recognition software whilst I poured. Generously. “I assume this is your friend the computer from the Church Kitchen? And what appears to be blood is in fact cranberry aspic.”

Doyle’s avatar swirled to life on my TV. It was always a bit of a gamble which great detective he might choose to appear as – his incarnations of Lord Peter Wimsey’s sartorial tastes

were particularly unspeakable – but today he stuck with a rumpled suit such as Joe Friday might have worn. “Florence Morgan,” he said with a sad shake of his virtual head. “A redoubtable woman, who shepherded the wives and mothers of Morgansburg through the Great Depression and the Baby Boom as President of the Morgansburg branch of the NY Federation of Home Bureaus, her life devoted to the Bureau’s sacred purpose, ‘To maintain the highest ideals of home life.’ If only she had been on the party line, I could have warned her.”

Roughly translated, that meant the Ladies Auxiliary and Home Bureau had yet to come to the internet. Which in turn translated into Byrne being right that there were no backups of the computer records. And I didn’t need Doyle’s artistic rendition of the dead body to recognize that there was no gleaning them off the current machine.

“You’re falling down on the job,” I said. “Couldn’t you have managed to have her scrawl a final recipe in her life’s blood?”

“I fear you have allowed yourself to be distracted by the wrong story,” Doyle said. “This is no Study in Scarlet. Instead, may I draw your attention to the Curious Question of the Missing Home Bureau Hall of Fame?”

“There was no such thing in the kitchen. I saw it for myself.”

“And yet it is well known that the Hall of Fame collected and preserved generations of ribbons and prize-winning recipes, along with photographs of every year’s prize winners. Along with not a few jars of preserves that might rival a vintage Lafitte-Rothschild in some eyes.” Doyle said with a gesture at the pile of photographs and ribbons Florence Morgan had apparently given her life to protect. “And that is the Curious Question. What happened to the Hall of Fame? It seems to have been removed before it could get caught up in the general destruction.”

“In other words, you think this whole thing was staged to steal a bunch of prize-winning recipes?”

“I think this whole thing was staged,” Doyle said. “I leave the rest as an exercise to the reader.”

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It took until the next morning for the penny to drop. Doyle was already waiting on my phone. “Well done, my good Watson,” he said. “No time to tarry over coffee. The game is afoot!”

I begged to differ and deliberately tarried over my coffee before I phoned Blanche and asked her to meet me at the Church Kitchen. And I used an old-fashioned land-line, not a text message. With Doyle, you sometimes have to remind him who’s boss.

When I got to the church, I discovered Byrne was already there. “What’s up?” he greeted me, with a casualness that fooled no-one.

“Just wanted to ask Blanche whether there was anything I could do to help clean up the Home Bureau office,” I said with equal deceptiveness.

“Great idea,” Byrne said. “I’ll help.”

Oh, no. *Not* a good idea. Byrne’s interrogation skills might work with drunken college students, but they were no match for a woman who had chained herself to historic oaks in defiance of the Village Aldermen.

“Feels more like woman’s work to me,” I said.

“Oh, come on!” Byrne said with an easy grin. “You’re not going to catch me falling into gender generalizations. My sainted Irish grandmother would disown me if I failed to help with the clean-up.”



Any reference to Byrne's sainted Irish grandmother signaled a firm request that bore little further translation. He wanted to know what the hell I was up to, and he was not going to leave until he had an answer. "I just don't think... Blanche has had a shock..."

"Good Lord, Watson," Doyle cut me off with a sigh. "Surely even you have heard of such a thing as feminine wiles."

"I *have* no... Oh, for God's sake, what do you mean? You want me to..."

"They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Doyle said. "It is also said that the comfort foods we ate in our childhood create a sudden intimacy..."

"*What* comfort food... Come on, Doyle. You can't be suggesting..."

Of course he was. Doyle was adamant in his belief in my special powers of persuasion when it came to Byrne. It was a hypothesis I found... unsettling, to say the least. But right now, I could see no other way.

I flashed Byrne my winningest smile and purred, "Well, I was hoping I might share your Spaghetti-O aspic tonight. We could make a date of it. Eat by candlelight."

Under other circumstances, it would have been gratifying to see the blank shock on Byrne's face, before he recovered himself with a boyish grin. "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me. Aren't you?"

"Well... I wouldn't go that far... I mean..."

"Hey, why not? I've got a bottle of Mateus I've been saving for a special occasion," he said. "I'll go straight home and put it on ice."

Well, *that* was a misunderstanding that would require some careful diplomacy to sort out later, but at least Byrne swung himself back into his battered pick-up truck and left me to figure out how I was going to deal with Blanche Morgan Philippe.

“The direct approach usually works best when you’ve reached the *denouement*,” Doyle advised.

I didn’t need a Ph.D. in literary criticism to have already arrived at that conclusion for myself. “You did it,” I said to Blanche as soon as I cornered her in the kitchen. “You staged the entire thing.”

To my relief, she didn’t try to hide anything. “What gave me away?” she asked.

“You didn’t destroy the Hall of Fame,” I told her. “You *couldn’t*. You wrecked a historic aspic and poured it all over a computer and Auxiliary’s financial records, but you couldn’t bear to damage the Hall of Fame and so you removed the prize-winning photos and recipes first.”

“Of course,” she conceded with an approving nod, as if I had just succeeded in turning my first hollandaise. “The men didn’t notice. But a woman would notice immediately. Even a woman like you.”

I ignored the casual insult. “Aspics can be made again next year. But your great-aunt’s life work is irreplaceable.”

“Not just my aunt’s but an entire generation of women – the likes of which we’ll not see again! Women who sewed all their own clothes and those of their children as well. Women who could knit, darn, cook, clean, and bake – homemade bread fresh from the oven every day. Women who canned – really canned, not those Soccer Moms in support groups that get their au pairs to boil and strain their artisanal fruit while they sip Cosmopolitans and trade tips on summer camps. These women grew their own beans, tomatoes, peas, raspberries, peaches – and if the harvest failed, their family went hungry. As for *jams*. You’ll never see the likes of Aunt Flo’s chutney, and there was no fancy talk of mangoes, then, let me tell you. Quinces, that’s what she used. Greengage jelly...”

“This man noticed.”

Byrne’s ability to sneak up on you completely unheard was another of those reminders of his old life that made me wary about how much more intimately I wanted to know him.

“You didn’t go home to chill the Mateus,” I said unnecessarily.

“Already in the fridge. I’m a man who likes to be prepared,” Byrne assured me with a wink, before he turned to Blanche. “Chalk it up to my sainted Irish grandmother insisting I know my way around a kitchen before she’d consent to see me married. Not that that did any good in the long run. Still, it seemed more delicate to allow Dr. Watson to broach the subject. A woman’s touch and all that. But now that we’re all here, you mind telling me what in hell you were trying to accomplish with all this?”

Blanche drew herself up with the pride of a true Daughter of Morgansburg. “All right then, you got me. I stole the money to cover a few discrepancies in the budget for the Fire Department’s Pancake Breakfasts, and I am prepared to take full responsibility. I will offer my statement to the appropriate authorities.”

Byrne sighed. “No, you didn’t. And no, you won’t. Staging a crime is one thing, but I draw the line at demonstrable perjury – if for no other reason than I hate going to court. The Village Justice insists men wear a coat and tie unless they’re the one in handcuffs.”

“You mean... you won’t let me confess?” Blanche demanded.

“Damned straight I won’t. Especially not when what you’re really doing here is covering for Mike Malone embezzling from the Fire Department...”

“He didn’t embezzle!” Blanche cried. “He borrowed the department’s water trucks to help out with his landscaping business. And what was the harm in that? No-one was *using* it.”

“No,” Byrne agreed. “But isn’t that how it always begins? Then, pretty soon, you convince yourself that refilling the Fire Department water tank with the water you’ve charged your clients for doesn’t do any harm otherwise. Or refilling the gas tank and not paying for the gas you used.”

“All right, all right! Things snowballed out of control, especially after his mother was ill for so long! And Mike will make it right. But to arrest him for embezzlement is too cruel – and for what? That pinch-faced county comptroller crowing zero tolerance when it comes to corruption. I’d like to know where he was when Mike was zipping up the turkey suit.” Blanche’s cheeks pinked angrily. “And not just the turkey suit! Santa Claus! The Headless Horseman for the Halloween Haunted House. When the Easter egg roll came around, who was wearing the rabbit ears?”

Byrne fighting back a laugh was an even more terrible struggle to behold than his wrestling with his conscience, but he mastered himself manfully, as Blanche went on, “And Mike personally headed the collection drives for every single family who never had more than a trailer to begin with and lost even that. But when Mike hit on hard times through no fault of his own, where was everyone then? He’s got nothing left. His mother’s medical bills ruined him, and yet no-one lifted a hand...”

“When he dug himself into a hole that he has no idea how to get himself out of, just to keep from sending his mother to a county nursing home,” Byrne completed the grim narrative. “I know. He told me.”

“He *confessed*?” Blanche demanded. Her eyes widened. “To *you*? Why?”

“Couldn’t say. All know is he came to me in a fit of remorse when the Comptroller’s office first requested the Village records, begging me to help him find a way to make restitution.”

Sure. That was Byrne’s story and he was sticking to it – even if it was a lot more likely that Byrne had gone to Mike and threatened to beat the crap out of him unless he made restitution. Not that I’ve ever seen Byrne make good on any physical threat either in anger or in cold blood. He never needed to. The threat alone was persuasive enough.

“Listen to me! You cannot allow him to do that! It will ruin the man.” Blanche cried. “And not just financially. The Fire Department was his life. Do you know what it would do to him to be led out of there in handcuffs? Paraded in front of the people he struggled to help, even when he had no money to give. Oh, yes, he was there with offering people a lift or some needed repairs. Just ask Earl Staggs...”

Byrne’s features hardened into the impassivity of a man about to give his name, rank and serial number. “You have my word a perp walk won’t be necessary.” He waved a hand around the room. “And neither was any of this. I could have told you the matter has already been settled if you had just come to me, instead of playing games with the Black Widow here. I could have told you that the Aldermen are happy to discover that the missing funds are back in the town’s accounts, and the discrepancy has been chalked up to a simple accounting oversight, so no further investigation is required on the county’s part. And while such a conclusion puts paid to the notion of restitution, Mike welcomes the opportunity to serve the people of Morgansburg as he always has by volunteering his skills wherever the Village most needs them. Now, if there isn’t anything else, I’m going to take the femme fatale here home before she ensnares another hapless male in her Mateus-soaked wiles. I’ll trust you to clean up the remains of this farce.

Starting with restoring the Ladies Auxiliary and Home Bureau's Hall of Fame to its rightful place on the wall, of course."

As solutions went, it was typical Byrne. Like any small town sheriff, he acted as judge, jury, and executioner when he saw fit – even when that required miraculously producing \$10,000 out of the trust fund he customarily refused to acknowledge. He was far less willing to discuss his decisions with others, however. It was pushing the envelope for me to even venture to point out, "You're a crap-assed liar, you know?"

"Back at you," Byrne returned the compliment, as we marched out of the Parish Hall. His lips curved into an evil smile. "But why don't we save the recriminations for later. We've got all evening, after all. Seven o'clock okay?"

"For what..." My face flamed. "Oh, surely you don't mean... Do you really..."

"Hope for an intimate dinner with a woman whose culinary interests so closely align with my own? I can't wait. The Mateus is chilling, the candles in the chianti bottles will be lit, and I'm dusting off my collection of old Barry Manilow albums. So see you at seven, my dear. I wouldn't want to answer for the consequences if I find myself a disappointed man."

## **Bonus Recipe: Mrs. Raab's Cranberry Aspic**



*A Staple at the Newport, RI, Holiday House Tour*

**Yield:** Serves 6.

### **Ingredients**

- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 large box lemon gelatin
- 2 cups hot water
- 1 can (20 ounces) crushed pineapple
- 1 pound cranberries, ground
- 1 cup diced celery
- 1 cup chopped nuts

### **Instructions**

Dissolve sugar and gelatin in hot water in large mixing bowl. Add remaining ingredients and mix well. Pour into mold and chill until firm, at least 4 hours. Unmold onto plate lined with lettuce, and serve. If desired, garnish with a bit of mayonnaise. This aspic can also be made in individual molds.