

THE DERRING-DO CLUB

*and the*

**Year of The  
Chrononauts**

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**WATLEDGE BOOKS**

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# CHAPTER I

## Miss Deering-Dolittle

Thirty four years, eleven months and fifteen days before the End of the World, the men from the future first materialised with plans to change everything, and thus started a chain of events that led inexorably to the death of one of the Derring-Do Club.

The coming of the new century, the Twentieth, promised a new age of hope and opportunity for everyone, except for the three Deering-Dolittle sisters of the Derring-Do Club. Or so it seemed to Miss Earnestine Deering-Dolittle, and, Oh! how she wished Charlotte's silly name for them hadn't stuck. It wasn't their family name! That was spelt 'Deering' for a start. For someone who received letters with the 'a' of her Christian name missing, it was particularly galling. The spelling 'Derring' suggested adventures, which would not do at all.

"Come on," she shouted. "Time's running out!"

Before she left, Mother had given Earnestine strict instructions on the matter: *keep them safe, no exploring, no trouble, no adventures.*

Not that the eventuality was likely, because they were still incarcerated in Zebediah Row, Kensington, utterly unable to mount a rescue expedition to find their lost Uncle, Father and Mother. The members of that ill-fated expedition stared out from the daguerreotypes framed on the wall of the drawing room, each face full of pride and determination, amidst their baggage, bearers and boats. The rest of the Deering-Dolittle family ranged across the wall in mismatched frames, but there was only one picture of the three sisters together: Earnestine, twelve then,

already looking stern and important; Georgina seated and already beautiful at ten, and Charlotte, then six, wriggling despite the lollipop bribe.

A year after that picture was taken, Earnestine had become the de facto head of the family – *look after your sisters*, Mother had said as the trunks were loaded onto the ship – and Earnestine had grown up instantly: and yet, she had the responsibility, but none of the rights that came with proper age.

If you were older, they said, if you were married, if... if, *if*... always ‘if-’.

Earnestine, the eldest, was not ‘of age’ and it would be aeons and aeons before her twenty-first birthday in five months’ time. In the meantime, Uncle Jeremiah, along with trustees and lawyers, kept them all trapped. It chafed.

“Tighter,” she told the maid, as she had her red hair pulled up into a bun, tucked by clips, and yanked upwards. She wanted to stand tall in her fine formal, dark red dress and her best Oxford Street boots.

“Tighter!”

“Miss, I’m doing my best.”

“Your best is not good enough.”

The maid was such a freckled, clumsy yokel.

“Don’t snivel,” Earnestine reminded her yet again.

“Sorry, Miss.”

Finally satisfied, she felt she gave the correct appearance of a woman in control of her destiny: if only people would take her seriously. And they must, she thought, if she was going to make a life for herself. After all, there was no chance she would find a husband.

Georgina, the middle sister, looked wan after their recent experiences. She’d lost her husband and it had taken its toll on that beautiful round face of hers, framed in dark curls and hidden behind her mourning veil. She

was still attractive, of course, and she was young – eighteen was still young – so despite her misfortune she might yet find a suitable match. Earnestine hoped the planned evening would jolly her up. Georgina liked the theatre; she always made the most entertaining of voices, when they'd played with the cardboard actors on the wooden stage of their fine, model theatre. Uncle Jeremiah had made it for them.

Bother it, she thought, he should be here by now.

Also, coming were three eligible bachelors, so perhaps... well, for Georgina's sake, one could certainly hope.

Charlotte was the youngest at fifteen, pretty with long blonde tresses and a tendency to... where was the girl!?

"Charlotte!"

"Coming, Ness."

...tendency to be silly, flouncing around in – oh dear.

"Not that jacket."

"But—"

"A dress, not a military uniform."

"It's a dress jacket."

"Don't be impertinent."

"I was not."

"You are a young lady; you should act like a young lady."

Charlotte, youngest *etcetera*, with long blonde hair that... fell loose around her shoulders.

"Ribbon!"

"Will there be a band?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm sure there'll be plenty of variety," said Georgina.

Charlotte wanted to be some sort of female soldier, when really she was an exasperating tomboy flibbertigibbet.

The doorbell jangled and the maid skittered along the hall to answer it.

Major Dan had arranged an evening at the theatre for the *Derring-Do Club* as a belated thank-you and Lieutenant McKendry had sent a note: ‘A night out at the theater to put some color back in Georgina’s cheeks.’ He was another person who had no idea how to spell. The sisters had met the Major’s three ‘mountaineers’, Caruthers, Merryweather and McKendry, in Switzerland and had thus become embroiled in the adventure... no, not adventure, the *events* of that dreadful Austro-Hungarian business.

Through the bay window, Earnestine could see the waiting carriages looming in front of the house.

The maid bobbed in holding two cards.

“Captain Caruthers, Miss, and Lie... ut...”

“Lieutenant, pronounced with an ‘P.’”

“To be sure, Miss. Lieutenant McKendry, Miss.”

Earnestine stepped into the hall to greet them.

Captain Caruthers stood waiting. The light from the stained glass window around the front door caught his strong features. He was tall with thick brown hair and a matching chevron moustache.

“Major Dan sends his apologies,” he said.

“That’s a shame,” said Earnestine. She saw McKendry waiting outside, easily recognizable because of his thin black handlebar and chin puff, and made a quick calculation: three sisters and only two men wasn’t going to work at all.

“We’ve two four-wheelers ready to whisk us all to the West End,” Caruthers pointed out.

“Spiffing!” Charlotte shouted as she raced, ribbon-less, down the stairs.

“Come on girls!” Captain Caruthers called out, holding the door open. “Like the jacket, Lottie.”

“Thank you,” said Charlotte, ducking beneath his arm in an overly familiar manner.

Georgina gave a little bow and Captain Caruthers stepped aside.

Earnestine waited.

“Come on,” said Captain Caruthers, “or you won’t get any ice cream.”

“But I’m...”

Caruthers sauntered off down the garden path.

*...not a child.*

They had ordered two landaus for seven, so it was three per carriage now.

“Oh, Ness,” said Captain Caruthers, “your Uncle Jeremiah sent a telegram: he’s meeting us at the theatre.”

“But...” Earnestine tightened her lips. Their Uncle was supposed to serve as their chaperone (even though he couldn’t be in both carriages), but now, three women and two men meant she’d be packed in with her sisters’ crinolines for the whole journey.

However, it turned out to be worse!

Lieutenant McKendry had already set off with Georgina and Charlotte in the first carriage, which was fine for a short journey, because Georgina had been married and could act as chaperone for Charlotte, but that left one carriage for Captain Caruthers and herself.

“Facing or back?” Caruthers asked.

It was intolerable.

During the journey, Earnestine had no idea where to look, because the man was sitting directly opposite her. Occasionally, he made to open conversation, or fidgeted with some envelope, taking it out and returning it to his pocket, but the silence just dragged on, particularly when the traffic ground to a halt in Piccadilly.

The four miles seemed more like four hundred.

Captain Caruthers looked over his shoulder: “Seems to be some hold up.”

She could see that, she was facing forward.

When they finally arrived in the West End, Uncle Jeremiah was not there to greet them.

Earnestine glanced up and down the street, but there was nothing in the fog, except indistinct shapes looming like phantoms. Any of these ghostly forms could materialise as their Uncle, but they all steadfastly refused to do so.

There was nothing for it, so they all went into the plush entrance hall.

“We’ll leave instructions at the Box Office,” Earnestine suggested, “that way—”

“There he is!” Charlotte raced forward.

Uncle Jeremiah was on the wide stairs that led to the Circle talking to a lady in a burgundy dress. He’d heard Charlotte’s unladylike yelling, so he made his goodbyes, and came down to join them.

“Tell us a story, tell us a story,” Charlotte demanded.

“Lottie, little Lottie, stand still so your Uncle can see you,” said Uncle Jeremiah, nodding either with approval or because he couldn’t decide whether to look through, or over, his half-moon glasses. His sideburns were wild and hairy, his whiskers fine and his white hair was all askew. He was the same old Uncle Jeremiah, who had weaved tales of adventure for them as they grew up. Earnestine, despite her anger at his tardiness, smiled.

“Uncle,” she said, “who was that lady to whom you were talking?”

“Captain Caruthers, isn’t it?”

Captain Caruthers jolted to attention: “Sir?”

“We met at the... didn’t we?”

“Yes, Doctor Deering, at the... yes.”

So many conversations these days were frames without a picture. The unmentionable event was the funeral of Georgina's husband, the late Captain Merryweather, whose presence still haunted them with so many pauses.

"This way," Lieutenant McKendry suggested, and he led them up the stairs and along a curving corridor. Much to Earnestine's chagrin, she realised that Major Dan had booked a box. Georgina and Charlotte loved the idea, but to Earnestine's mind it was ostentatious. If they were going to see a show, they should see a show; and not face the rest of the audience as if they were the performers themselves.

"Sit here, my dear," said Uncle Jeremiah guiding Earnestine to the front seat.

"Adults at the back," Earnestine said.

"Yes, dear, and children at the front."

"But—"

"And here are your sweetmeats."

So Earnestine was sat at the front, with her packet of tiny pastries, with her face feeling as red as her dress.

She could hear Uncle Jeremiah, Captain Caruthers and Lieutenant McKendry discussing weighty matters: politics, the troubles in Africa, the recent disappearances and even the cricket with an emphasis on playing by the rules; whereas she had to—

"Do you think there will be elephants?"

"Lottie," Earnestine replied, "how would they get an elephant in here?"

"They might."

"Shhh..."

Where was she? Oh yes, playing by the rules; whereas she had to—

"Ow!"

"Sorry, Ness."

“Don’t fidget, Lottie.”

Whereas she had to... take her mind off her worries. She’d write it out a hundred times: *I must take my mind...* No, she wasn’t a child, so there was no need to write lines any more.

Earnestine looked around the auditorium taking it all in. The curtains were red velvet, plush, and the walls were decorated with curls and patterns picked out in gold leaf. The stalls had the more middle classes, but the Circle and particularly the Boxes held collections of very finely dressed individuals. She could clearly see those in the opposite boxes. Lord and Lady Farthing, some foreign dignitaries with red sashes and, in the third box, a single, elegant woman dressed in a burgundy outfit with a black net veil pushed up to allow her to peer through a pair of powerful opera glasses.

Instinctively, Earnestine glanced over her shoulder: the men were earnestly discussing Grace and Darling, and then she realised they were still going on about whether Australia would win the Ashes. When she looked back, she saw the woman still staring in her direction as if she were studying something. Without doubt, the woman was watching one of them in their box.

But who?

There was only Caruthers, McKendry, Uncle Jeremiah, Georgina, Charlotte or... surely not.

The galvanic lights dimmed and the curtain twitched. An ‘ooh’ of anticipation gathered in the stalls below and those in the Circle leaned forward.

Instead of feeling excitement, the darkness let Earnestine’s recent worries intrude. Simply put, she was too young.

At twenty, she certainly didn’t feel like a little girl, but then she had never felt like a little girl. Recently, they’d

been thrust into the desperate world of international affairs, vis-à-vis preventing an Austro-Hungarian faction from conquering the British Empire.

This, surely, was an experience that counted over and above the actual number of her birthdays. She had hoped that this service would be rewarded with the funds to mount an expedition to trace their Father and Mother's last known whereabouts.

It didn't and hadn't.

Unfortunately, a twenty year old young lady was not considered responsible enough by the Foreign Office, the Royal Society, the British Archaeological Society or any of the other numerous clubs devoted to exploration. Leave it to the men, they explained patiently: which was all very well, she had no problem with that at all, *except that the men never did anything.*

She was forming the opinion, quite strongly, that all they did all day in those clubs of theirs was sit around talking. Goodness only knew what they spent all that time discussing.

"No, no," said Caruthers, "Darling captained in '99, and he's a left-hander."

"He has a beard though," Uncle Jeremiah replied, "and Grace is right handed."

"Yes, that's all very well," countered Caruthers, "but Grace retired in the series and Archie MacLaren took over."

"Of the English team."

"Yes, my point, and it was the Aussie, who had the moustache."

The other issue, for Earnestine, was money.

The house in Zebediah Row was covered by an annuity put in place by Father and Uncle Edgar before they went exploring, but there was no arrangement for pocket money

and they were down to their last shillings. The theatre sold cones of cockles, for example, but, unless one of the men offered, they couldn't even share one between the three of them. (There was the emergency money in the Adventuring Kit, but no! They were not going on another adventure. Mother had been quite explicit: *no exploring, no trouble, no adventures...* so that had to stay there... just in case.)

So, in summary, Earnestine was not happy.

The solution, of course, was for one of them to marry. A man, even some callow youth aged sixteen, could control finances, organise expeditions *and* would be allowed to sit at the back with the adults.

Georgina had married: possibly well, for Merryweather had been a Captain, but now she was a widow. She was the middle sister, so Earnestine had been overstepped and was therefore destined to be a spinster. Without doubt, then, the family's future rested firmly upon Charlotte's shoulders. Earnestine turned to consider Charlotte, who was beautiful in a showy way with her long blonde hair and who was currently *pulling faces at some soldiers down in the stalls.*

"Charlotte!"

Charlotte turned a sweet smile in Earnestine's direction: "Ness?"

"Sit back."

"But I won't be able—"

"Sit! Back!"

Earnestine felt the nape of her neck burning. Charlotte was no doubt sticking her tongue out at Earnestine, but Earnestine refused to turn around and give the silly thing the satisfaction of seeing how cross she had made her elder and better. Captain Caruthers and Lieutenant McKendry wouldn't be shocked, they knew Charlotte too well, but it

meant that there'd be no bliss in her direction from either man.

Perhaps Major Dan was worth considering? He had, after all, a Major's stipend and hadn't actually met Charlotte.

The auditorium darkened and the galvanic lights came up on the stage. A hush and then applause rippled through the audience as the plump Master of Ceremonies, a jolly dandy in a dress suit, bounded from the wings.

"My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen," he began. "Tonight, for your entertainment, for your exaltification, your edification and your entrepidation..."

His pause elicited an 'ooh'.

"I don't think those are words," Earnestine said.

"Don't spoil it, Ness," Georgina whispered in reply.

"...your entrapulation."

"See?"

"Ness!"

The Master of Ceremonies established and extended an edifice of excitement and exhilaration before, exhausted, he changed letter: "First, a Maestro of Magic, the Mage of Mañana, the Mephistopheles of Magnificence – do you want to know your future, madam? This man, this prestidigitator of precognition, can *and will*. Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, all the way from Moscow, the Master Malakov!!!"

Another formally dressed man entered to the Master of Ceremonies beckoning hand.

"Dames, Gospoda! And the spirits, the ethereal conveyors from the beyond, I bid thee welcome."

The magician sported a Russian beard, piercing eyes and some vowels from Hackney, but he had a charisma that demanded attention. He strode across the stage, held

his right hand to his forehead and invited the audience closer with his left.

“The spirits,” Malakov announced, “they are here, they can see the future. You madam, your name is... Ethel.”

“It is, it is,” said a woman in pink, turning round to tell everyone behind her row.

“You come from... Harrow.”

“I do, I do.”

“You – I see it now, clearly as if it were happening this very moment in front of me – you are going to meet a stranger, tall and dark.”

“Oh yes.”

Everyone in the stalls thought it incredible, but Earnestine was less impressed. I mean, she thought, how would one know if Ethel from Harrow was going to meet a tall, dark stranger? The audience applauded and Ethel was well pleased, but surely such an act should be congratulated only after it was demonstrably true. And men were either tall or short, light or dark, known or unknown, so surely by the law of averages, Ethel was bound to meet at least one tall, dark stranger with every eight men she met.

The Master Malakov turned his attention to the higher realms of the auditorium.

“I feel... is there someone who has lost a dear, dear person to them?”

Georgina stiffened next to Earnestine.

“Well, obviously, one’s only got to look at how many people are dressed in black,” Earnestine said, rather too loudly. She regretted it as the Master’s attention was drawn inexorably towards their box.

“Up here,” Malakov said. He pointed and a light from upon high shone in their faces. “Yes, a father... no, a husband... beginning with an eee... jaaa... aahhh.”

Georgina cried out: "Arthur!"

"Arthur, he was tall... a military man."

Georgina lent forward: "Yes."

"He's here now."

The audience applauded the arrival of the unseen military man.

"He wants to say something... yes... it's coming through now... 'I love you'."

Georgina breathed out, a gasp of utter rapture: her cheeks shone in the light. She was crying: there was no excuse for such a display, Earnestine thought, and that went for all the women swooning in the stalls as well.

It was simply bad taste to remind those who had lost a loved one of their calamity. Part of the reason they were going out for the evening was to try and jolly Georgina out of the dark humour that had settled upon her, and not to have entertainers turn it into a spectacle for all and sundry.

Now, Georgina would just sink back into her black mood again, all because her husband had been murdered during that business with the Austro-Hungarians, which hadn't been an adventure at all.

It was rotten luck, undoubtedly, but Earnestine had caught Georgina not exactly complaining, but sighing and gazing longingly into the distance and generally carrying on. All this sympathy for Georgina was one thing, but in truth she was jolly lucky to have had a husband at all. Earnestine suspected Georgina was deliberately being sick every morning to engender the appearance of romantically suffering. It came from reading Shelley.

The so-called Russian returned to the stalls and told a man on the third row that he would come into a fortune because of a red crow.

"Running in the two thirty," shouted some wit.

The crowd laughed and the magician made his farewell with a bow.

Earnestine felt guilty: she was being unfair, deplorably so. Her worries were spilling over into meanness and she resolved to stop thinking ill of people and to be kinder.

“Would you like a sweetmeat?” Earnestine asked Georgina.

“Thank you,” Georgina replied. She took two: she was eating like a horse these days.

A hand and a military sleeve with frayed cuffs appeared from behind with a handkerchief for Georgina.

One should be more understanding, Earnestine thought. Yes, a little more consideration and a softer voice would be the right tonic for her sister.

“What’s the matter with you?” Georgina asked.

“Nothing at all,” Earnestine snapped.

Next was a comedy routine about the French Foreign Legion, which was distinctly bloodthirsty. Obviously Charlotte loved that, and jounced up and down braying in a vulgar manner.

This was followed by an equally uncouth turn: a singsong by a cockney lady, whose sharp voice was thankfully drowned out by the massed choir of the stalls.

Another magician showed genuine shimmering ghosts in a large room constructed on stage for the purpose, but their position in the box meant they couldn’t see properly. However, they did see an actual apparition clearly present, floating by the magician, which was extraordinary. He finished his act with sword swallowing and Charlotte named all the weapons used.

The crescendo of the cavalcade of coruscation – the Master of Ceremonies didn’t approach alliteration alphabetically – was a brass band and another singsong

before a collection for Our Boys Across The Sea fighting the wicked Boer.

Eventually, thankfully, the interminable parade of nonsense came to an end.

Captain Caruthers held the door open as everyone made their way out. Earnestine was the last to reach it. Caruthers shifted, blocking her way.

“That magician: conjuring up the dead like that,” he said.

“If one believes in that sort of thing,” Earnestine said.

“Good old Merry, eh? Talking like that, in front of all those people and without a hint of a stutter.”

Earnestine remembered Captain Merryweather’s stutter with a smile: “And foretelling the future, but not in a way we can check.”

“The future, yes... Miss Deering-Dolittle?”

“Captain?”

He checked they weren’t being overheard: “I was wondering... that is to say. Two things. You’ve done a great service to the Empire over that Austro-Hungarian business. You were jolly brave, admirable in every way, so I thought that... there are other services... duties and wotnot... that is to say, what I mean is...”

“Captain?”

“I understand your situation. A young lady, who has yet to come of age, and therefore not eligible for her trust, is somewhat beholden to other men, so perhaps other men could...” he faltered, and then rallied: “You understand?”

“What are you trying to say?”

If Caruthers was actually bumbling towards a proposal – and it would take all evening at this rate – then everything would follow his suit like cards in Bridge. Georgina would come back into play naturally and

Charlotte could be hidden up a sleeve until she was more sensible. This was a truly excellent turn of events.

But shouldn't one feel all aflutter, Earnestine thought, as they did in those books Georgina read?

"I have something for you," said Caruthers.

He dug in his pocket for something, something flat and white, and at any moment he would drop to one knee and present a ring, but instead he thrust an envelope into her hands.

She fumbled with it and, finally, she felt an emotion.

"One cannot accept this," she stated.

"Why ever not?"

"We don't live on charity."

"It's not charity."

"What is it then?"

"It's a letter of introduction for employment."

"Employment!"

"Yes."

"I'm not a domestic."

"No, please... may I start again?"

"If you please – directly."

"Major Dan and I thought, well, your situation prompted us to consider you, and, of course, your sterling service to Her Majesty and the Empire, which must remain secret, so then the secrecy is a qualification. Don't you see?"

"I'm afraid not, you are being obscure."

"It's an administrative position at the Patents Pending Office."

"Patents..."

"Pending Office, yes. On Queensbury Road, it's impossible to miss," Caruthers explained. "You need simply go and announce yourself."

"I see."

“That’s a letter of introduction from Major Dan.”

Earnestine smoothed out the envelope. It bore a single letter: ‘B’.

“I’ll give it some thought,” she said.

“Do,” said Caruthers, and then he paused with casual carelessness. “You’d be doing us a great service, of course, and we all have our duties.”

He smiled.

Earnestine nodded: she knew when she’d been gulled.

### **Mrs Arthur Merryweather**

The evening had gone so quickly, and for Georgina it had been fleeting and ephemeral. She had laughed, and sung, and actually enjoyed herself. The entertainment had been jolly and diverting certainly, but to have heard from Arthur again had been a true wonder. However, each step now seemed to take her further away from his kindly visitation. Despite the jostling crowd, she felt alone once more.

The show was over.

She missed Arthur. She wanted to check his watch again, to hold that connection with him a little longer, but the crowd bumped into her too many times and she feared dropping it. She’d been without him longer than they’d been together, but time didn’t seem to make a difference. He was an ever-present gap next to her.

Outside the theatre, there was the usual bustle and noise. The street was lit by the garish glow of many gas lamps, those of the theatre glaring up at posters of entertainment and advertisement, while the street lamps blazed upon their wrought iron posts. Women sold matches or posies of flowers, boys ran hither and thither with messages and hawkers plied their wares. A Peeler

shooed away a beggar. Newspaper men shouted the headlines and waved copies of the evening editions aloft.

“Another disappearance, another disappearance...” they hollered: there being only one story of the day.

That’s what she wanted: to disappear, to get away from all the fuss, and well-meaning tea, sympathy and cake. She wanted to be left alone and yet at the same time she wanted to hold on to what she had left. She knew it wasn’t the world that was slipping away from her, but she herself who was drifting.

In her bag was a letter, an official document that she had so often hidden, put aside and distracted herself from, so that it had begun to dominate her every thought. Such was its influence that she had got out her luggage and put away her luggage so many times. She’d even taken down her Bradshaw to look up the train times.

Caruthers appeared with an arm to guide her to a quieter area by some stone steps, but even here it was busy.

“Erm...” he said.

A gentleman vendor approached to suggest that they have their picture taken as a souvenir.

Caruthers sidled away leaving Georgina with an opportunity to examine the photographic apparatus, lifting her dark veil to do so. Perched atop a tripod was a teak box. A glass lens protruded from the front held in a brass fitting and at the back, under a cloth, was the bellows used for focussing the inverted image. The man carefully explained the magic of photography and the alchemy of the enchanted plate, while Georgina patiently nodded and examined the ingenious way the silver-coated, copper daguerreotype plate was inserted. She’d read about it and seen figures from ‘a’ to ‘g’, but it was fascinating to see one in reality.

The man came to his conclusion: "...and I hide beneath this cloth to perform the conjuring trick."

"I see you are still using the collodion wet plate process," Georgina said sweetly. "I would have thought that the gelatine dry plate would be preferable."

"This is an excellent apparatus and works perfectly satisfactorily."

"But aren't silver halides more sensitive and thus reduce the required exposure time?"

"I have magnesium powder," he said.

The explosive powder of magnesium and potassium chlorate was ready loaded in a metal flash lamp, the dry cells ready to deliver the galvanic ignition charge.

"Gina!"

It was Earnestine, standing between Captain Caruthers and Lieutenant McKendry, and jerking her hand to call her over. Her place was on the lower step between Uncle Jeremiah and Charlotte, so when she joined them, Georgina felt comforted, surrounded as she was. Perhaps, she thought, she should leave a gap to her right, a space for Arthur. She felt like moving away from Uncle Jeremiah to do so.

Charlotte nudged her.

"Lottie, don't crowd so," Georgina said.

Charlotte answered back: "The man says we should move together."

The photographer seemed like a headless monster as he bent down and buried his head under the cloth hood. His arms stuck out and he waved the group together.

They bunched up.

With a shock, Georgina realised that her mourning veil was still raised. She should move it down, but it was too late: the man held the flash upright and lit the magnesium: it burned, crackling loudly and was painfully bright.

“Don’t move!” Earnestine commanded in a voice that had clearly been forced between stiff lips.

Georgina gripped Charlotte’s hand to avoid any fidgets.

As she felt the others come to attention, she stood erect and proper too, but in the moment of stillness she shivered. It was as if they were all being watched; she fought the impulse to glance around. As the moment stretched, she had a premonition that everything was passing over, disappearing as if the camera wasn’t saving the moment, but stealing it away. She held on tight, hoping she could preserve something.

A man walked behind them, but she knew that he would be smeared away by the long exposure.

She thought about the letter in her bag.

The light died away and the man slotted the covering plates into the camera. They could move again.

It was done, the image fixed forever. Or so it seemed to Georgina then.

## **Miss Charlotte**

“Ow!”

Charlotte pulled her hand away from Georgina’s clutches, clenched and opened a fist to restore her circulation. Georgina, honestly, she was becoming far too controlling. It used to be Gina and Lottie against Earnestine, but now Georgina was that tiny bit older, it was Earnestine and Georgina ganging up on ‘little Lottie’. So unfair.

Earnestine came over, looking all stern and adult.

“Charlotte.”

“Yes, Ness.”

“Come along here,” said Earnestine, “where the others can’t hear us.”

They moved away, off the steps along the theatre front, until they were a good few yards away.

“Is it a secret?” Charlotte asked, excited.

“You are going to have to get married.”

“What!” – this was all too sudden – “But I’m only fifteen, barely fifteen.”

“Yes, clearly you have been slacking these last few years. We need to choose someone eligible, not too old, and with a dependable income, something from land.”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“Nonsense. And you are far too young to know what you want. Women have a choice between being an Angel of the Home or a Fallen Women. You don’t want to be a fallen woman now, do you?”

“Maybe I do?”

“Don’t be foolish. You don’t know what one is, so how can you have an opinion either way.”

“You’re not married,” Charlotte countered. “Does that make you a fallen woman?”

“Don’t be impertinent.”

“I wouldn’t mind a Captain like Car—”

“He has frayed cuffs and therefore no money. We need to find an Earl or a Lord or a Lancashire industrialist.”

“But they’re all fat and ninety!”

Earnestine gave Charlotte a glare: “You may tell them you are a Deering-Dolittle, but on no account mention that we are the branch from Kent.”

“Our branch saved the Empire.”

“Which hardly engenders a reputation as respectable stay-at-home young ladies.”

Charlotte wondered how Earnestine could go on about respectable stay-at-home young ladies when she was being utterly horrid: “Stay at home!?”

“Don’t whine,” Earnestine chided. “You’re becoming as bad as Georgina before she was married.”

“But she’s ill now. She throws up every morning. I don’t want to catch Wife Ague.”

“There’s no such thing, and she does it discreetly, whereas... from now on, you must be seen and not heard, Charlotte.”

“But I’m not a child.”

“You were complaining earlier that you were too young,” Earnestine pointed out. “A child must be quiet, whereas a young lady looking for a husband must be *silent*.”

Charlotte went silent, but out of shock.

“So it’s decided,” Earnestine said, summing up. “A husband.”

Earnestine turned away, and Charlotte saw her dictatorial outline, her hawk-like nose and her pointy witch’s chin.

That was it then, Charlotte realised; they’d been planning behind her back to farm her off to some old fuddy-duddy. Well, she’d have none of it. First chance she got she’d talk to Uncle Jeremiah: he always understood her, and he’d invite her in to his drawing room, where he always had macaroons in a tin.

Earnestine and Georgina were talking to Caruthers and McKendry. She could hear them comparing this act with the other, preferring the magician or the dancers, and they were all just stupid, because obviously the military brass band had been the best.

Charlotte took a few steps down until she was on street level, wanting to get as far away from Earnestine as possible.

There was still a multitude of finely dressed theatre goers thronging the pavement. The near constant street

hawkers and beggars had been pushed aside. Carriages and hansoms came up to collect passengers, but with much trouble as one vehicle remained resolutely parked at the kerb. Its blinds were drawn up, but the inside was dark, a black like pitch or treacle, except for a single, glowing red ember. Smoke drifted out as the occupant exhaled.

Charlotte was drawn closer and closer, a step at a time, curious to see who waited within.

A hand stopped her.

A man had stepped in front. He had a broken nose, tilted to the left, and pugnacious eyes beneath an eyebrow split with scars. Perhaps, Charlotte thought, he was completely bald for, unusually, he had no moustache and he was hairless from the rim of his bowler down.

He'd broken the spell: the bustle of the street crowded in on her like the school bell fills the corridors with commotion.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said, sternly in that self-important manner that only butlers or batmen seemed to possess. "That's far enough."

"Oh, I just..." but Charlotte couldn't think of an excuse. Usually, when she was breaking some school rule or other, she had one prepared.

"Jones!" The voice, a woman's, came from the dark interior of the carriage. "Who is it?"

"I don't know, Ma'am."

The embers waved imperiously casting tiny sparks of glowing ash to the breeze.

The man, Jones, turned to Charlotte: "Who are you?"

"Miss Charlotte Deering-Dolittle, if you please," said Charlotte and she bobbed a curtsy.

A hint of a face shimmered in the evening gas light as the woman leant forward. Charlotte picked out an

imperious outline, a regal nose and an elegant chin, a face she felt she had seen before, but couldn't place.

"Little Lottie?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Well, well..." the woman sat back, so that her deep chuckling came from the darkness itself.

"Ma'am," said Charlotte, "I don't believe we've been introduced."

Charlotte looked at the servant, but he said nothing.

"Charlotte," said the darkness. "I am Mrs Frasier."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs Frasier," said Charlotte politely. "May I ask—"

"Charlotte! Charlotte!" It was Earnestine shouting out from the theatre steps. "Where are you?"

Two sharp raps sounded on the ceiling of the carriage: "Driver!" Mrs Frasier commanded.

The driver whipped the horse and the carriage jerked out into the traffic. The man Jones ran, caught a handle and pulled himself up to sit beside the driver.

Charlotte was pulled around by a grip on her elbow.

It was Earnestine: "Where have you been?"

"Here."

"Don't wander off."

"I didn't."

"Who was that?"

Charlotte looked out into the street, but couldn't tell which distant carriage had been the strange woman's.

"I don't know," she said. "Some lady called Mrs Frasier."

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