

THE DERRING-DO CLUB

and the

Invasion of the Grey

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WATLEDGE BOOKS

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CHAPTER I

Miss Deering-Dolittle

No-one would have believed in the last year of the nineteenth century that the old world was being watched keenly and observed with intelligence; that as men went to and fro over this globe, serene in their assurance of the might of the British Empire, they were scrutinized and studied. Yet across the gulf, the Grey, cool and unsympathetic, regarded us with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.

However, Miss Earnestine Deering-Dolittle was unaware of anything coming down to Earth for she was at an Embassy Ball.

There were two dances: the obvious one was the collection of couples moving in a quadrille to the Viennese music played by a small orchestra. They spun around as they circled the fine ballroom much as the Earth and Moon could be described as dancing together in their revolution around the Sun.

Miss Deering-Dolittle (Earnestine) and her sisters, Mrs Merryweather (Georgina) and Miss... where was she? Oh, Charlotte was dancing! The youngster's blonde hair flew into the air much like the tail of a comet – foolish girl. She was fancied up in dress of beautiful blue, a blue that Charlotte had complained was too feminine, as if a girl could be dressed too femininely. She'd wanted khaki or pink. Honestly! Pink! She couldn't go to a ball dressed as a tomboy!

Why couldn't she be more like Georgina, sensibly dressed in her widow's weeds that matched her dark hair, and seated calmly at the table? The Deering-Dolittle

sisters were out in public and it was a chance for them to disprove all that ridiculous gossip about their family.

Decorum was—

There was another squeal from Charlotte's direction.

Earnestine could see ladies exchanging furtive glances with men in a different orbit, rather like... but then the metaphor failed because there was nothing that travelled from one celestial body to another. Light perhaps, nothing more.

It was all jolly unseemly, Earnestine thought, as it was rude to ignore whomever one was keeping company.

"Ness?"

"Hmm."

"Ness!"

"Gina?"

"Are you listening?"

"Of course."

"I said it was lovely of Major Dan to invite us, but he's not here."

"No," said Earnestine.

The other dance was like a square dance with each line entering and backing away from the other. The first line consisted of Captain Caruthers and Lieutenant McKendry, the two Gentlemen 'mountaineers' they had first met during that appalling business with the Austro-Hungarian plot to raise an army of the dead. Here, they faced a defensive line of heavily built 'waiters', who were nothing of the sort. Each side responded to the moves of the other and, amusingly in time to the music, Caruthers and Mac fell back to the bar.

"Why isn't he here?"

"Who?"

"Major Dan."

Earnestine shook her head: “He was never meant to be.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“We’re only here to establish the Captain and the Lieutenant’s stories.”

“Oh,” said Georgina, “but I was enjoying it.”

“Well, it’s looking like a complete waste of time,” Earnestine replied. “Where’s my dance card?”

“You ripped it up in a fit of pique.”

“I most certainly did not. One never has pique,” Earnestine insisted. “Give me yours.”

“But it’s mine.”

“I need it, otherwise I have no reason to go over to the bar.”

“You could be getting a drink.”

“And look like I’m some gin-soaked... honestly, Gina.”

Earnestine flapped her hand across the large table.

“What if I want another dance?”

“Another dance... whatever for?”

“I’ve never been to an Embassy Ball before.”

“Neither have I. Card, Gina.”

Georgina handed it over.

“Thank you,” said Earnestine, her lips tight. “Stay here.”

“I can’t dance now, so where else would I go?”

“Exactly, so don’t wander off.”

“I could go home and check on—”

“The wet nurse is perfectly capable of looking after little Philippa. She came with an agency recommendation.” Earnestine stood and smoothed down her burgundy dress. “There’s no need to fuss.”

Earnestine checked that the newly cultivated ringlets of red hair covered the sides of her face, particularly on her

left, before she proceeded around the large dance floor leaving a trail of disturbance in her wake.

“Captain Caruthers!”

The Captain turned to her and smoothed his chevron moustache: “Miss Deering-Dolittle.”

“One believes one has the pleasure of the next dance.”

“I’m sure not.”

In reply, Earnestine brandished the dance card and only then did she notice how many marks it contained. She would clearly have to have a conversation with Georgina about appearances: she was barely widowed a year and she had arrived in the company of Lieutenant McKendry. She had not danced with him beyond the first quadrille and now mark-upon-mark upon her reputation.

“I am rather busy,” said Caruthers.

“Captain,” Earnestine said, her lips narrow and her gaze one she used when the youngest sister, Charlotte, had done something, but no-one was quite sure what it was it was, yet.

“Miss Deering—”

“One could slap you across the face and storm out.”

“You? Make a scene?”

“Yes.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“One never bluffs,” which Earnestine knew was what one always said when one was accused of bluffing.

“Mac,” said Caruthers, “hold the fort. If you get the chance... well, try.”

McKendry nodded.

The orchestra finished and there was some polite applause. Earnestine checked Georgina’s card and saw that she had to endure another waltz. Captain Caruthers stood formally with his arms extended. Earnestine pushed the card into her bag that hung from her elbow, and took

his hand, feeling the man's strong grip through the material of her glove. He put his right arm around her waist, which she could barely feel given her corset.

The music began again and they stumbled around.

Earnestine waited a full revolution before speaking.

"Captain, it has come to one's attention— *ah!*"

"Sorry."

It was only right for the man to apologise: that was the third time he'd managed to strike her Oxford folly boot with his shin.

"It has come to one's attention that your plan has a flaw."

"A flaw?"

"Yes, you are clearly officers of the British army."

"What do you think gave us away?"

"Your dress uniforms," said Earnestine. "So, you are countered at every attempt to penetrate the embassy by their security."

Caruthers smiled: "And I thought they were just eager waiters."

"Hardly, the sherry was in the wrong glass."

"I guess we'll just have to – sorry – enjoy the dancing."

They passed a twirling Charlotte, who saw Earnestine and mouthed 'Ness, you're dancing'. The youngest sister always looked gormless doing that. Still, at least dancing was a more feminine pursuit and, hopefully, she was growing out of her obsession with the military.

"It struck one that while you kept the guards occupied, I could easily perform whatever function brought you here."

"We're to be a diversion?"

"Yes."

"How would we do that?"

“I have noticed that you seem quite capable of ordering drinks.”

“Ah.”

“So, while they continue to watch you, and ignore Georgina and me, I could slip out and complete the assignment.”

And then, thought Earnestine, we can go home.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Or we could carry on dancing.”

“I think— *ow*... sorry. All right, but be careful.”

They came around to the bar again. Caruthers hobbled away and signalled to McKendry.

“Cut in,” he said.

“Sir?” the Lieutenant replied, his face blanched with dismay.

“That’s an order,” said Caruthers. “And brief her.”

Lieutenant McKendry stepped up to the breach and, as he and Earnestine revolved with everyone else, McKendry explained: go to the third floor, the last flight of stairs is down a corridor, east wing, front corner.

“Do you understand?”

“Obviously.”

“Find the Ambassador’s Aide’s office and in the writing desk, right top drawer, there’s a yellow folder. Leave the folder, but bring the contents. Put something else in, so that it looks like they’ve misfiled it,” McKendry explained, before adding: “And don’t, whatever you do, look at it.”

“Just that?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been using words like ‘mission’.”

“It’s the correct word.”

“It’s hardly mountaineering.”

“It has its— *ow!*” he winced. “Dangers.”

The waltz came to an end and Earnestine gave a curtsy. McKendry bowed jolly low in return and leant down to rub his ankle before he hobbled off to the bar. Earnestine went back to Georgina.

“I’ve missed the Attaché to the Ambassador of the Russian Empire,” whined Georgina as she smoothed out her returned dance card.

“I’m sure there are others.”

“Where are you going?” Georgina asked.

“Powder my nose.”

Earnestine moved away to the exit. Sure enough, the eagle-eyed waiters kept their attention on the Captain and the Lieutenant, and not on a mere slip of a member of the weaker sex.

Except one: “Mademoiselle?”

“Get out of the way!”

“Pardon, mademoiselle.”

“English.”

“Mais ici, c’est le sol français.”

“Speak English!”

“This is the soil French.”

“Yes. In England.”

The main lobby to the French Embassy was a wide-open space with large doors to the ballroom, the main entrance, a cloakroom and right in front of her, a big staircase leading to the upper storeys. She went straight across as if she owned the place, which was always the best strategy.

“Puis-je vous aider, mademoiselle?”

It was a functionary in a jolly ostentatious pseudo-military uniform.

She looked at him as if he was mad.

“Puis-je vous aider, mademoiselle?” the man possibly repeated – who knew?

“In English.”

“Can I help you, Miss?” he repeated, this time sensibly.

“There. See? That wasn’t so difficult, was it?” retorted Earnestine, and she made her way upstairs.

There was a lot of security on the second floor, but she ignored this and continued up until she reached the landing on the third storey as McKendry had explained.

She checked her gold fob watch, seeing the legend *JJD, To the Future, CM* and consulted a small, lucky charm dangling from the chain. East was... she went along the corridor and located the door to the front corner room. It wasn’t locked.

That was easy, she thought. The fuss men made was astounding.

It was dark inside.

She made her way over to the windows and pulled aside the long curtains to confirm that this was the East wing, front corner. The trees of the park, highlighted by gaslight, were unmistakable. She could also see that this was a storeroom. There was no writing desk.

She went back to the door and checked. Outside, a fancy sign screwed to the door, announced: ‘Dépense’.

Voices!

She ducked back inside.

“I tell you, the woman in rouge came this way.”

“Why are you speaking English?”

“She... oh, mon Dieu.”

They started opening doors, systematically working along the corridor to check each room. Given the time they were spending in each, they were being jolly thorough.

Earnestine pushed the door to, careful not to make a sound, and then she tiptoed through the storeroom. There

were no other exits, so she tried the window. It opened onto a petite balcony and the drop was a giddy one.

She drew the curtains behind her.

Just in time: the door opened.

Oh, she thought, and she lifted her skirts to get one leg over the rail. This was so undignified and – *ah*, she grabbed on as her foot slipped – dangerous. Perhaps she should go back inside and explain? They'd believe her. All she had to do was point out that all their signs were in some funny foreign language.

The curtains opened.

She dropped.

Her skirts started to billow out like an umbrella.

She caught the ledge of the balcony.

They only needed to glance down and see her fingers.

There was a similar balcony on the floor below.

She swung out, in, out – fingers slipped, one hand suddenly flailing about in the empty space – in... and let go.

She landed awkwardly.

“Bally...” she bit her tongue. Quiet. Nor should she even know the b-word.

The door from the balcony was locked.

She broke her nail file, bottle opener and penknife before she managed to get the thing open. If she'd known this was going to happen, she'd have brought a proper kit. (Although dancing with a canvas bag would have been awkward.)

This room was a proper office with a mahogany writing desk, filing cabinets and a selection of fine wines on a sideboard.

Earnestine went to the door and listened: it was quiet.

This was the floor with all the security: strange they were guarding an unimportant floor, while leaving the vital one unattended.

She opened the door quietly, kept low and glanced along the corridor.

There were a collection of waiters and others in military uniform loitering at the stairs.

As she moved back inside to consider, she caught sight of the outside of the door. The sign announced 'L'Adjoint de L'Ambassadeur'.

McKendry had got the floor number wrong!

Sure enough, the right top drawer was... locked, but Earnestine knew how to jig these around with her penknife without—

“*Om!*”

A little rubbing with a walnut and that scratch would hardly be noticeable.

Sure enough, a yellow folder.

There wasn't much light, so she took it to the window to check. Luckily, the pale gas illumination filtering up from the street was enough to reassure her that this was the correct paperwork.

She shouldn't peek, of course, and she had been brought up well enough, finishing school at the Eden College for Young Ladies in Switzerland, Latin and Greek obviously, and deportment training, so she knew her place was to fetch and not to become involved.

And, whatever you do, don't look, Mac had said.

French!

The utter cheek.

The seven pages could be about anything.

She folded them neatly, pushed them into her bodice and then searched about for a similar set of pages. There were plenty, so she picked something at random and slipped those into the yellow file.

Now to get out.

She went back to the balcony.

Carefully this time, she went over the rail and lowered herself down. Another swing and she was on the storey below.

These balcony doors were open, so she went in.

“Mon Dieu!” exclaimed a large, rotund man quickly gathering his shirt to cover himself. The lady – if you could call her that – underneath him simply stared.

“Pardoning moi,” Earnestine said. “Je suis... lost.”

Oh, the utter embarrassment and shame of it. She was from the great Deering-Dolittle family of explorers and she’d just said she was lost. Hopefully he wouldn’t recognise her.

The corridor outside was clear, so Earnestine made her way along to the staircase.

She reached it.

That wasn’t perhaps easy, but not exactly difficult, she thought.

“Excuse me, Miss.”

Mrs Merryweather

Georgina was worried.

She ought to have been concerned about Earnestine, who had obviously gone off somewhere for far too long and that spelt trouble. Charlotte, too, was enjoying herself and flinging herself around with ever-increasing abandon. It was only a matter of time before she did something foolish. The girl needed a hobby... a different hobby.

However, Georgina herself really needed to get home. She swore her bodice had changed shape.

She checked her dance card. Her next foray across the dance floor was with a... Bib... Burp... Bob? Oh, wretched Earnestine had folded it right along his name. Almost deliberately, Georgina thought. It was bad enough trying

to read these appalling scrawls without someone smudging the pencil.

She got up.

Almost immediately, the table they'd secured upon their arrival was invaded and occupied.

Well, harrumph, and another reason to go home.

She found Captain Caruthers and Lieutenant McKendry at the bar. They had been drinking.

She coughed pointedly.

"It's a diversion," said Caruthers.

"What's a diversion?"

"The drinks."

"Perhaps I could have a diversion for the road?"

"I'm sorry."

"A drink before we leave."

"We can't leave."

"Why not?"

"Miss Deering-Dolittle is... we're diverting for her."

"Are you indeed?"

"What can I get you?"

"Gin."

"Mother's ruin... sorry, right away," he raised a finger to the man behind the bar. "Un gin et deux more malt de single, s'il vous plaît."

"And tonic," Georgina said.

"Avec tonic," Caruthers passed on.

Georgina took a gulp from the generous measure. Perhaps she might last the evening. Another gulp.

"Steady on," said Caruthers.

"What's the topic of conversation?" she asked.

"Captain Conway," said Caruthers. "You remember? He was arrested by those Chrononauts last year and poor Tom became convinced he was in the future. Kept on about going back in time to stop Jack the Ripper or some

such. Poor chap is having difficulties adjusting to the 19th century again as it were. I suppose temporal transfer is wont to turn a man's mind."

"Poor chap," Mac added. He sipped his single malt. "I prefer bourbon."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Caruthers.

"We often have difficulties adjusting to a new life," Georgina said.

"They don't have the best single malts in the French embassy, I'll grant you, but this is still decent stuff."

"Will you stop going on about whisky!"

"Sorry, Gina... Mrs Merryweather."

"I'd like to go home."

"In a while."

It was all suddenly too much: the whirling, spinning, bright frocks, uniforms with gold braid and hats and the music *dum-de-de-dumming* continuously.

"Now?"

"I could take her," Mac offered.

"That would be jolly kind," Georgina replied.

"Shall I take Lottie too?"

"She's happy here," Georgina said, wanting to be on her way, wanting to be home, wanting so much...

Caruthers nodded to Mac, an instant understanding that came from training and a multitude of experiences fighting shoulder-to-shoulder.

In the grand hallway were yet more people: waiters rushing upstairs, guards, a positive Piccadilly Circus of activity and Lieutenant McKendry took an age recovering her shawl and coat.

There were people outside too in the street lit by the bright embassy interior and the street's gaslights. A crowd had gathered, pointing upwards, and McKendry shouldered a path for her.

As she went past, some gossip pointed aloft saying, “...and you could see all her frillies...”

What was the point of all these people!

“What would you prefer?” McKendry asked.

“Anything,” she said, not caring if they had a hansom, landau or even a three-wheeler if such a thing existed. She’d go in any of them.

“Cab! Cab!” McKendry shouted.

There was a children’s toy at home, a piece of wood with holes to put shapes through: circular, triangular, square, oblong...

She’d changed.

McKendry helped her squeeze into a hansom.

Her place in the world, so carefully chiselled out, no longer fit, but it wasn’t the world that had changed. She herself was – literally – a different shape.

Miss Charlotte

Another man in uniform!

And another!

It was so exciting!

Charlotte was quite giddy.

The quadrille was fast, the evening’s dances had been speeding up, and the men seemed to enjoy whirling her around, her blonde hair loose and swirling. Her dance card had been full, but she’d lost it. Never mind, bold men came up and asked her, taking her hand, leading her up, do-si-do and down.

She’d seen British Officers, of course, Welsh Guards, Hussars, Dragoons and so on, many times before, but here there were Swedish officers, and Austro-Hungarian (always a shiver considering that business with Graf Zala), White

Russians, Americans and even a Canadian Royal Northwest Mounted Policeman.

She'd got them to talk about battles, some even she hadn't heard about, and it was so utterly bizarre beyond belief to discover that there had been recent battles in the world, armies pitched against armies, that hadn't actually involved the British Empire.

Round she went, a blur of pressed finery and medals.

There was Captain Caruthers and – somewhere – Lieutenant McKendry. Earnestine had been talking to them, but she'd gone off somewhere now.

The orchestra.

Georgina scowling and nervously looking at the door – no wait, she'd gone too.

A clutch of cavalry talking and gesticulating.

Caruthers again, checking his watch, looking upwards.

The orchestra.

Georgina's empty seat... oh, she'd lost their table.

Cavalrymen pointing fingers at each other, perhaps there'll be a duel.

Caruthers ordering another whiskey.

The orchestra.

Some ladies in taffeta moving chairs to add to their table. Silly Georgina for leaving it unguarded. But Charlotte didn't care. She was in heaven.

An officer throwing his glove at another. Ooh, and Charlotte was going to miss it as she was still dancing.

Caruthers looking upwards again, checking his watch again, looking nervous – again.

Perhaps Mac had escorted Georgina outside. They'd probably waved to gain her attention, but Charlotte knew that she could always say that she'd been dancing and hadn't seen them. Gosh, she thought, it was true.

Round again: orchestra, stupid women in taffeta, cavalymen going outside, Caruthers fidgeting, orchestra... oh, finishing...

...and curtsey.

The Russian officer in his white wool tunic with red cuffs bowed to her: "Thank you, Mademoiselle."

"Merci," Charlotte replied. "Perhaps some more of that cough medicine."

"Of course."

The Russian (call me 'Sergei') went over to the bar for another of those tiny glasses, and they were so small, so therefore there wasn't much 'cough medicine' in them, surely? It wasn't really throat syrup, it was green Chartreuse.

"Mademoiselle!"

It was a British Major.

Charlotte glanced at his chest: only an Ashantee, Queen's South Africa, East and West Africa Medals and a Queen's Sudan. Quite disappointing, she'd seen all those before. It had hardly been worth bringing her brass rubbing paraphernalia.

However, before she was whisked away, Sergei brought over her green drink.

"Thank you, Merci, I mean..."

"Budem zdorovy."

"Buddy zdoorvski," she repeated.

Others raised their glasses too: a Frenchman, an Englishman – Captain Caruthers – and Sergei, the Russian.

"To us all," said Caruthers.

"Oui, à l'amitié."

"This double alliance of Germany and Austro-Hungary is worrying," said Caruthers, "perhaps we need to counter it with a triple alliance: the British Empire, France and the Russians."

“They will just add some other countries like Bulgaria or the Ottoman Empire for a Quadruple Alliance,” said the Frenchman in perfect English. “Or both for a Quintuple.”

“Then perhaps we should make diplomatic enquiries to Spain and the United States for our Quintuple Alliance.”

“The whole world into two factions doesn’t sound like a wise move,” said Sergei. “The West and East versus the Central Nations.”

And Charlotte was horrified: they were talking as if this was a game, dividing the world between two factions and discussing war. The ramifications were simply awful.

“It would take a large, common enemy to bring us all together,” Caruthers said. “But where would such an enemy come from?”

Charlotte could contain her dismay no longer: “Would that mean there’d be only two types of uniform!?”

“There are different uniforms within every army and navy,” said the Frenchman, “so it follows that each country would maintain its own traditions.”

“Oh good,” said Charlotte, relieved. “I was worried for a moment.”

*...and the adventure continues
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