



TEA & SANDWICHES—WHAT THE DICKENS—
AN INDECOROUS MELEE—OUR HEROINE SETS FORTH—EXPLOSIONS—
THE PERILS OF CHARITY—INTERESTING FOOTWEAR—
ELIZABETH BENNET IS NOT CONSULTED—A BAD DECISION

Charlotte could listen no more in silence. For several minutes now a young man at the teahouse counter had been abusing a waiter with language that pierced her soul. She had tried to behave as the other customers and look away—after all, who did not understand the pain of being disappointed in one’s hopes for a warm currant scone? But finally her patience broke, and she simply had to speak by such means as were within her reach—namely, a volume of Dickens she had been reading over tea and sandwiches.

Rising from her chair, she cast *Great Expectations* at the young man’s head and then settled down once more to her luncheon.

The young man roared. Clutching his head, eyes blazing, he glared around the cafeteria. “Who did that?!”

Charlotte raised one delicate, lace-gloved hand.

“He did,” she said, pointing to a dark-haired gentleman at a nearby table.

Several ladies gasped. Her chosen scapegoat, however, gave no re-

action. Charlotte was unsurprised. She had seen him enter the teahouse earlier and noted at a glance how everything about him was rich, from his long black overcoat to his gold-handled briefcase. She could not imagine him paying attention to anyone he might consider lesser than himself. Indeed, he read his newspaper and drank his coffee as if she had not even spoken.

The angry young man had heard her well enough, however. He stormed across to snatch the gentleman's newspaper and fling it dramatically to the ground. The moment was rather spoiled by paper sheets fluttering about, one covering his face and thereby muting his tirade, but he pulled it away, scrunching it within a fist.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, brandishing his knuckles along with the rumpled paper.

The gentleman blinked composedly. "I beg your pardon?"

"You threw a book at me! Stand up, mister, and face justice!"

"Don't be ridiculous," the gentleman replied, unmoved. Charlotte noted that his voice was rich too, with a slight accent woven through like gold thread. "Compensate me for my newspaper then return to whatever gutter from which you crawled. You are disturbing the peace."

"I'll give you disturbing!" The young man grasped the coat lapels of the older and hauled him from his chair.

"Goodness me," Charlotte murmured, leaning back as the men stumbled against her table. Screams arose from the other patrons, but Charlotte did not indulge in shock. Her teacup was rattling in its saucer. Her sandwiches almost leaped off their plate. If she sat around gasping, luncheon would be entirely spoiled.

With a sigh, she stood, laying her napkin on the table. She took a last sip of tea while the men knocked over chairs with their furious wrestling. She wrapped her sandwiches in the napkin, rescued her

purse from the table moments before the men crashed onto it, then left the teahouse, picking up the gentleman's briefcase as she went.

A tiny bell tinkled as she opened the door and stepped out. A breeze plucked at her strawberry blonde coiffure but was unable to disrupt it. Charlotte paused, squinting against the lambent afternoon light, and considered her route ahead.

St. James's Street was busy as usual with a bright drift of ladies going about their regular business, shopping and sightseeing and generally making a promenade of themselves. A woman dressed simply in gray, with only one feather on her hat and the smallest bustle possible without being indecent, would stand out most regrettably amongst them. But there was no choice. She closed the shop door just as a teapot smashed against it. From within the premises came a lady's anguished cry, and then a man shouted: "Where is my briefcase?!" Charlotte straightened her modest hat, hung her purse from the crook of her elbow, and proceeded along the street.

She had not gone far when the tinkle of a doorbell shook through her consciousness. Without glancing back, she began to lengthen her stride. She managed to cover several yards of St. James's Street within moments and, nodding to acknowledge a police constable who veered in his path to make way for her, turned onto King Street.

Almost at once she found herself stalled by a half dozen ladies laughing together as they moved at a rate that barely qualified as strolling. Charlotte managed to tap her foot impatiently even as she edged forward behind them.

"Stop, thief!" arose a shout from St. James's Street, the force of its anger making it clearly audible despite the distance. Charlotte attempted to circumnavigate the ladies without success. Really, people had no consideration for others these days. How was one supposed to effect a robbery when dawdlers blocked the footpath in this disgraceful

manner? They left her no option but to cast off all decorum and step out amongst the wagons on the road.

A driver hollered at her to immediately evacuate his intended route (or at least words to that effect). As she looked back, Charlotte saw the gentleman from the teahouse enter King Street, his coat billowing as he strode toward her. Realizing that she would not be able to outpace him, she muttered under her breath.

All of a sudden, the wagon's horses whinnied and reared, forcing their vehicle to a shuddering stop in the center of the road. Pumpkins flew from the back, bursting open on the cobblestones and causing ladies to scream as orange mush splattered over their gowns. A phaeton coming up behind narrowly avoided collision, and as its driver rose from his seat to shout abuse at the wagoner, various pedestrians rushed to join in.

Within seconds, the street was blocked.

Charlotte walked away from the tumult, her heels clicking delicately against the paving. Noticing Almack's public assembly house farther along, she began to aim for it.

A policeman's whistle pierced the clamor of the crowd, and Charlotte winced. Pain from the noise ricocheted along her nerves. If only she could leave London with all its cacophony and retire to Hampshire, birthplace of Jane Austen, where green peace whispered wild yet gentle poetry to one's heart. It was never to be—duty forced her presence in London, noble duty (and the fact there was not much of value to steal in the countryside)—yet still she dreamed. And occasionally took brief jaunts by train because, truly, there was nothing like leaving home for real comfort.

Thus imagining oak trees and country lanes while behind her the brawl intensified, Charlotte made her way without further impediment toward Almack's. Its door stood open, a delivery boy's bicycle leaning on the wall beside it, and the warm interior shadows promised respite

from London's inconveniences—as well as a back door through which she could slip unnoticed by policemen, pumpkin carters, and aggravated briefcase owners. She was almost there when she saw the child.

A mere scrap of humanity, he huddled within torn and filthy clothes, his small hand extended pathetically. Charlotte looked at him and then at Almack's door. She came to a decisive stop.

"Hello," she said in the stiff tones of someone unused to conversing with children. "Are you hungry?"

The urchin nodded. Charlotte offered him her wrapped sandwiches but he hesitated, his eyes growing wide and fearful as he glanced over her shoulder. Suddenly, he snatched the food and ran.

Charlotte watched him go. Two cucumber sandwiches would not sustain a boy for long, but no doubt he could sell the linen napkin to good effect. She almost smiled at the thought. Then she drew herself up to her fullest height, lifted her chin, and turned to look at the gentleman now looming over her.

"Good afternoon," she said, tightening her grip on his briefcase.

In reply, he caught her arm lest she follow the example of the urchin. His expression tumbled through surprise and uncertainty before landing on the hard ground of displeasure; his dark blue eyes smoldered. For the first time, Charlotte noticed he wore high leather boots, strapped and buckled, scarred from interesting use—boots to make a woman's heart tremble, either in trepidation or delight, depending on her education. A silver hook hung from his left ear; a ruby ring encircled one thumb, and what she had taken for a beard was mere unshaven stubble. Altogether it led to a conclusion Charlotte was appalled not to have reached earlier.

"Pirate," she said in disgust.

"Thief," he retorted. "Give me back my briefcase."

How rude! Not even the suggestion of a please! But what else could one expect from a barbarian who probably flew around in some brick

cottage thinking himself a great man just because he could get it up? Pirates really were the lowest of the low, even if—or possibly because—they could go higher than everyone else in their magic-raised battle-houses. Such an unsubtle use of enchantment was a crime against civilization, even before one counted in the piracy. Charlotte allowed her irritation to show, although frowning on the street was dreadfully unladylike.

“Possession is nine-tenths of the law, sir. Kindly unhand me and I will not summon a police officer to charge you with molestation.”

He surprised her by laughing. “I see you are a wit as well as a thief. And an unlikely philanthropist too. If you hadn’t stopped for the boy, you might have gotten away.”

“I still shall.”

“I don’t think so. You may be clever, but I could have you on the ground in an instant.”

“You could,” Charlotte agreed placidly. “However, you may like to note that my shoe is pressed against your foot. If I am so inclined, I can release a poisoned dart from its heel which will penetrate boot and skin to paralyze you within moments.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Ingenious. So you too are a pirate, I take it?”

Charlotte gasped, trying to tug her arm from his grip. “I most certainly am not, sir, and I demand an apology for the insult!”

He shrugged.

Charlotte waited, but apparently that was the extent of his reply. She drew a tight breath, determined to remain calm. What would Jane Austen’s fiercest heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, do in this situation?

“I consider myself a reasonable woman,” she said. “I take pride in not being prejudiced. Although your behavior is disgraceful, and I shall surely have bruises on my arm, I do appreciate this has been a difficult afternoon for you. Therefore, I give you permission to withdraw.”

“How kind,” he said wryly, although he did ease his grip on her arm. “I am going nowhere, however, without my briefcase.”

“But it is for the orphans,” she said, her tone suggesting horror that he would deprive the poor, wretched creatures of whatever small comfort his briefcase might afford them.

“The orphans, indeed? And you’re taking it to them right now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s afternoon. No well-mannered lady does business in the afternoon. I’m taking it home, selling its contents, and adding the income to my estate. It will support my general affluence and prestige, which in turn will lend weight to my opinion about the sad plight of orphans.”

“I see. So by contributing to your personal wealth I am helping the poor?”

“Exactly.”

He grinned. “You sure you’re not a pirate?”

“Certainly not! I am the *opposite* of a pirate. I am a good person. I only steal from the rich.”

“And those who would be rich if they’d just put their minds to it?”

“Yes.” She paused, frowning. “No. That is—” She broke off, muttering.

“I beg your pardon?” the man asked, then flinched as a pumpkin flew past his head, narrowly missing him before exploding against the wall of Almack’s. Wet pulp splashed his coat, although by good fortune (and some reversal of the laws of physics) none touched Charlotte.

The man regarded her steadily for a long moment. Then with his free hand he pulled back her sleeve to reveal a delicate gold bracelet set with tiny jeweled bee charms.

“I thought so. I’ve heard of women like you. What is your name?”

Charlotte tried again to escape his grip, without success. “Very well,” she relented. “I am Miss Anne Smith. And whom do I have the misfortune of addressing?”

“Captain Alex O’Riley, madam. Which, may I add, is *my* real name.”

So he was Irish, as suggested by his mild accent. An Irish pirate in London. Charlotte could only imagine the unbridled poetry he was leaving in his wake. “I cannot say I am pleased to meet you, Mr. O’Riley. But if you leave me your card, I’m sure I’ll acknowledge the acquaintance should we happen to encounter each other again at some public ball or soiree.”

“Or,” he countered, “I could just knock you unconscious, take back my briefcase, and kiss you before I leave.”

He smiled wickedly. Charlotte almost gasped for the second time in twenty-one years. Her outrage was so great, she struggled to summon a witty retort. Elizabeth Bennet, consulted urgently, could only suggest that his arrogance, his conceit, and his selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to bypass her disapprobation and move straight to dislike! But Charlotte did not have time to express all that before he spoke again.

“Forgive me,” he said without the slightest evidence of remorse. “I’m not usually quite so rough. But what else can a pirate do when he meets a lady of the Wicken League?”

He gave her a smug, challenging look.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Charlotte replied.

“No?” He tipped his head to one side as if he might see her better crooked. “I once knew a lady with a similar bracelet featuring bees.”

“It is a common symbol.”

“For her it showed she belonged to a covert league of women skilled in the cunning arts. That is to say, although I believe it must never be said—” Glancing around to be sure no one could hear him, he leaned so close Charlotte could see the sparks of mockery in his eyes. “*Witchcraft.*”

Charlotte considered this for a moment, then discarding Elizabeth Bennet in favor of Lydia, she stomped down hard on his foot.

Purple smoke burst from her heel. Bother—wrong shoes! The churl might sicken if he breathed in that smoke, but since it was some six feet below his mouth and nose, the risk of even that was minimal. She herself was in more danger, being shorter than him. Luckily, surprise had caused him to weaken his grip, and Charlotte yanked free, bashed him in the gut then under the chin with his own briefcase, and made a run for it.

“Stop!” he shouted, but did not follow, on account of being hunched over, clutching at his stomach. Charlotte knew, however, that he’d soon recover and catch up to her. Escaping on foot was going to be impossible. Almost without thinking, she grabbed hold of the delivery boy’s bicycle and clambered on as quickly as her skirts would allow.

The machine wobbled as she began to ride it across the cobblestones. She spoke rushed words under her breath. A lady hurried out of her way, a cry could be heard from what she guessed was the delivery boy, and she went on urgently muttering, muttering, until all at once the bicycle lifted from the footpath into the sunlit air.

Alex grinned through his pain as he watched the witch take flight. Pedestrians were gasping and pointing at the sight of a woman on an airborne bicycle—or perhaps because her lace drawers were made visible by the billowing of her skirts. She really was rather magnificent, he conceded, with her rich strawberry blonde hair and her eyes like tornado weather, not to mention her delightful willingness to maim or kill him. Her manner, though, reminded Alex a little too much of his childhood nurse. The thought of kissing her, mingled with the recollection of Nanny smacking his bottom, made a man more flustered than he wanted to be on a public street.

Besides, Alex disliked witches on general principle. While he’d only ever known one before, that had been one more than enough.

Even the memory of her made him wince, and he hastily transformed the expression into a brooding scowl, in case someone was watching.

The Wisteria Society, leaders of the pirate community, considered witchcraft *déclassé*, and Alex tended to agree with them, although he preferred *devious*, *destructive*, and other alliterative words he could not think up just at that moment. Although the Wicken League employed the same magical incantation as pirates, they chose to do so subtly. Alex found this suspicious. What kind of person preferred to trifle with minor things—pumpkins, people, bicycles—when they could fly actual buildings? And why do it secretly, when infamy was possible?

On the other hand, he also agreed with the witches when they called pirates unjustifiably arrogant. He himself was entirely justified in his arrogance, but some pirates he knew could benefit from the Wicken League's assessment. Not that such a thing would ever happen, since the two societies took such mutual pleasure from hating each other that they never willingly met. Alex would not have chased the woman today had he realized she belonged to the League. He might be a nefarious privateer, but he did not generally ask for trouble.

Mind you, the witch was the one heading for trouble now. Flying a bicycle over a crowded street was rather inconducive to the League's precious secrecy, and when her fellow witches learned about it, she was going to be in more danger than she ever would have been with him.

At the thought, he smiled and waved up to her. Losing his briefcase was a nuisance, for he'd come up to Town for a spot of blackmailing, maybe a swindle or two, and her robbery had mucked that up. But mostly he just felt glad to see her go. Never mind that he could still smell her enticingly puritanical scent of plain soap, nor that his—er, his *foot* was throbbing from her impact on him. Alex respected women enough to know when to keep the hell away from them.

But goodness, those certainly were very pretty drawers.



Charlotte frowned as she pedaled upward. All her life she had been bound by one rule. Well, that is to say, several dozen rules, such as never put the milk in before the tea, never slouch on the sofa, and always brush one's hair a hundred times before bed. But beneath the petty requirements that governed women's existence, there was one particular to the circumstances of a witch.

Never do magic in public.

Oh, she might fling a book and make it seem that she'd used her hand to do so. She might stop a wagon, toss its produce to create a diversion. But obvious magic—that was strictly forbidden. Not only might she be burned alive if caught, but she endangered the entire League. Just because no one had encountered a witch hunter in more than a century didn't mean they weren't out there, stalking the streets and haunting the nightmares of decent, law-breaking witches. Charlotte had been raised better than to break a rule, take a risk.

And certainly Elizabeth Bennet would never do it.

Yet here she was, riding a bicycle above a busy London street at noon while a crowd of pedestrians stared up at her in horrified amazement.

Stupid, Charlotte castigated herself. Some man grabs your arm, smiles at you like he's slowly unlacing your brain, and you panic and throw twenty-one years of scrupulous caution to the winds—literally. The briefcase's contents had better prove worth it.

Her hat feather fluttered in the breeze as if from memory. Her skirts billowed around her knees. Charlotte pedaled hard to gain height. If she could just surmount the rooftops, she'd be away free. Unable to resist an anxious glance down at the street, she saw Captain O'Riley waving cheerfully to her. There was something in his hand—

Bother! He'd stolen her purse.

"Odious churl!" she shouted, and shook the briefcase at him. He laughed. The bicycle wavered perilously, and as Charlotte tried to grip its handlebars with both hands, the briefcase's latch snapped. Before she could do anything, it tipped open.

And shredded blank paper floated down on the crowd.

❖ 2 ❖

MISS PLIM DISAPPROVES—THE PAST AND THE FUTURE—
A DULL TALE IN WHICH NOTHING UNUSUAL HAPPENED—
NEWS!—AN ACROBATIC BUTLER—
MORE NEWS!—THE RACE IS ON

It is a truth seldom acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a good fortune is not especially in want of a husband. Miss Judith Plim, socially advantaged and possessing several fortunes (although legally they belonged to other people), had always felt a man would add nothing to her happiness. As she grew older and the world offered no opportunity for her to test this theory, she became so determined in it that she assumed the same must be true for any woman.

“Just consider poor Hadassah Greig,” she said to her sister, Mrs. Pettifer, as they sipped tea at a lace-covered table in the Pettifer drawing room. “Marriage has ruined her health. Why, she’s only been a bride three weeks and is practically bedridden!”

“Hm,” Mrs. Pettifer replied. She flicked over a page in the magazine she had open on her lap.

Miss Plim eyed her narrowly through a small, round pair of spectacles. “Are you listening to me, Delphine?”

“Of course not, dear.” Mrs. Pettifer held out her hand without

looking up from the magazine and, with a low mutter, transported a biscuit from a nearby plate to her fingers. “But don’t let that stop you from going on.”

Miss Plim pursed her lips in lieu of employing the witches’ incantation to propel Mrs. Pettifer out the nearest window. Magic was not to be used for fun. Miss Plim was very clear on that—so clear, indeed, that she had made it the unofficial motto of the Wicken League by dint of sheer nagging. She was a stickler. Not for anything in particular, per se—but, rather, for everything. If there was stickling to be done, Miss Plim was the woman for the job. And nothing called for stickling more than witchcraft.

“What are you reading in that rag that could be more important than the willful self-ruin of independent women?” she demanded of her sister.

“An account of the Belfast riots,” Mrs. Pettifer said.

“Huh.”

(This was, it must be said, an awfully brief statement on the Irish situation from a woman who had recently used witchcraft to campaign against “that atrocious liberal” Gladstone, driving him so to distraction by subtly moving the pencil tray on his desk and the potted fern on his windowsill that he actually proposed Home Rule for the Irish and got himself laughed out of office.)

“Several people have been killed,” Mrs. Pettifer reported. “It’s quite shocking.”

Miss Plim pecked irritably at her tea. “Something more shocking happened yesterday.”

“Indeed?” Mrs. Pettifer flicked over another page. “You smiled at someone?”

“No. I was in Twining’s and that Darlington woman walked in. She acknowledged me politely with a nod.”

At this, Mrs. Pettifer finally looked up, her velvety eyes growing wide. "Not Miss Darlington, the pirate?"

"Indeed," Miss Plim intoned.

"How atrocious! What did you do?"

"Arranged for a canister of tea to fall on her head, of course. What else could I do?"

"Nothing," Mrs. Pettifer agreed. "And how did she respond?"

"Brace yourself, sister."

"I am braced, sister. Tell me."

"She laughed!"

Mrs. Pettifer, despite the bracing, gasped.

"This never would have happened a few months ago," Miss Plim said, shaking her head as she recollected the offensive scene. The knot of black hair upon her crown reverberated with an attitude of disapproval all its own. "Apparently the woman has got herself married to some *man*, and it's caused her to develop a sense of humor." These last three words were spoken as if they tasted of raw lemon rind. "Married, in her advanced years, and moreover when she is independently wealthy! Women should only become wives if they have nothing better to do. Granted, Darlington is a pirate, therefore prone to stupid behavior. But altogether this modern trend for romance is quite ridiculous."

"Hm," Mrs. Pettifer said, trying not to glance at the dozen red roses her husband had given her yesterday. They stood in a vase just behind her older sister's head, making the thin, gray-clad woman appear to be wreathed with folly. If only she knew how Mrs. Pettifer had expressed gratitude to Mr. Pettifer for those roses . . .

All at once Mrs. Pettifer was obliged to repurpose the magazine as a fan.

"I blame education," Miss Plim was saying, oblivious to her sister's blushes. "The female brain is weakened with all those ramblings from

male philosophers and foolish examples from kings.” With a click of her tongue, she damned the entire compass of pedagogical arts, selected a tiny salmon sandwich from the tiered plate before her, then muttered a few words to engage the teapot in refilling her cup while she herself cut the sandwich into quarters. “At least our Charlotte seems established as an old maid.”

“My Charlotte,” Mrs. Pettifer amended, since the girl in question was her daughter.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Delphine.” Miss Plim lifted the sandwich to her lips then lowered it again with an expression of vague revulsion. “You know that, as the Prophesized One, Charlotte belongs to the entire Wicken League.” In other words, herself. She was after all, as its leader, the very embodiment of the League. (Or the archetype. Or whatever noun necessary to justify Charlotte being in her control.)

Mrs. Pettifer gave a sigh as complex as her tightly curled coiffure. “Don’t mention that prophecy. I still maintain Lettice just wanted to predict smaller bustles and higher hemlines.”

“Balderdash. I heard her—”

“You dictated to her.”

“—and she *clearly said* the true heir of Beryl Black would come, bringing in a new era of greatness. Then she pointed at you. Seven months later, Charlotte was born.”

Mrs. Pettifer recalled the scene with distaste. It had quite ruined her wedding day. The fact Lettice had died later that night only served to further inspire general belief in her prediction—mostly because the League witches knew a warning not to ask questions when they saw one in the form of a knife having accidentally fallen into the back of an elderly woman while she slept.

Then again, scandal would have erupted had Charlotte *not* been prophesized somehow. Witches disliked seeing people go about their lives in random fashion; it was altogether untidy. Why, only yesterday

THE LEAGUE OF GENTLEWOMEN WITCHES

Mrs. Pettifer herself had been predicted by various cards, crystals, and passing clouds to spend the week playing tennis, buying that charming pink hat in Harrod's, and alas, having afternoon tea with Judith.

"Lettice could at least have waited until I was on my honeymoon to announce her prophecy," she said with a bitter look at her sister.

Miss Plim would have shrugged had that not been unladylike (and rather difficult to do when one's posture is even stiffer than an Englishman's upper lip). "There was no time to waste. Rumor had it Margaret Cuttle was about to pay a medium to predict her granddaughter was the One. Can you imagine anything so unscrupulous?"

Mrs. Pettifer thought of Lettice's body in its blood-soaked bed, and decided changing the subject was advisable. "If you feared Charlotte marrying," she said, "why did you insist on her receiving such a thorough education?"

"The risk was necessary. Even if she weren't the Prophesized One, Charlotte is a Plim, and therefore needed to be educated with her heritage in mind."

Plim women had been witches for almost two hundred years, although this did not equate to a blood inheritance of magic. Their power came from a Latin incantation Beryl Black had found in an old sea-washed bottle while digging a grave for her husband on the island where he'd shipwrecked them. (He asked her what the bottle was; she told him to go back to sleep.) After Beryl realized the incantation could move any object, regardless of weight, she used it to fly a local's hut back to England, where she shared her tale with the ladies in her book club. Thus the Wicken League was born. (And a subgroup of lesser importance, comprising ladies whose book club contributions had involved drinking too much wine and reading aloud lurid scenes from penny-dreadful novels; they degraded the art of witchery into the crude practice of flying houses and declared themselves the Wisteria Society. The Wicken League had another name for them, too impolite to record here.)

One of the first witches was Andromeda Plim, who ~~betrayed Beryl to the authorities~~ arranged for her darling friend's early retirement. Once Beryl was ~~safely tried and hanged~~ ensconced in the countryside, Andromeda took over her leadership role, and a Plim had ruled the League ever since. So it was an inheritance that involved blood, just not *Plim* blood.

Charlotte's role as the next leader could not be left in the soft hands of Mrs. Pettifer, who believed in such nonsense as "love" and "quality of life." Miss Plim had instead installed a strict regime of intellectual advancement and psychological repression that would have left boarding school headmistresses weak at the knees. And the results had proven as excellent as her crystal ball predicted they would. At nine, Charlotte had poured a perfect cup of tea while sitting in a different room from the tea service. At nineteen, she had stolen the earrings from Princess Beatrice's earlobes without anyone noticing. She was the apex of Plimmishness. Put a glass or plate down in front of her and she would be utterly incapable of not moving it, even by the merest part of an inch. One day she would take charge of the Wicken League, fulfilling the prophecy and allowing Miss Plim to retire—i.e., stay on ruling from behind the scenes until she was at last dragged away to her grave.

"I should like to see Lottie happy," Mrs. Pettifer said with another sigh.

"You would," Miss Plim muttered sourly. She reached for a new sandwich but withdrew her hand empty. "Caviar. Really, Delphine, what is with this nautical theme? Do you not have any good, sensible Marmite?"

Just then came a banging of the front door, and footsteps hurried across the entrance hall. The ladies glimpsed a gray-clad figure dashing past the drawing room.

"Charlotte?" Miss Plim called, her voice as sharp as a hook. "Is that you?"

The momentary silence seemed to wince.

“Charlotte,” Mrs. Pettifer repeated in a wistful maternal tone, which is far worse than sharpness, for it can be ignored only at the cost of crippling guilt. “Your aunt is visiting. Come and say hello.”

A woman stepped into the doorway, bright-faced and breathing a little too fast for good manners. “My word!” Miss Plim ejaculated with astonishment. “You look as if you’ve emerged from a hurricane.”

Charlotte touched the one loose strand of hair fallen from beneath her hat. The hat itself was tilted; a few creases marred her skirt. “I took an unfamiliar route home,” she explained, “and found myself rushing. Hello, Aunt Judith. Good afternoon, Mama.”

“Won’t you join us for tea?” Mrs. Pettifer asked.

Charlotte hesitated, and the ladies watched her blink as she tried to contrive a good excuse. But failing to do so, she came to sit at the table with that particularly exquisite graciousness, which screams reluctance. “What have you been up to?” her mother asked, passing her a teacup.

“Up to?” The cup shook in Charlotte’s hand. She set it down firmly and smiled. “Nothing. That is to say, plodding along as normal, feet on the ground, quite boring, really.”

“Did you go to St. James’s as you planned?” Miss Plim inquired.

“Briefly,” Charlotte said—and then unaccountably flushed. “I mean, only for a moment. Just in and out. Saw no one special, talked to no one, please pass the milk.”

Mrs. Pettifer eyed her daughter with concern as she incanted the small silver jug across the table. “Are you quite the thing, dear?”

Charlotte smiled again. “Yes. Of course. How was your own morning?”

“I have been busy planning tonight’s dinner party and making sure Cook ordered plenty of pumpkins for the soup Lady Montague especially loves.”

Suddenly, Mrs. Pettifer and Miss Plim gasped in unison. Miss

Plim dropped the sandwich she was about to not eat; Mrs. Pettifer laid a hand against her lace-swathed bosom.

“Is something the matter?” Charlotte asked as she anxiously returned their stares.

“I think you are the one to tell us that,” Miss Plim said.

“Dear,” Mrs. Pettifer whispered, “you have just poured the milk into your cup—before the tea!”

Charlotte looked into her cup and blanched. “I beg your pardon,” she said. “It has been a difficult—which is to say, a boring morning that has quite dulled my senses.”

“Ahem.”

The three ladies looked up to see the imperious form of Woollery, the Pettifer butler, possessing the doorway. “Miss Gloughenbury,” he announced.

Miss Plim and Mrs. Pettifer exchanged a glance. Although neither spoke, the former’s pained smile and the latter’s leaping eyebrows provided eloquence enough. A middle-aged woman sailed past Woollery in a magnificence of lace, ruffles, stripes, and beads. She carried a small white poodle also dressed to within what would have been an inch of its life were it not actually dead and taxidermied.

“Darlings, how lovely to see you,” the woman declared. Her voice was so cultured, every vowel had its own bustle and feathered hat. Her face was a rictus varnished with the sort of glossy health obtainable only from jars.

The three ladies murmured in response.

“Although I fear I cannot entirely see you with all this light.” She raised a gloved hand to shield her eyes. “How brave you are to keep your drawing room curtains open. Alas, my own complexion is too refined for me to risk doing such a thing.”

“You do use adjectives in the most charmingly obverse way, Maud dear,” Miss Plim replied.

“Darling! And you—”

“Won’t you have this seat, Miss Gloughenbury?” Charlotte said, standing. “I must be getting on.”

“Do stay,” Miss Gloughenbury said, and Charlotte was obliged to stop halfway to the door or else be rude. “You will want to hear what I have to tell your mother and aunt.”

“Oh?” Charlotte smiled in mild inquiry.

“Yes, I rushed here straight from St. James’s to share it!”

“Why, Charlotte was on St. James’s Street just this very hour,” Mrs. Pettifer said delightedly.

“Darling girl!” Miss Gloughenbury stretched her smile to show fretfulness. “How could you? I say, how ever could you do it?”

“Um,” Charlotte said.

“Surely everyone knows St. James’s Street is not the place for nice ladies after noon. Hm? Hm?” She looked about the company for agreement, although showed no actual interest in the results. “All those gentleman’s clubs corrupt the feminine soul.”

“Nonsense,” Miss Plim interjected. In fact, she agreed about the unsuitability of St. James’s Street for lady pedestrians, but Miss Gloughenbury might have said Plims were equal to queens and she’d have declared it nonsense. The two ladies had been in dispute ever since attending a soiree in the same dress (that is, not together in the same dress, which would have represented a whole different kind of rivalry, but each in a copy of the other’s) and for the past several years had only refrained from maiming each other by instead using charities in a proxy war of spiteful generosity and benevolence. That it had inadvertently led to lives being saved, and each lady being awarded medals, was a consequence neither regarded, except to ensure their next donation was even more medal-worthy than the other’s had been.

Miss Plim produced from a secret pocket a red-handled device from which she extracted a tiny broom and proceeded to sweep imag-

inary crumbs from the tea table. This both calmed her feelings and gave her an excuse not to look at Miss Gloughenbury. "I believe a modern, independent woman should go wherever she pleases," she lied.

"Including into the air?" Miss Gloughenbury asked.

Miss Plim's broom flicked a teaspoon from the table. "Well of course not that. One cannot condone piratic behavior."

"Exactly, darling. Which is why I came at once to tell you—"

Suddenly Charlotte coughed. Miss Plim looked up in time to see a bronze statuette on the mantelpiece behind Miss Gloughenbury become liberated from its position and speed toward the lady's head. Only a heroic dash by Woollery, who grabbed the statuette mid-flight, prevented the lady from being brained.

"I do beg your pardon," Charlotte said.

"That's all right, dear," Mrs. Pettifer replied, smiling at her daughter. "Who amongst us hasn't accidentally coughed the incantation?"

"As I was saying," Miss Gloughenbury continued, patting her dog peevishly. "I was on my way to the haberdashers to steal a new ribbon for Barker here when my passage was diverted by a terrible traffic accident on King Street. Pumpkins broken all over the road."

Mrs. Pettifer ejected from her chair in shock. "Egads, that is indeed terrible! Pumpkins? Are you certain?"

"I'm sure even Miss Gloughenbury can identify pumpkins," Miss Plim said, although the compliment was so tinged with doubt as to make it clearly, but deniably, an insult.

Miss Gloughenbury deigned to ignore this. "I am afraid the news gets worse, Delphine. A rather formidable looking pirate chap could be seen nearby, talking to—"

Again Charlotte coughed. Woollery rushed across the room and, thanks to a nimble leap, caught a large ornamental wreath that was wheeling from the wall toward Miss Gloughenbury's back.

"It seems you could do with a pastille, darling," the lady murmured.