

CHAPTER 1

In Which We Catch Up with Ourselves

Emmaline Cayley was packing for the trip. Comb, brush, toothpowder, sensible thick stockings, a hat that wouldn't blow away. She was not a froufrou sort of girl. She was a pioneer of aviation. Her mother's attempts to make her ladylike had been a complete failure. So everything went into one bag. She'd returned from London the day before, which made getting ready easy. What was much more difficult was deciding which of her scientific materials to bring along. Not just the notebooks and reference volumes but the tools and plans and all the waxed fabric, wooden struts, leather straps and metal thingumajigs (all of which she knew the names of) that were the raw materials for a flying machine.

Froufrou girls did not build aeronautical devices.

Emmaline sighed. It was ridiculous to take the makings of a gliding contraption with her. The trip was a winter holiday to a place as yet unknown, taken at short notice. It was more important to have mittens than her notes about a Russian inventor who might have flown for fourteen seconds in 1872. Still, she tucked the copy of Professor Octave Chanute's *Progress in Flying Machines*, borrowed from Mr. Sherlock Holmes, inside her valise. She'd need some light reading on the train.

So, she was packed to leave. It had taken her fifteen minutes to get ready.

In the next room Princess Purnah was jamming her own choice of travel necessities into a suitcase. Emmaline could see that Purnah had no gift for packing. One might think that a princess would have relied on servants to pack for her, but Emmaline suspected that in Purnah's strange and ferocious homeland, nestled beneath the high Frizzibuttok Mountains, members of royal families traveled at the head of marauding bands of raiders or were trussed up as captives. Suitcases didn't come into it.

"Eeek!" said Purnah. "Cannot closings without squishy! Oople!"

Purnah was thirteen, as far as anyone could work out, and had learned English simply by overhearing it spoken while pretending that she didn't understand a word. The result was that she used it in a wildly ungrammatical way with lots of curses and threats in her own language. She spoke in Chiligrity, a tongue unknown to almost everyone anywhere but very well provided with curses and threats.

It was the middle of November, and they were running away from home. That had been Mr. Holmes's idea. A series of events had taken place in which agents of what the newspapers would call "a Foreign Power" had tried to kidnap Princess Purnah. This had involved a considerable amount of hurtling about the country in trains, cabs, balloons and steam devices. A man with no face and his masked minions had attempted abduction and murder. There was a Belgian birdman, the aforementioned famous detective and a lot of running and hiding. Buckets of rats, too, and a flying monster. Rab had said it was "champion." Purnah had said it was a "hooty-hoot"!

Emmaline thought it was a good thing that it was all over. Except that it wasn't over at all.

The Mad Misadventures of Emmaline and Rubberbones

Emmaline opened the case to rearrange the contents. Purnah's suitcase was completely filled with a mixture of cheap costume jewelry, kitchen knives and smooshed cream cakes from the village bakery.

"I think you will have to wash everything, Your Majesty," said Emmaline.

"I will licks the cream off!" declared the royal princess.

Emmaline shook her head in despair and went back to her own room.

She had plenty of time to wait, as Professor Bellbuckle was busy putting out the barn. She assumed he hadn't meant to set it on fire.

Robert Burns (known as Rubberbones for his "indestruckable" physique) walked up the hill to Mad Mrs. Butterworth's house. He had spent the night at his gran's cottage, scratched the cat on the head and sorted out his belongings. He owned far less than Emmaline. An old sack contained socks and underwear, one shirt, a photograph of his mother, brother and three sisters, and seven paperbound novels with titles like *Comanche Jim Rides Through* and *Dead Pirate's Gold!* His grandmother had hugged the boy with a furious affection he hadn't expected and pushed him out of the house before she could burst into tears.

"I'll be back in a bit, Gran!" he called through the letter-box in the door.

"A bit" might mean an hour or a month when Rubberbones said it. In this case, he thought it might be a longish sort of "bit."

"Goodbye, Rab," she replied. She always called him by that name. "Yes, see you in a bit."

As he reached the Butterworth house he smelled something burning and rushed through the yard to find Professor Ozymandias Bellbuckle outside the kitchen door, drenched

in water. Lal Singh was emptying a bucket into the open doorway to the barn, and Rab saw blackened wood around the frame. Mrs. Butterworth, Emmaline's Aunt Lucy, appeared from inside the barn with a bucket of her own. She greeted the boy cheerfully. "Hello, Robert! All ready? We are a little behind schedule, I'm afraid." She pinched his cheek affectionately and then turned to smack the professor with the bucket.

"Ouch! What in tarnation was that for?" demanded the professor. He was from Savannah, Georgia, and most people considered him quite mad.

"Ozymandias, dear, when I say 'Pack up the things you'll need for a few weeks away,' I do not mean 'Please start a fire in your workshop and risk burning my entire house to the ground!' You see the difference, don't you?" She struck him again, although not as hard. He groaned nevertheless.

"I'm sorry, Lucy. I was making fireworks for our journey."

"Most people find it possible to travel without homemade fireworks, Ozymandias. I've spent many a happy holiday without any sort of explosive devices in my luggage."

Rubberbones noticed that Lal Singh was trying to hide a smile. The Indian butler was always dignified, but sometimes he couldn't help himself.

Princess Purnah was the daughter of the late Mir of Chiligrut. Anyone with an atlas could find the tiny mountain kingdom at that point where India, Tibet, Bulgaria and the Russian Empire come together in a long knot of mountains, but they'd have to look hard. Chiligrut consisted of two mountains, a lot of wild people who liked to knife their own relatives and a ravine to throw the dead bodies into. Princess Purnah missed it very much. But her father had been killed — "fouly slewed! Porok!" as Purnah described it — by his brother and cousins, and most of the family

had disappeared into the mountains or perhaps off the mountains into the ravine. It was hard to know. Princess Purnah had been taken to safety by someone called the British Resident. Which might have been good, if the “safety” hadn’t been the most unpleasant boarding school in the whole world, St. Grimelda’s School for Young Ladies (established 1552). It was there that she had met Emmaline and, between them, they had escaped.

That was the problem. The British government — or at least that part of it called the India Office — considered Princess Purnah to be “an official responsibility.” Purnah had no idea what this meant. Emmaline thought it meant that the government was a sort of nanny, although a rather vague and neglectful one. The India Office had placed Purnah at “St. Grim’s,” and demanded that she go back there. There were letters inside file folders. Fees had been paid. Documents had been signed. It was all settled.

“Pish that!” said Princess Purnah. “Tikkir the lots of ’em! I no go backs. I stayings with my friends Emmaline Cay-Lee and Errand Boy.”

That was fine with Emmaline and Rab (“Errand Boy”) and, more importantly, with Aunt Lucy, who had a house in the Yorkshire village of Lower Owlthwaite. Aunt Lucy seemed to think that you could take in stray princesses like lost kittens. But it was not acceptable to Mr. Botts of the India Office or to his superiors. Mr. Botts expected the princess to return to the school. So did the headmistress, the ferocious Mrs. Wackett, who didn’t like it at all when “gels” tried to escape. St. Grimelda’s had a reputation to uphold. No prison in Great Britain had a record like St. Grim’s; Mrs. Wackett wasn’t about to let “that chit of a foreign gel” go free. So Mr. Sherlock Holmes (a friend of the family) suggested that it might be a good idea if Aunt Lucy took the princess — indeed, the entire household — away for a while until things quieted down.

But where to go? Winter was coming. Aunt Lucy said she had money hidden in a pillowcase for this sort of emergency. Emmaline wondered whether she had money marked for different kinds of emergencies, like “the bag of cash in case I have to run off with a foreign princess.” Maybe she did.

“Everyone come up with places we should visit,” Aunt Lucy had ordered on the train back from London. They all wrote down three suggestions and put them in Rab’s battered top hat. Princess Purnah scribbled “Chiligrít” on each of her papers. Rab’s choices were “Africa,” “Antarctica” and “Birmingham.” The others kept theirs secret. Emmaline saw that Professor Bellbuckle had put down his hometown; she didn’t say anything, although she knew that his family sent him money not to come back there.

Lal Singh, the ex-soldier from India who acted as butler and occasional bodyguard, had said that he would go wherever the Memsahib, Mrs. Butterworth, went; it was he that drew the “winning” suggestion from the hat. But he hadn’t said what it was.



The sun had gone down over London. Two men waited in an alley that reeked of horse droppings and stale urine. They were physically as different as could be: one was a giant; the other was miniature in stature and build.

The little man spoke softly. “Cor! Stinks a bit ’ere, dunnit? He’ll be along any time now. It’s his regular short-cut ’ome. Fat man with skinny legs, it says ’ere. Wears an overcoat and a cricket cap. Squeaks for no reason, like a mouse. Twitches a bit when he walks, talks to himself. Got the chloroform pad ready?”

The giant nodded in affirmation.

A minute later a person matching this description stepped into the alley, mumbling under his breath.

The small fellow stepped in front of him. “Good evening!”

he said. “Am I addressing the famous Professor Cavor? The inventor of the anti-gravity alloy known as Cavorite?”

“Ah, um, yes, I am he,” stuttered the man in the cricket cap. “Can I help you?”

“You can accompany me!” replied the little man.

As Professor Cavor peered at him in confusion, squeaking faintly, the giant emerged from the shadows with surprising agility and stepped behind the scientist. With a swift motion he seized Cavor and pressed a pad over his mouth and nose. The noxious smell of chloroform mixed with the alley’s stench. Within seconds the inventor of Cavorite fell unconscious. Then he was laid out in a traveling trunk and lifted onto a wagon.

“Off to Scotland, Professor,” sneered the little man.

“Good work, Titch!”

The giant sniffed at this nickname, which meant “tiny” in the slang of the streets. “All right, Hercules,” he replied in a voice as soft as a choirboy.

