

## ***Etiquette & Espionage: Finishing School***

**By Gail Carriger**

### **The Correct Configuration of a Finishing School**

My goodness,” said Sophronia. “It looks like a caterpillar that has overeaten.”

And it did. It wasn’t so much a dirigible as three dirigibles mashed together to form one long chain of oblong, inflated balloons. Below them dangled a multilevel series of decks, most open to the air, but some closed off, with windows reflecting back the dying sun. At the back, a colossal set of propellers churned slowly, and above them billowed a massive sail—probably more for guidance than propulsion. A great quantity of steam wafted out from below the lower back decks, floating away to join the mist as if responsible for creating it. Black smoke puffed sedately out of three tall smokestacks.

Sophronia was enchanted. It was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen, and entirely unlike any of the finishing schools she had ever heard of, which were mostly—according to her sisters—inside castles in Switzerland. She did not, however, want to admit to being enchanted, as this seemed childish, so instead, she said casually, “It’s much bigger than I expected.”

“It’s very high up, isn’t it?” added Dimity nervously.

As the carriage drew closer, Sophronia realized that the floating academy was moving much faster than she had initially thought. It was probably riding the stiff wind that seemed to rush over Dartmoor constantly, tilting small trees into lopsidedness. Just when she thought they might actually catch it, the horses screamed in terror and the carriage jerked to a stop.

The door burst open. A young man stood before them. He was a tall, swarthy fellow of the type that Petunia would swoon over; rakishly handsome in a floppy way. He was wearing a black silk top hat and a greatcoat that covered him from neck to ankle. *Papa would call him a "young blunt" in a disgusted tone of voice.* Sophronia was briefly afraid that this was some new form of flywayman—except that he wore no goggles and was grinning at them.

"Ladies!"

Monique colored becomingly. "Captain."

"Winds are fierce this evening. Can't float down for a pickup. You ladies will have to wait until after sunset, then I'll give you a lift."

"Oh." Monique's delicate little nose wrinkled. "Must we?"

The young man's cheerful expression didn't falter under the weight of her dissatisfaction. "Yes."

"Oh, very well." Monique gave the man her hand and he helped her down.

He did not turn to accompany her, instead looking inquiringly at Dimity and Sophronia. "Ladies. No time like the present."

Dimity gathered up her little basket, also blushing furiously, and put her hand into the man's large one.

He helped her down and returned for Sophronia. "Miss?"

Sophronia busily checked the cab for any forgotten items.

The young man observed this with a twinkle in his dark eyes. "Cautious girl."

Sophronia didn't dignify that with a reply. She hadn't pin-pointed the particulars yet, but there was something odd about this man, aside from his being adorable.

Outside, the wind was biting, and the great airship was even more impressive. The horses were restless, rolling their eyes and straining against their traces. The coachman fought to hold them. There seemed to be no reason for their panic.

The young man strode forward to pay the driver. This only terrified the animals further. The coachman managed to take possession of his fare and keep hold of the reins, but only by dint of real skill. Then he turned his steeds around and let them have their way, careening across the heath at a breakneck speed.

Dimity sidled up to Sophronia and whispered, "Isn't he simply scrumptious?"

Sophronia pretended obtuseness. "The coachman?"

"No, silly. Him!" Dimity tilted her head toward their new escort.

"He's a little old, don't you feel?"

Dimity considered the age of the young man. He was, perhaps, one-and-twenty.

"Well, I suppose. But Monique doesn't believe so. Look at her flirting! Shameless."

The man and Monique were discussing the lack of luggage. With animated hand gestures, Monique described its loss, their recent attack, and their subsequent escape. She downplayed Sophronia's part and accentuated her own. Sophronia would have defended herself, but there was something about the way Monique told the story that was about more than ego.

"She's hiding something. Has been all along—and not only her real identity."

"A brain?" Dimity suggested.

"And *he* isn't wearing any shoes."

"Oh, I say! You're right. How peculiar."

"And the horses were afraid of him. Every time he got close, they shied."

"But why?"

"Perhaps they have equine standards—an abhorrence of bare feet."

Dimity giggled.

The man, apparently tired of Monique's tales, came to join them.

The older girl trailed behind him and finally remembered her manners. “Girls, this is Captain Niall.”

Dimity bobbed a curtsy. “Captain.”

Sophronia followed suit a second later with a much less tidy curtsy and a much less pleasant “Captain.”

Monique said, “Miss Dimity Plumleigh-Teignmott, full credentials, and Miss Sophronia Angelina Temminnick, covert recruit.” Her lip curled.

The man touched the brim of his top hat and bowed to each in turn.

Captain Niall had a nice smile, and Sophronia liked his boneless way of moving. But she had a sinking suspicion he wasn’t wearing a cravat under the greatcoat. Also, it looked as if his top hat was tied under his chin like a baby’s bonnet. Since she figured it might be rude to point out the man’s deficiencies in attire to his face, she said instead, “I do hope the coachman finds his way back to civilization safely.”

“Commendable conscientiousness, Miss Temminnick, but I shouldn’t trouble yourself.”

Behind them, the sun had completely set. The airship, drifting away, began to fade into the misty, purpled sky, becoming increasingly difficult to see.

“Back in a jiff.” The young captain ambled down a little gulley, disappearing behind a large rock.

The ladies could still see his top hat bobbing, but nothing else, and that only for a moment. The hat began to melt down and out of sight. *Was he crouching?* It was difficult to hear anything above the wind, and Sophronia’s ears were already starting to ache from exposure, but she thought she could detect a moan of pain.

Then, out from behind the rock, trotting up the gulley, came a massive wolf. A rangy beast with dark, mottled, black-and-brown fur and a fluffy, white-tipped tail.

Dimity let out of a squeak of alarm.

Sophronia froze, but only for a moment. *Werewolf!* said her brain, putting everything together in one split second. The lack of shoes. The full greatcoat. Now he was coming *at* them.

She turned and ran straight for the nearest coppice of trees, thinking only in terms of safety. She ignored Monique's instructions for her to stop. She didn't even think of poor Dimity. Her only instinct was that of prey: to scurry and hide, to escape the predator.

The werewolf leapt after her far faster than any normal wolf ever could. Not that Sophronia had ever met such a monster before. She had heard the rumors about supernatural speed and strength, but she had hardly given them credence. This werewolf proved all the fairy tales true. Before she had gone more than a few paces, he caught up to her and jumped over her head, twisting in midair and coming to rest facing her and blocking her path.

Sophronia crashed right into him and fell to her back on the rough grass, winded.

Before she could rise, a massive paw descended onto her chest, and a vicious wolf face appeared above her—black nose damp and teeth bared. The face descended and . . . nothing.