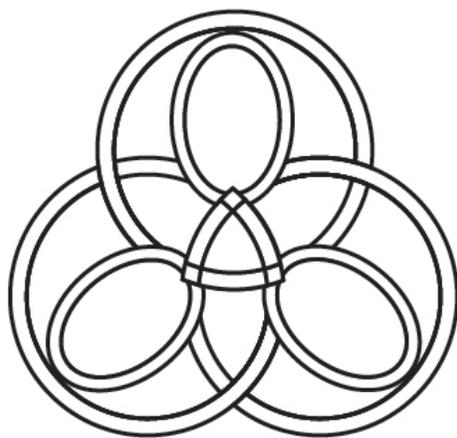


CONSTANTINE  
CAPERS

THE PENNINGTON PERPLEXITY



NATALIE BRIANNE



# CHAPTER 1

September 12, 1888



The sun rose in the sky over London, sunlight filtering through the leaves onto the pavement. Clouds and airships drifted about the blue, casting shadows. Mira Blayse stepped out of the shadows, the heels of her boots clicking along each cobblestone towards her destination, wherever that may be. She approached the corner, biting her lip as she considered the scenery.

Quite a bit of brick, some ivy, a few shops, but mostly residential buildings. Carriages passed her on the road, horse hooves clipping the road methodically. A paperboy stood on the corner opposite, yelling out one bit of news or another.

“Won’t want to miss this! More news in the Whitechapel murders! Just a farthing for a paper!” The boy called after her as she turned down the street. She shook her head and kept going. There would always be horses, and buildings, and boys selling newspapers. Another block passed beneath her feet before she stopped in front of a cafe. It had been a week or so since she had last ventured into one. Well-placed umbrellas offered amiable shade.

She took a breath to steel her courage and chose an empty table with an ample view of the street. Ignoring the chiding glances of the other customers, she retrieved her sketchbook from her bag and flipped through it to find a new page. She scanned the area for a subject and noticed the waiter approaching her table.

She closed the book and looked up at him like an angel.

“Eating alone today, miss?”

“For the moment. I’m sure my aunt will be arriving soon, however I’m certain she wouldn’t want me to wait for her.” It was a blatant lie, and she knew it. Fortunately, the waiter didn’t. He nodded, and the patrons at the other tables visibly relaxed. She had a chaperone coming, after all. It wasn’t as if she was a young lady out in the city by herself. Oh no. Not at all. The waiter took her order and hurried inside.

As soon as he had turned away, Mira felt her cheeks flush. She just needed to breathe. The hardest part was over, at any rate. Now she only needed to ensure that no one else paid her any heed, and that was easy. One of her strengths was becoming invisible; She had only recently become more adept at drawing attention to herself.

She flipped open her sketchbook again and cast her gaze to a gentleman a few tables away. He sat in direct sunlight with deep shadows outlining his jawline, his nose was oddly shaped (like a turnip, bulbous at the base with a point on the end), and most fortunate of all, said nose was set deep into a newspaper. Really, he was the perfect subject. The news article must have been spellbinding, as he was oblivious to her gaze. Or more precisely, her sketching his facial features as if her life depended on it. She added subtle shading to the sketch as the waiter approached her table again. By the time he arrived, her sketchbook was closed, and she looked up at him with as nonchalant a smile as she could muster. He placed a plate of French toast in front of her.

“Thank you.” She nodded to the waiter and handed him a few coins.

“Let me know once your aunt gets here, or if you need anything else.” He pocketed the payment and nodded back before returning to the interior of the cafe. She hastily opened to the sketch again and sighed at the smudges. She’d have to fix those later. The man wouldn’t be at his table forever. In fact, she barely had time to etch in the final details before the man folded his newspaper and left. She looked at the finished product disparagingly and swapped her pencil for her fork.

Even if being without a chaperone breached the norms of propriety, and her insides flip-flopped every time she told a lie, she did have French toast as a consolation. Granted, the reason why she stopped at this café had nothing to do with breakfast. And it was the same for the other twenty cafes she visited in the past three months. It just happened to be that cafes were quickly becoming her favorite place to people-watch and sketch. And if she had to break the boundaries that society had so painstakingly put in place around her? Well, it couldn't be helped, even if it was potentially embarrassing. Actually, no. It was always embarrassing.

Then again, society life was, as well. She never could remember all the rules and regulations, how to flirt with a fan, what colors matched, and when to wear what. This couldn't be more humiliating than the time she had tripped over her own skirts and spilled the punch bowl all over herself at Maureen Harris' last gala. It had been the last party she had attended, over six months ago. This was simply a way to see more of London, and to sketch new things every day. Recently, she had a growing interest in doing portraits; she just needed suitable subjects.

As if in answer to her thoughts, a man rounded the corner and leaned up against the building opposite, obviously distracted. He seemed to be looking for something. Perfect. She smiled softly to herself. He wouldn't notice her, then. She flipped her sketchbook over, drawing on a fresh page. He walked along the building, holding his top hat in one hand and as he ran the other through a mess of wavy, brown hair. She waited patiently for him to turn towards the cafe again, hoping this wouldn't become another unfinished drawing. He stopped at the corner, frowning, then turned back, resuming his position on the wall. He examined the cafe as Mira examined him.

He was well built, with an angular, clean-shaven face. His piercing eyes were curtained by bushy eyebrows, and light in color. Perhaps blue. She couldn't tell from this distance. His mouth was downturned and determined, but seemed liable to smile at any moment. His grey suit had silver buttons that gleamed in the sunlight and

drew the eye into his blue waistcoat and sharp white cravat. He couldn't be any older than twenty-six. She subtly finished his outline and started to shade as a carriage passed between them on the road.

Glancing up again to reaffirm the shape of his chin, she realized he wasn't looking at the cafe anymore. He was looking at her. Heavens, he'd noticed her! Blushing up to her ears, she closed the sketchbook and slipped her pencil behind her ear, looking away. Footsteps came closer, and she chanced a glance back across the street. He was fast approaching her. Biting her lip, she attempted to act nonchalant and invisible at the same time. When he stopped at her table, she could barely breathe with embarrassment, and yet her corset dug into her ribs as if she were hyperventilating. This was certainly worse than the punch bowl incident. Why had she ever thought it was a good idea to sketch in public?

Then he slipped around the table murmuring his excuses and thrust his hand straight into the shrubbery behind her. The pencil fell from her ear with a clatter, and she bent to pick it up, keeping her eyes on the man. He felt around for a moment and brought out a slip of paper. The man smiled, read the paper, then replaced it into the bush from whence it came. Mira furrowed her brow as the man once again apologized and moved back to the street. He turned in a slow circle, meeting her eyes, winked, then walked slowly in another direction. She focused her attention on the bush. Pushing the leaves to either side, she discovered the paper.

*"I have four faces yet cannot see. I have eight hands but cannot touch. I sit beside the seats of power. What am I?"*

She slipped the paper into her sketchbook, the chair scraping against the ground as she stood, looking around for the man. A grey coat flap disappeared around the corner. Biting her lip, she considered her options. She could stay at the cafe and forget this happened, she could return home, or she could follow him. As unladylike as stalking was, she opted for the latter. She hastened after

him, keeping a good distance, and tracked his path towards the Clock Tower, leaving the waiter to wonder what happened to her aunt.

The man in the grey coat strolled past shop windows and carriages, observing everything with a meticulous energy. As he approached parliament, his movements became more deliberate. His eyes roved over the scenery for a few moments before he pulled a small book out of a satchel. After consulting it, the man replaced the book at his side and proceeded to a tree. Mira slipped behind a lamp-post and watched him dig around in the dirt and leaves. Soon enough he pulled a dirt-ridden wrinkled sheet of paper from the roots and took it to a bench to examine it. He made some notes, then he put it back where he found it before he ambled off in another direction. Mira rushed over to the tree and retrieved the paper.

*Marjorie Castro*

*E. Elizabeth Smith*

*Vincent Holland*

*Borneo Treaty*

The list went on and on, with most items having some sort of note accompanying it. Descriptions of people, places to visit, questions to be asked. Some had “*Solved*” written next to it. Others had “*Resolved*.” Some were vague titles, while others were names of people. There were forty-two entries listed, each with a number next to them. Her eyes flicked to the last entry. “*Airship Operator*.” The note next to it read, “*Motive? Witnesses?*” Airships? She glanced up at one of the steam powered balloons above her. On the back of the paper, it read, “*Two more notes to go. St. Paul’s West Yard*.” She sat there puzzled for a moment and slipped the paper into her sketch-book. With her interest piquing past normal curiosity, she hurried on towards St. Paul’s Cathedral, hoping she could catch up with this person, whoever he was.

She found him walking away from the cathedral farther down the street. Rather than nudge around for details in the moldering gardens, she sprinted to catch up to him. The man sat at a table

writing in his notebook. After a moment, he ripped out small strip, set it in a potted plant and started off again. The last one! She snatched it up, disturbing a few leaves in the process.

*“I know you are following me.”*

She was certain her face rivaled the roses in the cathedral gardens. She looked up just in time to see him give her another devilishly handsome smile before he disappeared into the crowd. Digging around St. Paul’s gardens came to naught as there were no notes to be found, and she left before anyone thought ill of her. She turned back towards her rooms at Campden Grove, the diversion over, but questions still piling in her mind. Who could he possibly be? Why all the notes? Witnesses regarding what airship? She looked up at the airships drifting past above her again. Could he possibly be referring to the accident of 1870? No...he couldn’t be. The disaster was over eighteen years ago. And while she had reason to be curious about it, why would anyone else be interested? Would she ever get answers to any of her questions? She hailed a hansom cab to take her back to her lodgings. Probably not.

Church clocks across London all chimed together to let the world know the sun had reached its apex. And that meant the noon-day post was in! With any luck, a letter from her brother, Walker, was waiting back at her rooms!

Was this what she had been reduced to? Following suspicious strangers in the street and living vicariously through the letters of her brother? The cab stopped in front of her rooms and she paid the driver as she stepped out onto the street. Fumbling with her keys, she skipped up the steps and opened the post box. She retrieved three letters and held them close to her as she unlocked the door.

Her cat, Nero, rubbed around her ankles as she entered the sitting room. She set her sketchbook down and appraised the envelopes. One was obviously an advertisement of some kind, the next was from her brother and the last was from the Central News Agency. She bit her lip and picked up the letter opener.

“Might as well get the least exciting one out of the way, right kitty?” Nero ignored her and looked out the window from the sill.

She turned her attention back to the letter. The advertisement was for electric corsets. She grimaced. Corsets were bad enough without sending electricity through them. What would they think of next? She set the advertisement aside and picked up the letter from her brother with eagerness. She slid the letter opener through the top of the envelope.

*My Dear Mira,*

*I am so glad to hear that our Uncle has finally agreed to stop pestering you about moving back to Swan Walk. I believe these last three months living on your own have done you good. Although I'm sure if dear old Uncle Cyrus found out what you've been up to, he would move you back right away! I'm pleased to hear about your progress in researching Mum and Dad's accident. I always thought the story seemed a bit sparse, but with you on the trail we might find out what really happened. Let me know what the newspaper editor has to say on the story. Hopefully it will be good news to help you in your little investigation.*

*In my own news, my schooling is continuing to go well. Soon enough, I shall be finished with the general studies, and then perhaps I can convince our uncle to allow me to pursue engineering as a career. I am certain if you find out more about what happened to our parents, you can convince him that airships aren't dangerous in the least. In fact, if you remember, I wrote you all about the one I took to cross the channel! I love you dearly, my Mira, and wish you luck. Don't envy me too much. It doesn't suit you. Au revoir!*

*Walker Blayse*

She placed the letter back into its envelope and threw it on the table. Nero's ears perked up, and he jumped onto it. The slick

envelope skittered off the table and onto the floor. It was hard not to be jealous of Walker. After all, he had the opportunity of a lifetime to go and study in France. If only. France was the center of the arts, and before she could even pick up a pencil she had wanted to go. Unfortunately, France was one of those irrational dangers her uncle kept on about. For whatever reason, Walker could go while she was forced to stay in London. Nero pounced on the letter again, leaving a paw shaped indent near the seal.

She blew her hair out of her face. She knew the reason. Even though she was the exact same age as Walker, give or take a few minutes, she was a lady. Ladies shouldn't go abroad, at least in her uncle's mind. Blowing a strand of hair from her face, she tugged the strewn letter from underneath Nero's lean body and deposited it in a well-worn box on the mantel. The cat watched with curiosity before finding a stray thread at the edge of her skirt to paw at. Mira sat down in her armchair and picked up the last letter. At least her uncle allowed her to have her own set of rooms. And she was doing something Walker couldn't. She hoped. The envelope felt heavy in her hand. It had been several weeks since she had sent her question to the editor. Would this letter even have the answers she was looking for? She caught the edge of the seal with the opener and held her breath.

*Dear Miss Blayse,*

*I regret to inform you that we have no further information on the airship accident of 1870 aside from the information sent out in the newspaper around the date of the tragedy. We also do not have a copy of the newspaper available to send you. I am aware of several bound editions of our newspaper in the London Library at St. James' park. I recommend that you consult their facilities and regret that we are unable to offer more assistance currently.*

*Sincerely,*

*William Saunders*

Mira replaced the letter in its envelope, picked up the advertisement, and tossed them both in the direction of the hearth.

This “little investigation” as her brother had called it almost seemed like a fox-less hunt. If it came to nothing, then what was the point of it all? She watched the letters smolder for a few moments before perusing the spines in her bookshelf. *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Time Machine*, *Around the World in 80 Days* were all ways to escape her reality. Her eyes drifted to her collection of Dickens and Austen. Her fingers lingered over a particularly old, leather-bound book. With consideration for the delicate cover, she pulled the tome from the shelf and brought it over to her armchair. Nero hopped up in her lap, and she stroked his fur.

Her father brought the book back as a gift for her mother just before they were married. If she remembered right, it had come from Arabia or India. Granted, this information came from her uncle. She was young enough when her parents died that she didn’t remember anything directly from them. The book was small in her hands as she fondled the intricate patterns decorating the cover. She perused the novel, knowing she wouldn’t be able to read it. The symbols on the page were foreign to her, but every so often she came to a word circled in red. Next to each circled word or phrase was a written translation, presumably in her father’s handwriting. Her name was written in the margin on page 79 next to one of the red circles. The page was wrinkled and water splotted, but it was hers just the same. Sufficiently calmed, she set it on her side table.

It had been foolish to hope the newspaper would have any further information. She checked every diary of her parents, every stray note, asked her uncle as many questions as she had deemed reasonable. Still the same story. No. If she wanted to find any new information about what happened to her parents, she needed to find it herself. She could make the trek back to St. James’ park in the afternoon, but she had already wandered in that direction and didn’t fancy making the journey again.

She attempted to read, but the man in the grey suit kept entering her mind. She smiled to herself as Nero fell asleep.

He might have information too. She likely wouldn't be seeing the man again, but perhaps she could give him the opportunity. Tomorrow, she would go back to the same cafe and see if he was a frequent visitor. And then, as it was convenient, she would go to the library at St. James' park. Her plan laid out in her head, she retrieved a new book from the shelf and settled into the armchair again, content to envelop herself in the world of Elizabeth Bennett for the afternoon.