

By Olivia Bruni

Keen's Genuine Imperial Mustard

By Olivia Bruni [please see end for historical note and relation to theme]

I stare at the poster, my hands tracing the creases snaking over the grubby page. I have been sitting on my bed for an eternity now, folding, and unfolding the paper continuously, only stopping to look at the words written at the bottom:

'MEETING in the LONDON PAVILLION on MONDAY 11th MAY at 7.15 p.m.'

The details are already memorised - have been for a long time. I have been staring at the poster for the best part of this week, trying to decide whether to risk incurring my father's wrath is worth it. I have always been one for breaking rules but never before outright defiance. I do not know if I have the strength to turn against him like this. But then I read the words written boldly across the top and this time they stir something in me. Something rebellious.

Something dangerous.

I have decided to go.

I dress myself in my most practical clothes, though even those are hideously frivolous – women's fashions are so ridiculous. Why couldn't I have been a boy? I would have made an excellent boy. Day in, day out I am forced to strap myself up in a corset, the very bane of my existence. Why we women subject ourselves to such torture is beyond me. Corsets are not made to allow for breathing and of course do not grant the luxury of free movement. That particular privilege is reserved for men.

My bedroom is on the second floor of our house. It is rather large, with big airy windows framed by heavy drapes. It is wallpapered in a delicate flowery pattern that I absolutely despise.

Slowly, I crack open the door, sneak down the stairs and escape into the night.

There are more people than I thought there would be at the meeting. It is mostly women but there are also a few men. A buzz of voices and feverish excitement thrums through the air. Nervous anticipation is rising in me.

'I haven't seen you around here before. First time?' I jump – I hadn't noticed the girl who has sat next to me. Her voice is brusque, but there is kindness behind it. She is small, with petite, delicate features. Her eyes narrow as she looks me up and down, taking in my well-cut clothes and shining hair. I blush, but steel myself, dragging a dredge of confidence out of me.

'Yes, first time. I'm Lil. Pleasure to meet you.' She snorts at my formality.

'Margaret. But call me Meg.' She smiles at me, and I grin back.

A hush descends on the room as a woman takes the stage. I suck a breath in as I realise who it is. Christabel Pankhurst, one of the leaders of the movement, notorious for her violent campaigns. She is a striking figure, and I can see why she is so idolised by the suffragettes.

‘Welcome, ladies. And gentlemen, I suppose.’ A ripple of laughter spreads across the room. ‘Thank you for coming.’

The rest of meeting passes like a blur. She talks about votes for women, campaigning, protesting. I find myself joining in with the chorus of voices shouting approval and cheering. Her words light a spark in me. I have never felt like this before.

‘That is all. I am so grateful to everyone for coming. Anyone interested in more militant work stay behind please.’ People start to get up and leave. I do not. I do not want to go. I do not want to go back to the stuffiness of my house.

‘I see we got you interested. See you at the next meeting, I hope. Goodbye.’ Meg says, but she makes no move to leave.

‘Perhaps I should stay? What does she mean by militant work?’ She laughs, a light lilting laugh.

‘That isn’t for the likes of you. Go. Go back to your comfortable bed and warm fire. Go home. You’re too soft for that.’

The meetings become a routine. I have become excellent at sneaking out of the house. I start to wear purple, green and white and pin *VOTES FOR WOMAN* badges to my lapel. Every meeting I get more involved, shouting and cheering louder and louder. I make new friends and meet more people. They are all devoted to the cause like me. When I can make it, I slip away from the house to join rallies and protests.

When I’m at home, I have to pretend everything is normal. I have to listen to my father rage about the suffragettes and bite my tongue. ‘A damn nuisance’, he calls us. Christabel Pankhurst would be thrilled. That is the aim of course - disruption and chaos until we get the vote. My father is a Tory MP and is extremely conservative. He believes women, like children, should be seen and not heard. If he found out what I was doing, he would have a fit.

It all starts on a Monday evening. After the meeting, Meg approaches me. I haven’t spoken to Meg much since my first meeting, so I am rather surprised.

‘They want to speak with you.’

‘They?’

‘You’ll see. Come on then.’

She leads me to a room behind the main meeting hall. Three women are standing, all dressed in WSPU colours.

‘Hello Lil, thank you so much for coming.’ one of the ladies says. She is tall and statuesque and has a soft voice.

‘We have a proposition for you. We’ve seen you at the meetings and rallies. We were wondering - would you be up to doing something more...’ she pauses, searching for the right word, ‘...active?’

'Active?'

'Yes, active.'

'Of course, what would you like me to do? Set fire to a post-box? Break windows?'

'No, not exactly.' she says smiling. 'Though, feel free to do any of those – they are all so disruptive. Especially the post-boxes. I just love setting fire to post-boxes. It drives people positively mad.' I cannot imagine her setting fire to a post-box. She looks like the kind of woman who has tea with my mother. My mother is just as conservative as my father, but with an ear-splittingly high-pitched voice and a tendency to nag. She would certainly never be seen with someone who sets fire to post-boxes.

'We have a job for you. A very important one. You're perfect for it. It's dangerous, however. Are you up to it?'

Eagerly, I nod. I don't even have to think about it.

'Excellent.' Her face curves into a smile. She unrolls a map of what seems to be a cathedral or a rather large church, and a picture of a chair. I am thoroughly confused now. Am I required to steal a chair? I do not think I am quite strong enough to carry a chair, especially one as large as this.

'This is the Coronation Chair, under which lies the Stone of Scone. The legend goes that the stone is responsible for the luck of the monarch. The Stone was stolen from the Scots by Edward I who took it to Westminster. This is your target.'

'My target? To steal?'

'No not steal, bomb. You will bomb the throne.' My face blanches; my mouth opens; my eyes widen. I try to speak but no words come out. The lady laughs.

'We don't want you to kill anyone, dear. You know our rules: property but *not* people.' I swallow and try to speak.

'Why all this trouble for a chair though?'

'This is not just Britain's oldest piece of furniture. This is the throne upon which all of the past monarchs have been crowned and upon which all of the future ones will be. It is the seat of the monarchy, the institution that denies us freedom and suffrage. It is not about it being a throne; it is about what the throne represents. Our goal is to provoke outrage, outright.'

'Why me?'

'We need someone devoted to the cause but also of high enough social standing to be beyond all suspicion. You are the daughter of a prominent MP - no one will question you being at Westminster. We are all recognisable suffragettes. You will be provided with instructions and the bomb. All you have to do is place the bomb under the throne and light the fuse. If all goes well, no one will ever know it was you. Are you willing?'

I am excited, albeit a little nervous about opening the envelope. It arrived by post this morning. I have been waking early to get to the post before anyone else – I cannot risk someone asking unwanted questions. I never receive letters, so my father would be suspicious. I rip open the envelope and read my orders.

Your instructions:

On the 11th of June you are to travel to Westminster with a chaperone, (preferably a maid but do not under any circumstances bring your mother). You will have been delivered a hatbox from the modiste the day before, containing a bomb. You will find an excuse to visit the chapel of St Edward the

Confessor, where the throne is displayed. Approach it alone. It is immediately behind the high altar and is protected by a carved stone screen. You will place the bomb behind the throne and light the fuse. Leave the chapel - you will only have three minutes. Make sure you are not seen.

In the unlikely case that you are caught, the WSPU will claim full blame for the attack. It is excellent publicity anyhow.

Thank you very much for your service. We wish you the very best of luck.

The doorbell rings. I listen to the servant answering, and as soon as I hear the click of the front door shutting, I run into the hallway.

‘Is there anything for me? I’ve been expecting something from the modiste.’ I ask as nonchalantly as can muster. I am not the most accomplished actress.

‘Yes, miss, something just came for you.’

I take the package, nod thanks, and sprint up to my bedroom.

I open the hatbox with trepidation. My hands are trembling. I lift the lid and inside is a straw hat with little fabric flowers glued on. That was not what I was expecting. Very anticlimactic. The hat is very pretty, though. I lift the hat and there is a mustard tin. This box is full of surprises. *Keen’s Genuine Imperial Mustard* to be precise. Suddenly, I remember an article about a bombing at St Paul’s last year. It is a mustard tin bomb!

The pitter patter of footsteps approaching snaps me out of my thoughts. I put the bomb back in the hatbox and shove it under my bed.

My mother peeks her head through the door.

‘Everything, alright darling?’

‘Fine.’

‘You spend all your time in your room.’ I recognize this as the opening line to a lecture. She is gearing up for yet another speech about the importance of finding a respectable man and taking my place in society. My mother is quite desperate to see me down the aisle. I need to say something now or I will be stuck here with her for the next hour.

‘Tomorrow, I plan to call on Charlotte, mother. We are quite close. I am to help her plan the wedding.’

‘What a wonderful idea. What a charming young lady. You should take a leaf out of her book.’

Charlotte is the daughter of my father’s closest friend. She is about to get married, and it will be *the* event of the 1914 social season. It is all my mother can talk about. Not even the rumblings of a looming war in Europe can distract my her from upcoming nuptials. I despise Charlotte. She has fluff for brains. All she can talk about is ribbons and eligible bachelors.

Today is the day. I get out of bed quickly and get dressed. I pick clothes that say, ‘I am a proper young lady who has never done anything wrong in her life’. I have it all planned out. I will ask a maid to

chaperone me on a walk. My walk will bring me to Westminster where I will ask her if we can stop to visit.

Downstairs, I find Betsy. Betsy is the prettiest and youngest maid we employ. She is an accomplished flirt - I have seen her talking to the footmen – which may come in handy. I also know I can count on her not to ask questions.

I pack the bomb into a small silk bag that my mother gifted me for Christmas – I am sure that this was not the intended purpose for the gift.

We reach Westminster Abbey. I take a deep breath and walk in. The Chapel of St Edward the Confessor is quite beautiful. There is an altar, that looms up above me. In front of the screen separating me from the chair, there is a guard.

‘Betsy, I have a favour to ask of you.’

‘Yes?’

‘Can you go and ask the guard where the tomb of Sir Isaac Newton is?’

Betsy nods and goes to the guard. I see the guard smile at her as she twirls a shiny brown lock around her finger and giggles. He points to the other side of the abbey. He is engrossed in her and does not seem to notice anything else. Saying a silent thank you to Betsy, I slip behind the screen.

The throne is wooden with two magnificently carved lions at the base. Underneath the gilded chair sits the stone. There is nothing special about the stone, but having heard the stories about it and what it symbolizes, I am in awe.

But I have no qualms about destroying it. The only way to win the vote is to make noise, disruption, chaos. This will make a lot of noise.

I plant the bomb underneath the chair. I light the fuse. From this moment, I have three minutes to get out. I walk very quickly to Betsy, who is still deep in conversation with the guard. I pull her away and half walk half run out of the abbey shouting an apology to the astonished-looking guard behind me. In my haste, I accidentally leave behind the silk bag.

My father is reading the newspaper.

‘Those damn women. Wild, the lot of them’. He thumps his fist on the table and spittle flies out of his mouth.

‘Did something happen Father?’ I ask, leaning away from him slightly.

‘Westminster Abbey was bombed.’ I fake a gasp.

‘How terrible. Do we know who?’

‘Of course, we know who. It’s always them. Those *women*.’ He hisses out women, as if he cannot bear to speak of us. He is getting worked up now, and his face is turning a deeper shade of puce every word he speaks. I decide to feign ignorance.

‘Which women, Father?’

'Those blasted suffragettes! The sheer cheek! They bombed the Coronation Chair! They blew a corner off the throne! The king is furious!' I am absolutely thrilled. I didn't think I could cause so much chaos. How delightful.

'Do we know which suffragette did it Father?'

'No. But the police found a silk bag.'

'That is simply terrible, father.' I place a placating hand on his arm.

'Yes, darling. Thank God you are not one of them.'

I smile faintly and take a dainty sip of my tea. Tomorrow, I am going to set fire to a post-box.

The Coronation Chair and Stone of Scone were bombed by unknown suffragettes on the 11th of June 1914. At the scene, the police found a small silk bag, feather boa and guidebook. However, no serious damage was done.

A few days later, on the 28th of June Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia which led to the outbreak of WW1. The suffragettes stopped their campaigns to dedicate themselves to the war effort.

The Coronation Chair is still in use and was used for the coronation of King Charles III.