

Tête-à-tête

"Aaaatchoo!"

Boswell the bowler, startled by the unexpected explosive noise, jumped two inches off the shelf, landing with a thump.

"I am so sorry to have disturbed you Sir," declared the mortarboard. "I realise it is polite to cover one's mouth during sternutation; however, I had no warning signs. The dust here is intolerable."

Boswell sniffed haughtily. "No great harm done, I suppose."

"Since we've finally spoken after two weeks of silence, let me introduce myself. I am Morticia Mortarboard, known as Morty."

"I am Boswell, I'm not in the habit of striking up conversation with strangers as I am very important and prefer academic discussion; which is rare to find these days."

"Ooh, very la-di-da," retorted Morty. "I've probably sat in more university lecture halls than you've had hot banquets."

"Surely the phrase is hot dinners?"

"Well of course," Morty sniffed, tossing her tassels. "But you seem too pretentious for simple dinners. Did you know that by 1675, the mortarboard was standard attire for graduates at Oxford and Cambridge?"

"I had no idea," Boswell admitted. "Look, we are stuck in this musty charity shop for the foreseeable future and seem to have set off on the wrong foot. Could we start afresh?"

The conversation relaxed. As the days passed, from their top shelf vantage point they kept abreast of all comings and goings. They spotted the dishonest volunteer who pocketed the odd piece of jewellery. They also learned the "three-week rule" that if stock didn't sell; it was boxed up and shipped off to places unknown.

Each day at 5pm they returned to their conversation. Boswell explained he had belonged to a city banker. For twenty-five years he had crossed London Bridge without incident, until a blustery February wind whisked him into the Thames. A lady had fished him out and brought him here. "City Bank to homeless charity," he sighed. "What a comedown."

Morticia disagreed. "Aiding the homeless is far more important than sitting on a banker's head!"

She shared her tale of working for a graduation-wear hire company at Cambridge. "An athlete tossed me so hard into the air, that I became wedged upside down in an oak tree, and a robin nested in me! I stayed until the eggs hatched and the fledglings left. Eventually a tree surgeon set me free, gave me a jolly good wash, and brought me here."

Their friendship grew until the dreaded day the cardboard boxes arrived.

"This may be our last day together." Morticia whispered sadly. "I haven't even told you - I'm flat to keep knowledge safely inside the wearer's brain."

"And I have this bump on top to contain all the calculations that explode from a banker's head. Be brave Morty."

Moments before 5pm, the manager dragged a box toward their shelf. Just as she reached for Boswell, the front doorbell jingled.

A theatrical man waltzed in. "Hello, darling! I don't suppose you can help? I'm from the local theatre. I'm looking for two specific hats for our next production, a bowler and a mortarboard."