

She Brews Acerbus Potions

by Celestial Melody

Have you ever wondered what it must be like to rule over St. Mungo's Hospital of Magical Maladies and Injuries? Have you ever wondered what it takes to become a Healer? Have you ever wondered why we never hear about the Healers?

If you *have* ever considered any of the above, please straighten your robes, enter the dusty office of Head Healer Esther Pyrne, pull up an ancient armchair?but most certainly do NOT take off your shoes?and listen to the incredible story of everything Head Healer Pyrne lost, who she loved, and all that is involved in the brewing of acerbus potion.

Extracts of Camphor and Vervain

Chapter 1 of 1

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She had a penchant for sickness: healing *and* catching. To date, I have never seen anything like it ... and I'm Head Healer at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries! That, my dears, is saying something.

It has been, for many years, my personal preference to delve deeply into the background of each potential Healer who wishes to study and pursue a career at St. Mungo's. Though this isn't required of the Head Healer, I find a certain satisfaction in knowing whom I would have to deal with from year to year, day to day. In fact, I discover all manner of quirky, little secrets in this rather queer pastime, and Madeline Brentwall's file proved no exception to that rule. Indeed, she had a particularly interesting and captivating file ... even more so than others.

You can perhaps imagine, then, the time I spent perusing Madeline's file. In my quest for knowledge of the potentials, I found that by the time she was thirteen, Madeline...who preferred to be known by the nickname "Maddie"...had contracted the chicken pox five times and had a nasty run-in with a particularly vicious Devil's Snare and *enjoyed* it. Yes, the records actually included that on her file. Her parents must have been singular, indeed, to note their daughter's mood at the time of her injury. She was only six at the time and had apparently emerged beaming and thrilled at her near-death experience. Strange as that seems, if you knew Maddie, you wouldn't think twice of it. Not one bit. Oh! With the passage of years, I've forgotten. Maddie had also acquired pneumonia ... *twice*.

Therefore, with such a precocious nature, it came as no surprise to me that Maddie had been the first to snatch an important medical case in her former hometown of Edgely-on-Fennervale.

The first I heard of the recent outbreak of a magical strain of tuberculosis in Maddie's hometown was from her own rosebud lips. I declare, that child must have spent her nights scheming on how to procure the Request Charts before anyone else even saw them. Strictly speaking, stealing charts before the qualified Healers see them is not allowed. However, since it is highly unethical to probe other's dreams and thoughts, there is no way we can monitor either the sleep or waking moments of our Healers-in-Training even though they are housed in dormitories adjacent to the hospital and under our gaze twenty-four hours a day. I don't know that I'd want to either; I already have enough grey hairs and don't need to add to the proliferation of fuzz that already exists. It makes my spine quiver to think of those trainees' dreams. Ugh...

Anyway, each morning, all the Healers and trainees proceed to the Chart Room where health requests are processed and sorted. The Healers have first pick of the new charts that come in from all over Great Britain during the night, and the trainees pick up the leftovers, which are often low priority, mundane injuries. Ha! Listen to me. The Ministry of Magic's inspection team would have a community heart attack if they knew I was speaking so casually of disease.

"It doesn't do to be the Head Healer and have such a flippant view of medicine."

Yes, that's what they'd say...

To move on with my tale, Maddie is only a Healer-in-Training, and she shouldn't have been down in the Chart Room before the other trainees and Healers in the first place ... but it doesn't surprise me that she was. Again, if you knew her ... and I believe you will come to know her, you'd understand.

And so, with her rare though unknown talent for espionage employed, Maddie was the first to respond to her home village's plea for a Healer.

This did not make me happy. Not in the slightest. Maddie is ... not the most reliable of individuals. Rather, she's quite the opposite. She is careless. There is no reason she should have passed the personality tests required for becoming a Healer. She is uncommonly intelligent, she has ambition, she is charismatic, but she lacks tact and she is forgetful. There is no reason she should be here, and yet ... she is.

There are certain qualities a Healer must have, among them a thirst for accomplishment, a clever mind, a brave soul, and a friendly nature. Maddie fit all of these, but she also had so much against her that I find it difficult to imagine her placement in the program. But I, a member of the St. Mungo's Healer Qualification Board, helped to pass her anyway. Why? Perhaps, because I felt... No. I cannot say. Not now, not at this moment. However, I can, freely and without conscience, picture the mark on her file, shining and bright, an example of thoughtlessness at its finest.

Madeline Esme Brentwall:

One of the First Healers-in-Training to almost succeed in catching Mara Pestilencia's Tuberculosis during the Supervision of Head Healer Esther Pyrne. All thanks should go to...

Oh, but she would have dearly loved that. The pride of having almost died for, what was it, the fourth time? Oh yes, she would have enjoyed that mark on her file. To Maddie, it wouldn't have been a rebuke. Quite the contrary. The blot would have been a medal. Yes, she was that peculiar.

However, was I prepared to allow my youngest...and frequently irresponsible...Healer-in-Training to be put in such a dangerous position? I honestly don't know. I don't think so. But what eventually happened was my fault and nothing I can do now changes that. Nothing at all.

How well I remember that April day. April, the medical practitioner's least favorite month. The month of disease. I laugh bitterly to remember that morning of April the thirteenth when Maddie approached me, full of life and energy and bubbling over with enthusiasm, eager to either cure or catch that dreaded disease. For, upon hearing that her elderly former neighbor, the authoress witch known as Henrietta Jarbors, was ill and dying from a magical strain of tuberculosis proven to be fatal in nearly all cases, Maddie couldn't be contained. That inexperienced, eighteen-year-old, Healer-in-Training just had to be there. She had to try and save the poor woman. Either that or catch her own death. Perhaps she was a fan of the woman's work. I will never know.

Honestly, I speak the truth. With Maddie, one could never tell. She was peculiar, and this often earned her the enmity of the other trainees. But, because of her quirky personality, this hostility never seemed to bother Maddie. She continued to sail serenely around the hospital, advising copiously, pitter-pattering to and fro on her little feet...

I so clearly recall that girl, her richly-colored chestnut hair flying, close-set blue eyes sparkling excitedly, slamming into my office without notice or preamble. Ah, yes ... how clearly do I recall that fateful morning.

*

"Healer Pyrne!" she shrieked, her breathy voice barely containing her obvious enthusiasm as she gasped in fatigue, obviously having run the entire way from the Chart Room, which happened to be located in the basement of St. Mungo's.

Oh, dear, I thought to myself, what is it now?

Truth be told, I couldn't discern anything distinctly unusual from Maddie's behavior. She was always rushing one way or another, completely oblivious to the purpose and procession of others. For example, at this very moment, Maddie was dancing impatiently in front of my desk, hopping from one pudgy foot to the other as the floorboards creaked underneath her pretty, but plump, frame. She performed the same dance when she needed to use the bathroom. How was I supposed to know that Mara Pestilencia's Tuberculosis had resurfaced? How was I supposed to know that Maddie intended for no one but herself to attend the poor woman?

I sighed, knowing full well that I should admonish her. One must maintain some air of decorum. It's an unspoken rule: Head Healers must be dignified, courageous, and kind. What a load of rubbish. If my employees and patients knew what I was thinking half the time they're standing in front of me, chattering my ears off, they'd ... But I do not let them know. I can't; just as I could not, and did not, rebuke Maddie. In fact, I could never quite bring myself to discipline Maddie as she should have been. Instead, today, I simply looked at her, slight annoyance towards myself...not to mention Maddie...flowing through my body as she bounced energetically on her toes.

"Yes, Maddie?" I fought to keep the weary edge out of my voice. "What is it?"

So great was her desire to tell me...or ask me...she practically ate my words.

"Oh, Healer Pyrne, there's this person ... well, patient ... an old, well, actually, *ancient* neighbor of mine named Henrietta Jarbors. You know, the authoress of those captivating romance novels on Merlin and Morgan le Fay?"

Yes, I'd heard of them. They were rubbish. Just the type of book I'd expect a young, star-struck girl like Maddie to read. She plunged ahead anyway, caring not at all that I disapproved of her choice in reading material.

"Anyway, she has...Oh, you won't believe this!...she has ... Mara Pestilencia's Tuberculosis! Can I go attend to her? Oh, please. Can I go? I'm ready. I know I'm ready. Everyone else is busy and I know the area. Oh, please." Maddie squirmed excitedly, a hopeful look plastered on her round, dewily beautiful face. Her lower lip trembled with emotion she was trying to hide, her eyes were so bright they looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment, and there was a slight sheen of sweat dotting her upper lip.

One could always tell when Maddie was excited about something. Her entire body reacted to whatever emotion she was feeling that day, and everyone, I repeat, absolutely *everyone* could tell what mood she was in. That wasn't exactly a good thing and was one of the main reasons she was unpopular with trainees and Healers alike, but as I've said before, she didn't care. That was her problem: Maddie didn't care. She just wanted to prove herself, again and again and again...

When Maddie uttered those words requesting permission to attend Henrietta Jarbors, well ... that was where my problems truly began. To put it bluntly, I had doubt in Maddie's character. Would her lack of consistency and her impulsiveness allow her to objectively finish her goal? Although she wouldn't have been my first choice for the job, how was she ever to improve her skills if she was never allowed to practice? Regardless, this decision presented two distinct options.

On one hand, Maddie would be out of the hospital where, although she showed definite promise, she was constantly shadowing established Healers, giving unwanted though applicable comments based on existing medical books ... some of them written by the very Healers she was trying to lecture! Yes, Madeline Brentwall was a pest.

But, on the other hand, she was also a lovable, intelligent, and talented pest, and if she attended this neighbor, she would probably...with her luck and carelessness...end up catching her death. Despite her tedious manner, despite her endless commentary ... I did not want her to die. It would have been shocking if I did. I have had to deal with all manner of people for so many years, and I would like to think that I have become desensitized to the flaws of wizard, witch, and child. I would like to think so many things are true. I would like to think...

Anyway, these were the thoughts scampering like little annoying vale rabbits through my already occupied mind as I contemplated the eager expression on Maddie's pudgy face. She still gave the impression of dancing excitedly though her feet had stilled remarkably, and either she didn't notice, or I imagined the apparent despair etched on my features, but I felt as though my frayed emotions were fairly obvious. What was I supposed to say now? *After all these years in the wizarding world, all these years as Head Healer... and I'm still having trouble, still messing up!*

Reaching up a hand, I massaged my head, grimacing as my fingernails snagged on the broken strands of fuzzy hair. It had been a long time since I'd bothered with my appearance. It didn't matter anymore, but what *did* matter was that Maddie was still doing her little minuet in front of my desk, and I needed her out of my office now. *Oh, ye gods!* I thought to myself, refusing to look at Maddie's hopeful countenance. *What have I done to deserve Maddie?*

However, oblivious to my thoughts, Maddie opened her mouth hesitantly, her fleshy chin wobbling slightly. She didn't say anything in response to my distracted silence, as was usually her custom to break through awkward pauses in conversation. This, under any other circumstance than this one, would have been enough to thoroughly surprise me. Maddie was never quiet. She must really want this assignment. Did I mention that, not only is Maddie an insufferable know-it-all, she is also a supremely annoying chatterbox as well?

Finally I realized that now was the time to refuse her request. I looked at her gravely, determined to decline her appeal. I wasn't going to allow one of the most inexperienced Healers out in the 'field.' There was no reason for her to embarrass the entire Hospital and die in the process. No reason at all. None. But, again, I was fooling myself, for, seeing her happy, waiting expression, I didn't know how I could possibly rebuff her. I have a soft spot for Maddie, she so reminds me of someone else I knew. Long ago. Someone, who at that age...

"Can I go?" Obviously the bonding silence was too much for her. The hasty words were blurted out as if unstoppable. I pasted a façade of amazement on my face and stared down my nose at Maddie, whose own face was contorted in surprise, her hands clutched to her throat as if that could rectify her mistake. I nearly laughed, I'm ashamed to say, because she looked hysterically funny, her eyes bulging, terrified that she might lose the assignment, which, I must admit, she already had though I was not prepared yet to admit it. Again, choosing not to rebuke her for her impertinence...which was extensive and began the moment she rushed into my office...my eyes wandered once more away from the anxious young woman standing nervously in front of my cluttered desk.

Oh, Maddie. I rolled my eyes heavenward, a gesture not unnoticed by the painted portrait of an elaborately dressed wizard. The canvas man was bedecked in hose of deepest goldenrod and sported a doublet of ebony satin. His sleeves were slashed with complementary golden strips of fabric and speckled all over with delicate fleur-de-lis. It was an elegant ensemble, but the man's expression was teasing and yet admonished me at the same time. *What are you looking at, Mungo Bonham?* The founder of St. Mungo's simply threw a smirk at me and turned his canvas gaze back to Maddie who continued to watch me fearfully. I was stalling for time. I needed to think about this. My forehead creased into oddly familiar lines as I pondered the matter.

Eyes narrowed, I stared up at the spider webs festooning the yellowed tile ceiling of my office. The hospital might be sparkling white in the wards, but my office was a relic of the old days. Maybe not his days, I thought, glancing pointedly at Mungo Bonham who was continuing his painted perusal of Maddie, but certainly not anytime close to today.

The pale, ineffective glow that lighted my dingy office, piles of scrolls, and Bonham himself emanated from giant, floating bubbles covered with the grime of countless years of neglect. Such a contrast they were, to the globes of the wards, which were sparkling white, shiny, new. Still, though, they light ... Of course they light! What am I thinking? All these years in the world of magic, and I still make slips. Sometimes, I feel that I've never learned anything. I'm still a student back at Hogwarts, then a student here at St. Mungo's; I'm a student in life. I will never find the answer. Will anyone? Does it even matter? I don't think it matters, because I will still continue as I always have. I will listen to complaints, I will continue my perusal of this ancient office, ignoring Healers-in-Training like Maddie as she makes a small noise in the back of her throat.

Accepting this truth, my body acts by habit and my eyes trace the familiar bookcases packed with tomes of medical theory and history that reach from the splintery wooden floorboards, up the six meter high wall, and finally meet the ancient ceiling. I hear Maddie give another exasperated sigh, but I take my time ... I'm still thinking.

I have been closeted in this office for thirty-seven years. The clutter is as familiar to me as the Healers who, though the years pass, never change. Their problems are all the same.

Perhaps, Healer Pyrne, this Muggle device, 'X-ray,' would be beneficial in our work; Healer Pyrne, I have a complaint against Healer Adams, she...; Healer Pyrne, what should I do to assuage the pain of Number Four in Room Eight?

And so on, and so on... And, as always, the complaints have come to me: Head Healer Esther Pyrne.

These grievances are ingrained into my memory as the steps of my movable bookshelf ladder are to my arthritic feet. And, no, Maddie's request is no more original than a thousand others before her. Yet...strangely enough...she has earned a special place in my heart, tedious as she is. But always, always, I must think of my Healer-in-Training's health first, and her training after that. Pity, now I've come to the end of my musings. Now I have exhausted my sources of distraction and must make a decision. Should I let Maddie go and try to help this poor, sick woman? Or should I keep her at the Hospital, secreted away from illness and evil. Should I break her spirit? No.

In the end, I let her go. I couldn't keep her at the hospital. I couldn't deal with her questions or her quiet submission ... whatever emotion she chose for that day. I couldn't deal with it. It wasn't an easy decision. I truly did want to keep Maddie safe. However, I also wanted her out of my hair. What a strange relationship I entertained with this young girl! The latter reason, eventually, won out in the end.

We'd had a recent influx in patients placed under various, oddly related hexes. Apparently, there was a wand-happy witch or wizard roaming the streets of London. I couldn't give the culprit the time of day, though. I had a hospital to run.

Though I didn't relish the thought of Maddie trying to single-handedly cure a terminally ill patient, I entertained the idea of her dashing around the Spell Damage ward on the fourth floor, handing out copious amounts of advice, even less.

"All right. You can go. But, Maddie..." I stopped as she burst into excited squeals and dashed towards the door.

Hearing the serious tenor in my voice, Maddie turned around, her smile frozen on her round face. "Yes?" she questioned, hesitantly. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

I didn't know I was that frightening.

Sighing again, this time in resignation, I climbed wearily to my feet, placing my blue-veined hands on my desk and preparing to continue what I had been saying before she cut me off in her anxious haste to begin preparations for departure. Oh, the work involved in treating out-of-hospital patients, I remember... But now is not the time for remembrances.

"Be careful." Those were the only words I was able to utter. The faster they were said ... the faster she'd be gone. The faster she was gone ... the sooner she'd come back.

But, thrilled not to have been admonished for her subsequent faux pas, Maddie beamed and bobbed her head. I inclined mine as well as she whipped around, flinging open

the door, and whirling away in a splash of lime green. I stared down at my own green robes fingering the satiny fabric disgustedly. Oh, how I hate these awful robes.

I stood there for a few moments, listening to the anxious clatter of heavy, excited footfalls retreating down the hallway. She was incorrigible.

Heaving a deep sigh, I turned away from the door and, titling my head to the side, peered into the gilded mirror that hung heavily on the peeling wallpaper of the archaic walls.

The sight that accosted me was endearingly familiar but oddly shocking, too.

My eyes were tired. Tired of dealing with Maddie and she knew it. Tired of the workload I had and I knew it. Tired of the Healers complaints and they knew it. But mostly, I was tired of trying to order my affairs and those of everyone else and getting nowhere. What had I accomplished in my life? Yes, I was Head Healer, but what about other things in life. Shouldn't I have experienced love? Marriage? Children? I had none of it.

At one time, though, those tired eyes that gazed sadly out of the mirror were bright and inviting. The blue irises twinkled in an odd blend of coyness and intelligence as well as a generous amount of sympathy. People have told me that my eyes are the reason I became a Healer. The established Healers continue to tell me that, playing up to me, no doubt. I don't refute them. There's no need to try and change what is already ingrained into their attitudes.

A wistful look shades my face and a nerve twitches in the corner of my mouth as I reach up a hand to my steely gray hair. Hesitantly stroking the sides of my head, my once deft fingers snag on the frizzy strands. Once, long ago, my locks were a luxurious midnight black. A beautiful and captivating luster shone from deep in my hair and caught the eye of many a young man. Caught the eye of one particular young man...There's no need to dwell on that. I've no use for bitter remembrances. No time to crush camphor, no time to brew vervain. Why make a potion of my dreams? Why make a concoction of my talents? Healing should not ever be coupled with bitterness. Why make it so? Why should I regret the triumphs of my life but for the sake of never having been loved? No. I had no time for love. It takes a great deal of hard work and many hours spent studying and training to become Head Healer. He would have had no place in my life...

I chuckle dryly, desperately trying to forget him. I succeed...partially. I have had many long years of practice. Why not think of something else? So I do.

For that matter, I thought to myself, turning away from the mirror and lowering myself, arms tightly clutching the armrests of my creaky, wooden desk chair. *For that matter... It takes a great deal of time and effort to become a mere Healer! It takes strength, dedication, and...Does Maddie exhibit any of these qualities?*

And right there, I'm back to the subject of Maddie. Why does she interest me so? Is it because she is so familiar? Her enthusiasm, her know-it-all nature ... that was me, fifty years ago, in my last year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, in my early years as a Healer-in-Training. That was me.

Author's Notes

This story is the product of a bunny who visited while I was ill with bronchitis. I have no idea where I'm going with it, but I hope you like it.

Credit for grammar and plot help goes to my fantastic betas, Evie who fixes my plot lines and catches my Americanisms, and Dani who saves my grammar. I am forever grateful to you both; much love, mon cher! :)

With that, please enjoy the bitter ramblings of Head Healer Pyrne and the ridiculous enthusiasm of Maddie Brentwall.