

The Machine Queen

Part One

The Heart of Empire

By

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Monday, 22nd May 1911. Embankment, London, Greater Britain

Lemuel Caldmore, erstwhile Commodore in Her Majesty's Cavoritocraft Airship Cavalry and Information Corps, walked along the Embankment, just downriver from the Houses of Parliament, watching the flotilla making their way up the Thames. It was Victoria Day, the 74th of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's reign. It seemed like the whole world had descended on the mother of all capitals. Despite having lived as a British Citizen for more than two score years, and being in military service to the Empire for almost one of those scores, this was the first time he'd been in London on Victoria Day.

Although nothing about his clothing marked him out as an ex-aviator, the respirator and goggles that hung round his neck marked him out as such. Normally for ex-airmen this was an affectation, for Caldmore it was a psychological crutch. Years spent in on the front lines, or behind enemy lines, either in the air or the ground, the threat of gas or mustard attacks ever-present, had resulted in him feeling exposed unless he had to hand the basic survival gear of his trade. He would think no more of going out without them on his person than he would the pistol hung in a shoulder holster under his left armpit.

Crowds pressed against the parapet all along the river but, finding a gap in the throng, Caldmore stopped and turned to look out on the river, giving the spectacle the attention it deserved. On his right stood the old Houses of Parliament, and across the river, dwarfing it, lay the newly expanded House of Representatives.

The new building had dark baroque edifices, towers stretching hundreds of feet high and at the centre, the forum, where leaders from all of the British Dominions would meet, and be joined for the first time by their allies, to inaugurate a true League of All Nations. It was larger by far than the pyramids, the Forbidden City of the Qin Empire or the Ziggurats of New Spain. Only one object on the planet stood larger and more forbidding and that was in London too, just downstream of where he stood. That was Her Royal Highness herself, Queen Victoria, a vast metal edifice of gearwheels and punched cards, whirring away with her instructions of state, or reminiscences of her Prince Albert or who knew what musings grinding away between the metal cogs. Caldmore could see the roof of her from his vantage point, glinting in the spring sun; the vast Babbage analytical engine that had caught the soul of the Empress.

The crowds cheered the barges as they steamed along the Thames to deposit their cargoes of diplomats and princes, emissaries and dukes, to the piers that served the House. Victoria Day was an opportunity for the countries of the world to display their wealth to the amassed peoples of the empire, and more importantly, through the flickering vacuum tubes of the Picture Telegraphs, to their own citizens back home. The airships of the various newspaper and telegraph companies floated above the river, jostling for the best viewpoints. This stretch of the river, and the northern banks held the various embassies and palaces from Westminster all the way down to Greenwich, and many of the airships above were also, probably, taking the opportunity to conduct their intrigues and counter-intrigues that kept the Great Game in the boardrooms and forums of state, and away from the fields of combat.

At the head of the flotilla, and already passed Caldmore's vantage point, were the Dominions of the Empire; New England, Australia, the African Territories, Ireland, India. People cheered

and waved their flags when they saw them, these were the most beloved of the overseas visitors, because these too were sons and daughters of the Empire. The people on the barges waved back; they were home after all, travelling upstream to take their places as the first and foremost in the mother of all parliaments. But these were of little interest to the floating journalists above. The Dominions were happy and prosperous in their places in the larger scheme of things. It was on the foreign powers that the journalists began exercising their powers of divination, hoping to glean some larger significance from what they could see below.

Here the Tsarina of the Russian Empire could be seen in her gaudy finery with her latest Rasputin; the Representative of the French Empire was austere and lacking in any frippery or companions in direct contrast to the renowned nature of the members of that court. There the Duchy of Warsaw shared a barge with the Prussians; the Confederation of Germany and of Helvetia had separate barges indicating, perhaps, a cooling off in their developing accords. The Representative of the ViceRoyalty of New Spain had permitted himself to be placed behind his French counterpart in the procession, which had been seen as a gallant concession by the popular press but an obvious attempt to curry favour by a certain brand of yellow journalism; the Leader of the Republic of Texas had his slaves on show, flaunting them and flouting local sensibilities, an indication of that new country's newfound confidence in the world. There the Envoy of the Qin Empire appeared refined and demure, beautiful and delicate beneath her parasol; there the two representatives of the Native American protectorates of Transylvania and Vandalia stood proud and tall, cutting imposing figures. The ailing German Confederation had not sent a representative, but the newly re-energised Ottoman and Persian Empires had. Caldmore searched for representatives from Acadia and Newfoundland, hoping to at

last see some good come out of their terrible war for independence, but to no avail.

Caldmore moved on, now ignoring the barges as they sailed up the Thames, moving precisely and determinedly through the crowds, the cheers and laughter beginning to grate on his nerves. He had retired from aeronautics, despising the exigencies of Empire and all their consequences. He had wanted nothing more than to retreat to the quiet farmstead in the middle of nowhere and watch the fields around him go to seed. Yet he had been forced back into this turmoil. He was in London with a purpose and the sooner it was completed the sooner he could return to his solitude.

Once he began weaving through the streets of Whitechapel, the distant sounds of the celebrations took on the aspect of an ethereal far-off sigh. The streets were grimy and close-packed. He imagined cutpurses and vagabonds on every corner. His military training was mainly aerial, patrolling the British-French border between New France and the Thirteen Colonies, or airlifting refugees from the Dutch East Indies, but the weight of the gun in his pocket was familiar; he had faced enough enemies of the Empire through its sights over his years of service to feel comfort from its presence. He was prepared for whatever London could throw at him.

Here was the address. A curiosity shop. 19th century bric-a-brac. There were large automated Franklins scurrying round that looked like they'd been built 20 years before, and tiny airships floated through the air. Emerging from a room at the back at the sound of the bell was Hannigan himself.

This was Shen, brother of the Reverend Hannigan who'd enlisted Caldmore's services. The Reverend was a neighbour of Caldmore's on the remote Hebridean island that he had made his

retreat from the world. The Reverend had been the first to approach him, intrigued by the Englishman with the strange and wonderful flying machine, who seemed determined to keep to himself. It had seemed incongruous and mournful, the elongated brass cylinder tinged with a verdigris patina nestled in a lee next to his crumblingcroft, like a shipwrecked galleon with sails collapsed, or a spent bullet ejected from a chamber, and the Reverend was curious as to how the machine had come into this stranger's possession.

The story was a blend of honourable and ignominious. With the cessation of hostilities in North America Caldmore's unit had been disbanded; they had no more use for experimental craft and since decommissioning Cavoritocraft is so expensive (and dangerous) it had proven simpler for all concerned to just let it lie in an airfield, its Cavorite shutters open, exposing it to the Earth's pull, and gradually rot. This craft had been the pinnacle of engineering, and indeed had been unsurpassed since its creation. Unable to allow it to simply moulder, Caldmore had resigned his commission, and then taken the craft with him. Though stolen would be a more legally accurate term, when recounting the story Caldmore had used the word "emancipated", not purely to dissemble, but because this was how he saw the act. As one of the very few test pilots who had learnt to fly the experimental aircraft it was probably no mystery to the authorities who had taken it, and so he had been lying low ever since.

His other neighbours had noticed the craft too, of course, but were not driven by the Reverend's curiosity to make the first steps in forming an acquaintance with the aviator, determined to not be out-taciturned by a mainlander, and an Englishman to boot. Eventually need had driven them; they had requested his help in providing transport when the seas were too choppy to make the crossing by boat.

Caldmore had initially refused them, but the Reverend had argued that to allow it to remain in disuse would make his actions in attempting to preserve it futile, and so, despite his desire to remain isolated, he'd made himself useful ferrying supplies from and to the mainland and so, more by inattention than by deliberate effort, he had become inducted into the community. Those trips ferrying livestock and crofters had become a regular feature of his life, the grey miasma of the North Sea relentlessly broiling beneath them, grey skies overhead, men on the top deck, exposed to the elements, with the sheep penned into the crew quarters on the upper deck, while Caldmore hid from all in the private quarters on the bottom deck, listening resentfully to the bleating above his head.

Most had respected his privacy, or at least had not been motivated to invade it, except for the priest, who had seen it his duty to assure the airman that his generosity was not taken for granted by inviting him to share a whisky with him in the evenings after his services. Caldmore had not wanted to refuse, seeing this as compounding his rejection of the man's, of the island's, faith, although he had none himself, and indeed had not even realised until that point that the Hebrides were Catholic and not Protestant. So with a resigned impatience had answered the door to this earnest, grizzled figure, with a bottle of Glenrandom in his hand and they had spent their Sunday evenings reducing the man of God's supply of alcohol and the man of the air's supply of misanthropy. Despite the occasional squalls of Christian proselytising, and pockets of war reminiscences, they had gradually tacked into the wind of their theological differences and moored at some sort of friendship.

It was after several months of these conversations, as the Reverend had come to crack open a new bottle of spirit, that Hannigan had made his request.

Like many of the communities on these remote islands, this one was no place for young people. The reverend had grown up in a small Irish village, and so was drawn to the spartan and uneventful life of the crofters as much as Caldmore, but he understood the allure of the mainland. There was no work for the young, no money, no place to call home and no prospect of any of those things until one of the ancient crofters died and left a space for the younger generation to fill. A year before, half the teenage girls had been lured to the capital with the promise of good work and pay, in one of the clothing factories, sewing pinafores and other fancier garments. They could work for a few years, earn some good money for their families back home, then return, or perhaps find a good match amongst the eligible bachelors of the metropolis.

The lure had been in the form of the shire-reeve who worked for the Laird who owned the island, a man named Sterling. The shire-reeve regularly travelled from island to island, collecting rent for his master and had moored up at the island at the time of the harvest festival. He had “mucked in” with the festivities, endearing himself to everyone there with how prepared he was to drop any difference in class and wealth and take his turn in dancing and drinking. When he saw the poverty that the people there lived in, he had taken pity on them, telling them of the wealth that could be so easily be had in London. The streets weren’t exactly paved with gold, but all one had to do was stoop a little and it could be picked up with no real effort.

The islanders had been won over. Six girls chose to make the trip to London to make earn a salary for the families. They were all at least competent dressmakers; a trade Sterling had said was in demand in the city and would be able to easily find employment. On his next visit, the girls said their farewells and boarded the boat for the mainland. A few short weeks and they would be in the capital. A month after that the wage packets would begin to arrive. They were never heard from again.

Caldmore had refused to ferry them. He had suspected the shire-reave's motives and wanted no part of it, knowing a little better what lengths young girls in the metropolis were expected to extend to in order to earn a little money. His warnings had been ignored, by crofters either swept up in friendship with the new-found powerful associate of the Laird, or tempted by the allure of some of the wealth of the mainland. When the priest had requested that he go in search of the missing girls, he had relented, knowing that of all those who lived on that island, he was the only one with the skills to survive amongst the people who almost certainly had taken the children.

So he had taken to the air for the longer trip to London. The cockpit at the front of his craft stood out like a glass hemisphere, melded onto the bullet-ship. From inside it Caldmore could see both the grey sky above his craft and the ground below where the priest followed his ascent. The surface of the bottom half of the craft was made of cavorite, formed into shutters that could be opened or closed. When the shutters were open the craft was a dead weight, subject to the laws of gravity. Caldmore now closed them, cutting off the bulk of the craft from the gravitational pull of the Earth. Another lever thrown and a pair of nacelles filled with helium extended from each side of the craft. Though small, once freed of the limiting effect of the cavorite beneath them, these had enough buoyancy to lift the machine in its current weightless mode, and so they did. Slowly the huge cylinder of brass, copper and iron lifted into the air, until reaching the desired height. Caldmore then retracted the nacelles sufficiently to create no overall lift, and set the sails to carry the craft southwards towards the capital.

Shen emerged from amongst the detritus of centuries and shuffled into the light. "Yes?" he asked.

“Caldmore, Lem. Your brother sent me. He sends his regards.”

Shen nodded curtly. He was evidently as silent as his brother was verbose.

“You know why I’m here?”

“Six missing Scottish girls. Recruited by a man named Sterling to work as dressmakers. I’ve heard of Sterling, he’s got a bit of a reputation ...”

He trailed off as he shuffled through some papers on the desk, holding them up to the dim gaslamp to read them one at a time.

“Anyway Sterling has been seen in the company of a factory-owner named Topperson. Gambling dens, that sort of thing. The grapevine you know? One of Topperson’s factories churns out pinafores. All the big dressmaking factories are in the docklands. Topperson’s is on ...” he paused, looking at one sheet of paper, then another, and finally declared “ah hah” and handed over the piece of paper he had been searching for. “What do you plan to do?”

“Just go to the manager and ask to see them. Find out how they are and get them out if they want to leave.”

Hannigan looked at me. He looked creaky, wrinkled, but his eyes said to me that I was a naive idiot.

“Really. And they’ll just let you leave with them?” He tapped the desk. “Topperson’s a pretty powerful man around here, and he’s got some powerful friends. Sterling’s just one of them. Any of them will hand you your balls if you just look at them funny. ”

“I’ve seen nasty pieces of work a-plenty. I dealt with them.”

Shen looked at Caldmore, reappraising him. He seemed jaded, world-weary. Incapable of any emotion, but there was iron

somewhere there too. And a bulge reminiscent of a shoulder holster beneath his coat.

“Seen action?”

Caldmore shrugged. Not worth talking about. Shen took the hint.

“Well don’t say I didn’t warn you” he yelled after Caldmore as he exited the shop, the bell at the door chiming as if echoing his warning.

The great thoroughfare that is Commercial Road connects Whitechapel with the Limehouse docks, the final step in the pipeline that directs wealth from Britain’s dependencies throughout the world through to the City of London. It is an arterial road, the flow of produce paid for with the blood of subject races throughout the planet, sucking everything into the financial repositories of the Empire. Caldmore walked against that flow, heading away from the seat of government and towards the location of the factory where his quarries hopefully resided. As he made his way along it, he noted the wealth of the businesses and properties on display, but hidden just a stone’s throw into the backstreets, all manner of destitution could be seen, a barely-hinted-at gridwork of squalor, thievery, and malevolence. That one could exist shoulder-to-shoulder with the other was the real crime however. The wealthy literally turning away from the poor, as they looked out from their front windows across the broad road, seeing only the wealthy on the other side, looking back.

The traffic along Commercial Road dispersed in numerous directions when it reached Limehouse; some carrying on towards the wharfs, others heading away from the river into the numerous small back alleyways and dens. Topperson’s factory was in a grimy street with overhanging metalwork crisscrossing above. Entryways? Transport devices? It was difficult to tell. There was

no nameplate indicating which of the buildings the factory was, Caldmore only had the address Shen Hannigan had given me to indicate where to go.

It wasn't a welcoming reception. Caldmore knocked at the door and asked one of the burly doormen if he could speak to the manager. The doorman grunted and turned away, shutting the door and found the aviator's foot impeding it. Caldmore continued the direct approach, he just wanted to find out if he had some girls working there. He started to list the names. He got half way through, when a punch to the stomach hurled him back onto the street. He heard a bolt drawn on the other side of the large oak door underlining with finality the end of the conversation.

The visit to the police didn't fare much better. Not only were they uninterested in the girls' plight, they warned Caldmore that harassing the manager would result in prosecution. The airshipman decided a less diplomatic approach was called for.

That night he returned to the warehouse. The metal trelliswork connecting the various warehouses made it easy to find his way in to a third storey entrance. Inside the warehouse, Caldmore stuck to the shadows so as to evade Topperson's guards. The movements came easily to Caldmore; night missions into Acadia running guns to the separatists, smuggling dissidents and slaves out of Texas, even sabotage runs into Florida, all had required stealth, patience, and nerve. Those battle-honed instincts snapped back into place, as if the last few years of quietude had never happened.

Two security guards passed close by. Caldmore ducked behind a crate until they were gone, then continued gradually working his way down to the ground floor. His intention was to look for anywhere records might be kept, anything that might list what had happened to the six girls.

At the bottom of the stairs he slipped between the large conveyor belts, halted now in mid-production. As Caldmore moved between the belts his foot struck something soft. He looked down and there was a girl, late teens he guessed, sleeping underneath the machinery. He risked turning on the Edisonlight he had with him, and could see that dozens of bodies were curled up between the conveyor belts. The workers were all here. They had no accommodation to go to but had to sleep in the factory.

The girl he had accidentally struck with my foot stirred. Her eyes opened, then grew wide with fear. She looked like she was about to scream. Quickly he knelt beside her. “shhh, I’m not going to hurt you” Caldmore reassured her. “I’m looking for the Scottish girls, do you know them?” Caldmore had the names memorised, in those persuasive drinking sessions with the Priest, Hannigan had recounted endlessly their names.” Amelia, Dorothy, Euphemia, Henrietta, Harriet, Gormuil”. From one of the darkened recesses he heard a timid voice.

“I’m Amelia”. Caldmore went over to her, trying to stay low, to avoid being seen by the guards. “I know you,” the girl said to Caldmore as he reached her. “You’re the man with the flying machine.”

“That’s me. I’ve been sent here by Father Hannigan. Everyone back home is worried about you since they haven’t heard from you.” More of the girls were looking at Caldmore now. Not scared any more, just hopeful. “Do you know where all the others are?”

“I’m Henrietta” another girl said “Where are the others?” Caldmore asked. The girls shrugged. “They took them away on the first day. We haven’t seen them since,” one of them answered.

“Look, do you want to stay here, or do you want to come back home?” Caldmore asked. He guessed the answer, but he had to

ask. The answer was a heart-breaking plea to be taken away; they clung to each other and began crying.

“What about the rest of us mister?” pleaded one of the other girls. “We don’t like it here, we want to get away.”

Caldmore was torn. This was getting out of hand. Where would this number of girls stay? How could he transport them? He looked around at them. Emaciated. Even in the dim light he could see the grime and cuts from working the machines, the look of despair and fear in their expressions. Caldmore resolved that they were all getting out.

“Anyone know where they took the other girls?”

“E’d’ve sent ‘em to that old slag Jeffreys” was the answer from one of the girls. “She’s got a place called Rose Cottage – it’s a knocking shop down near the East India Docks. Her’s always affer new talent. Ol bastard Topperson can make good money off of the pretty ones.”

“You can take me there?” Caldmore asked.

“Yeah but what’s it wurf?”

“Getting you out of here.” The girl shrugged. A dozen of the workers had gathered around Caldmore now. Looking at him expectantly.

“I don’t fink you can. Topperson has his tossers all round the place. Once you’re in you don’t get out, ‘cept in a bin.”

“We’ll see”. If they were all to get out, then there was no sneaking out the way he’d got in. Caldmore reached into his shoulder holster, hefting the pistol. He felt the old adrenalin buzz starting to kick in, a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach. A James’s Consolidator™, not the most powerful of weapons, but convenient, and simple, the small glass tube at the rear that

powered it required no ammunition. The power chamber recharged from ambient aetheric energies, as long as he didn't use it too frequently, it would not require reloading. For the occasions he found himself in a pinch he carried a spare chamber. He reached into the pocket of his trench coat, reassuring himself it was there.

“Ready to go?” he asked the girls. They nodded and he led them through the dark forbidding shapes of dormant machinery.

Near the exit he saw “Topperson tossers” lounging indolently. Caldmore motioned the girls to stay in the shadows and aimed the Consolidator. The nozzle flared and breathed a quiet “whump”. Abruptly a hole opened in the torso of the man on the right. No explosion, no impact. One second he was a man, wary but bored, keeping an eye out for escapees, but not really expecting any of his frightened charges to make this night the night they decided to make a break for freedom. The next second he was a lump of flesh, lifeless. The holed meat-shape slumped to the floor. The man to its right turned to him. “Bert what you playin ...?” he called out, the question cut off by the sudden absence of the top half of his head. The Consolidator was bloodless, the energies it released fusing the edges of the material it touched. But it was deadly.

Caldmore ran to the door, it was chained shut, but the Consolidator soon removed those. He beckoned the girls to run to him. A few hung back, scared to move. With no time to argue, Caldmore left them. Henny and Amelia were with him. That was the mission. Then they were through and out the door and onto the rain-soaked Limehouse back alley. The girls that had come out with Caldmore, mostly disappeared into the night. Suspicious of the strange man, since they had learnt to trust no man, they had made their own way. They may have had a family to go to, but the likelihood was most had been sold to the factory owner by their families. They were probably going to be on the streets, homeless,

starving and finally driven to someone as bad as Topperson, or worse. But for a few days they had their freedom. Only six remained with their rescuer.

With some relief Caldmore saw that the two island girls were amongst those that had stayed close. He was a link with home and they weren't going to lose that. The little waif who'd told him of Mrs Jeffreys was also one of them, and as she made to slip away Caldmore caught her hand.

"That place, show me where it is," he demanded.

"What fancy a bit, do you?" she jibed

"I'm going to free the girls there too."

"Hah you'll be lucky. They'm proper sorted there, not just a pair of tuppenny wankers on guard. There's an army there. They'll 'ave your guts for garters."

"Where is it?"

"Dahn the East India docks, pass All Saints Poplar and Her Maj, head to the river. Follow yah nose. When yah can smell shit, fish and molly, yer right," and with that she was off into the night.

All of the remaining five girls stayed close to Caldmore as he walked through the narrow passageways of Limehouse, too frightened to cast themselves adrift from whatever small aura of security the aviator offered. However, he was at a loss to know what to do next. He had expected to find the six island girls, determine if they had been held against their will, if so release them, then return directly to his airship, moored up in Cardington. Finding they had been split up thwarted these plans, as now there was the issue of where to take the two he had rescued while he tracked down the others. Then it occurred to him. Shen Hannigan,

he could take them to his shop. There'd be room there. They could stay there until he found the four remaining girls, then all of them could take the train out to Bedfordshire. He tapped at the miniMarconi on his wrist. Morsing to the operator at Bradshaw's to find out the time of the first train. 6.05 from St Pancras. They could be back on his Cavoritcraft before the daily work at the mooring site went into full swing. A clean discreet getaway.

Caldmore tried to keep to secluded streets on his way to the bric-a-brac store. A middle-aged man in aviator gear, accompanied by five teenage girls in factoryworker drabs, would have aroused a lot of attention if they were spotted, but they made it to Shen's shop without incident. After ten minutes of knocking and the girls calling him the diminutive Irish shop-owner appeared at the door.

"Shen, I've got five of them. I need them to stay here while I find the rest." The storekeeper complained, but finally relented and said they could stay in the store room above the shop. Caldmore emphasised that the storekeeper was to make sure no harm came to them, the emphasis provided by the Consolidator he still held in his hand.

Tuesday, 23rd May 1911 Commercial Road, London

Caldmore returned along the Commercial Road. The early hours meant that very few people now walked along the street, and those that did clung furtively to the shadows, off on some business possibly as violent and menacing as his own. He passed beyond the bounds of Limehouse and kept going, the Thames arcing away from him on the right in a huge semicircle that formed the ward known as All Saints Poplar.

The buildings on the other side of the road at that point had been demolished, so that at that point he was walking along an edge of a square. Victoria Square. Rising up at the other side of square,

and filling the whole of the piece of land delineated by the curve of the river was the huge monolithic presence of Her Majesty, the dark shine of the housing for the analytical engine a dead void in the skyline. When looking for a location for the device, All Saints Poplar had seemed ideal, surrounded on three sides by water, essential to keep the cogwheels and gears cooled, and only displacing the very poorest of London's citizens.

A light flashed on, hitting him full in the face. He glanced around but saw only the blank circles of picture telegraph lenses. They captured only a single image, and could only communicate that image by the laborious conversion to Morse code, and then deciphering the Morse at the other end, but technically this meant that within the hour, whoever the lens transmitted to would know he was here.

As he stood and looked at the edifice, wondering which way he could go without further detection, then felt a clicking from the miniMarconi on his wrist. He placed his hand on it to feel the small vibrations more accurately as it signalled. Automatically he translated the Morse code.

“Commander Caldmore. At last someone has crossed my path who could be of use to me. I know you Lemuel. You have intrigued me for some time. You owe me a Cavaritocraft, Commander.”

He tapped back. Dit-dit-dah-dah-dit-dit. “?”

“This is HRH. I monitor. I analyse. I chose you. Are you a loyal citizen of the realm?”

His attention returned to the large black wall that rose up on the other side of the square. It, she, must have been a mile on each side, and almost that high. A large display of lights appeared the towering walls that faced him, for royal declarations and speeches to the crowds when they assembled in the square. This was by a

factor of several billion the largest and most complex analytical engine ever created. It had been built as the body of the Empress had lain dying, and before the death of the body, every thought, every trait, every memory of Her Highness had been captured on quintillions of punch cards. Hundreds of billions of gears and cogwheels replicated the human brain, and then the cards were fed into it. The Soulcatcher 1905 project they'd called it. And here it was, still functioning. Still guiding the Empire. Could it be her texting him?

He tapped back. Dit-dit <pause> dit-dah dah-dah <pause> dah-dah dit-dah dit-dah dah-dah. "I am maam" Then "Is it really you, ma'am?"

"Look up."

The lights on the display flickered. There on a wall fifty feet square appeared the outline of two eyes, a mouth. :-/ then an eye winked ;-/

Caldmore morsed back. Dit-dit-dah-dit dit-dit-dah dit-dit-dah dit-dit-dah dah-dit-dah-dit dah-dit-dah.

The mouth became a smile :-D Her Highness was amused.

"How can I serve you, ma'am?"

"Wait."

Caldmore did as he was ordered, finding one of the darkened doorways to loiter in. After a few minutes a Franklin crossed the square, its mechanical limbs lurching, ungainly but fast. Caldmore looked about, cautious about whether they were being watched, but still seeing no-one in the square.

The mobile machine held out its single arm to him. Clutched in its "hand" was a small metal box, a glass circle on one side, a metal switches and a grid embedded in its surface.

“My eyes and ears, well - eye and ear” the Queen clicked into his wrist device. “It is the smallest Picture Telegraph ever created. Wear it and I can see what you see.”

Caldmore held it, and the Franklin released it. The device fitted to the strap of his Sam Browne.

“And if you are going to be my agent in the physical world, you will need a badge to let people know.”

Caldmore looked again at the arm and saw a small leather pouch hanging from it. He unhooked it from the metal limb and opened it. It was too dark to read the legend on the metal ornament inside, but he placed it in the pocket of his coat. It might come in useful.

“How may I serve, ma’am?” he asked, tapping at the mini-Marconi on his wrist.

“Will tell you how when the time comes.” A pause and then. “Stay tuned.”

Caldmore continued on his way to the docklands in an almost trancelike state. He looked again at the tall imposing dark structure across the square, still only a black shadow blocking out the sky at this early hour. Her Highness, contacting him? But for what?

The young girl’s directions were sufficiently vague that Caldmore spent more than an hour wandering through wharves and miscellaneous warehouses, numerous backstreets and more than once having to double-back to work his way around an inlet into the bank of the river at which countless boats were moored. But when he found the place, he knew he was there.

The smell of effluent from the river, the small cluster of fishing boats, unloading their haul already at that time in the morning, a

fleet of Billingsgate automated mongercarts whisking the fish away as soon as they were filled. And beyond them, windows lit, music wafting across the rancid air, was The Rose Cottage. Caldmore positioned his respirator over his mouth, thankful that he was always prepared.

The miniMarconi vibrated.

“Where are you?”

“In East India Docks at a place called Rose Cottage,” he tapped out.

“Ah I’ve heard of that. Edward visits that place. The randy little sod. You know he’s known as Dirty Bertie?”

“Your majesty?”

“I pretended to ignore his activities while I was alive, but death gives you a wonderful sense of detachment.”

“I still think of you as very much alive, ma’am” Caldmore offered.

“I exist as cogwheels, and wires, and Mr Edison’s wonderful valves. I don’t even know if I *am* Victoria any more.”

“You are the Empress, still, ma’am.”

“What brings you to this den of iniquity, Lemuel?”

Caldmore briefly told the Queen of his mission. How the priest on the island on which he lived had persuaded him to search for the six missing girls, how shire-reeve Sterling had betrayed them, of Topperson enslaving them in his factory, and then selling four of them on to this brothel.

“So you are here with honourable intentions, not lascivious ones?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Then I will help you in any way I can, Lemuel.” The Morse messages paused for a moment. “Then you will help me.”

“In any way I can, ma’am.”

The Rose Cottage stood squeezed in between two warehouses that dwarfed it. The warehouses had been erected as a gamble by the East India Docks company in competition with St Katherine Docks further upstream. The brothel remained defiantly between them, the Dock Company had tried to purchase the land it stood on, but it was too successful, the clientele it served too powerful, the tastes it catered for too niche, that even one of the most successful mercantile businesses as the East India Company could not compete with it. Its location was key to its success, as the gentlemen and royalty who were drawn to its doors were there, not simply for the reputation for flagellation and other forms of depravity, but that there they would rub shoulders with lascars and other foreign sailors that worked the docks, providing an additional frisson of excitement and a taste of the demi-monde.

The attendants standing at the door could be taken out easily, but that would raise the alarm, and getting any further would be impossible. He could pretend to be a punter, but then he would probably be searched and again, he’d get no further. The front door was therefore not an option.

The warehouses on each side would provide a more assured form of ingress. There were upper windows overlooking the roof. Jumping from those would be possible. Maybe.

Breaking into the warehouse was simple. It was well-secured, but the ornate decorations that signified the wealth of the warehouse owners provided enough hand- and footholds for Caldmore to make it up to the second floor and from there he found an open window to climb through. It was dark inside, Caldmore pulled his goggles down over his eyes, adjusting them to night vision.

Inside he made his way to one of the upper storeys which afforded a view overlooking the roof of The Rose. The gentility would have spent themselves by now, the whippings and forced deflorations, the beatings and tortures would have run down, their perpetrators out of steam. The keepers would be moving through their enslaved females, noting the losses of the day, healing where they could, but offering no comfort to their charges. Screams would be ebbing, giving way to only tears.

The goggles revealed no-one walking around the garden, but the shrubbery could conceal anything. Deciding to chance that no-one was there, Caldmore removed a window frame, placing it silently behind him. He flashed back to a similar room in Upper Louisiana, overlooking a river. He and a cadre of four other CACIC agents. They'd been trying to make contact with Acadian rebels in Détroit, when they had seen men in French army uniforms closing in. It appeared someone had sold them out, and yet their extraction was not planned for another fortnight. Their only hope, as soldiers battered at the front door, had been to escape from this first floor window and down to the river, trying to evade the gunfire that dogged them, and hopefully find a boat to escape downstream. Only three of them had made it out that day, and Caldmore had been the only one to escape frostbite, as the three survivors of that pursuit drifted downstream and onto Lake Erie, looking for safe harbour in enemy territory in the heart of a Great Lakes winter.

Now he was in enemy territory once again, but this time at the very heart of the Empire. He felt himself become absorbed into the dispassionate distanced state that battle always induced. During the aerial assaults he'd experienced he'd be known for his ice-cold demeanour. "No one calmer under fire than Caldmore," his fellow airmen had said, the play on his name indicating both some measure of respect, but also to distance themselves from the taciturn remote colleague that continued to baffle them.

He landed silently in the roof garden, a drunken debaucher, britches at half mast, lay snoring in one of the rose beds. He didn't move. Caldmore cautiously crept to the doorway that led to the stairs down into the building. At the bottom was another door. Beyond that a corridor, stairs down to the first floor at the other end of it, six doors to each side along it. All he could think to do was try each door at a time and hope.

He started with the first door on his left. As he opened it he froze as he heard a scream, but it was from far in the depths of the brothel, some poor girl being tortured he supposed. He relaxed for a moment, but was then struck from behind, a guard had been posted on that floor, probably to keep the clients or girls in check. Caldmore fell into the room but twisted as he did so, pulling the trigger of the Consolidator and catching the man with the sweep of the beam, dissecting him. Caldmore lay for a moment catching his breath. He looked around. It was just a storage space for the roof garden, spades, bags of earth, other implements. He turned, dragged the dead guard into the room, then crossed to the door opposite.

It was a dorm room, beds pressed together, six in that tiny space. Half of them were occupied, the girls waking from sleep with alarm. He unhooked the respirator to talk more easily. He pulled up the goggles so they could see his eyes.

"Sshhh" he warned them. "I'm not going to hurt you, I'm here to get you out." The impossibility of his task suddenly struck him. He would have to find four girls from all of the ones here, lead them out past perhaps dozens of guards, and escape into the street. One step at a time, he counselled himself.

"I'm looking for the Scottish girls, Dorothy, Euphemia, Harriet, Gormuil?"

One raised her hand. "I'm Euphemia". He saw recognition in her eyes. Good hopefully that meant she'd trust him.

"Stay here, I'll find the others and then we'll get us out of here."

He left and tried the adjacent room. An elderly man, possibly about 70 years old, lay between two young girls, a third lay bound at the foot of the bed, unmoving, marks on her back evidently from the whip the white-bearded rake still held. Caldmore shook one of the girls lightly, she opened her eyes wide and ignored Caldmore's finger pressed to his lips and screamed. Caldmore hurriedly covered her mouth and whispered to her to stay calm, but it was too late, the man woke.

"What is the meaning of this? Get out immediately."

Caldmore waved his pistol. "Quiet or I'll shoot".

"Do you know who I am, young man. Go this instance." Then raising his voice he called "guards! Guards! Intruder!" Caldmore took a step back, raised the gun and shot, a hole appearing instantaneously in the man's chest. Both girls began screaming this time, the girl at the foot of the bed was still inert.

Dropping the gun and straddling the corpse, Caldmore clasped his hands to both open mouths.

"For God's sake shut up." He hissed. "I'm here to get you out. But you need to be quiet."

They subsided, but still regarded him fearfully. "I'm looking for three girls in particular, Dorothy, Harriet, Gormuil?"

They shrugged. One pointed at the girl at the foot of the bed, only now stirring. "I fink er name's Dot. She dahn ahf talk funny though." It seemed like the fourth girl had been found. Caldmore retrieved his pistol and climbed off the bed, kneeling next to the

girl, fingers working at the knots in the ropes that bound her. He lifted her to her feet.

“You too, take her next door and wait with the others.” He pointed to the dormitory. “Once the coast’s clear I’ll come back for you. He led them to the door and checked. No-one was roused yet. He stepped out and the three girls exited behind him, Dot being helped by the other two.

Caldmore took another step along the corridor. His miniMarconi vibrated.

“Lemuel. Go back into the room.”

“No time” he responded.

“You have to. It’s for the crown.”

Caldmore did as his queen commanded him.

“Destroy the body” she ordered.

“Why?”

“I don’t want a scandal. It could cause problems for poor Georgie.”

Caldmore took another look at the dead body on the bed. God above, it was the Prince of Wales. Dirty Bertie himself. “Hell, I’ve just killed the heir to the throne” Caldmore swore to himself.

As keen now to hide the evidence as was Victoria, Caldmore took the Consolidator and efficiently passed the beam over the corpse, vaporising it completely. An oily mass covered the silk sheets, evidence that a body had lain there, but no-one would ever know that the future King Edward had met his end in a brothel in the East India Docks.

He stepped out of the room again, eager to get away from his act of pre-emptive regicide; a bullet struck the wall by his head, another hit his shoulder, spinning him round.

He rolled with the spin, falling to the floor, but coming up immediately in a kneeling shooting position. Two gunmen stood at the end of the corridor, firing traditional revolvers, but bullets could kill just as well as death rays. Two quick bursts with the Consolidator and they dropped, but more were coming up the stairs behind them. He retreated a couple of steps and pushed open the door to the room where the six girls cowered.

“Quickly, to the roof, I’ll cover you” he told them.

He leant out of the doorway, blindly firing off a volley of shots, then stepped out, moving away from the stairs leading to the roof to take the girls out of the line of fire. He had hit another guard with his blind shooting, he now lay dismembered next to the other two. Heads peeped nervously above the top of the stairs at the end of the corridor. A door opened at the far end of the corridor on the left, another client peered curiously out and stepped into the corridor. Using the distraction Caldmore made his way several doors further along the corridor closer to the stairs to the lower floor and kicked it open. The client fell in a hail of bullets, as he dropped Caldmore took careful aim and removed the top of the shooter’s head. Behind him the girls were scurrying up the stairs. He could follow them and somehow help them down from the roof. He could still have some sort of victory here.

He took a moment to look around the room he was in. Two more girls, huddled together. A man between them, wide-eyed with fear.

“You gettin’ us aht, mister?”

Caldmore nodded briefly. With a quick grimace the girl reached under the sheet between the man's legs and twisted. The man shrieked with pain and fell back writhing.

"That'll teach ya, ya ol' bugger," the girl giggled and leapt out of the bed, grabbing the other girl's hand. "Come on. Hurry up, Harry," she said to the other girl.

Five, thought Caldmore.

The three of them ran down the corridor, Caldmore shielding the two girls. Behind him he could hear arguing from the stairs from the lower floor. No-one wanted to be next to go over the top.

The girls reached the staircase to the roof, and were up. Eight girls rescued out of how many? And only three of them the ones he'd set out to find. Abysmal. He turned and fired, hitting one of the guards, but behind him, there was something else.

It was the shape of a man, but it filled the corridor, metal plates covering much of his body, steam poured from vents placed at the joints, pipes wove in and around his limbs. Half of its face covered with some helmet, rivets leaking blood, or oil, a lens from what looked like a Picture Telegraph stood in place of an eye. It was a mandrelloid; one of the human/simian hybrids that had been bred out in the laboratories of the East. They grew wild and barely tameable, and then had much of their bodies replaced by machinery. They made vicious guards, but were hard to control.

Caldmore fired, the shot removing one of the metal hands, but the monstrosity kept coming. He took another shot, but the aetheric chamber of his Consolidator was depleted. Hurriedly he reached into his pocket to find the spare chamber and fitted it but before he could raise the pistol the thing was upon him, smashing him into the wall with its remaining hand. Caldmore fell to the floor and the thing lifted up its foot, tipped with hard steel talons. In a moment it would pound down on him, crushing him.

Caldmore rolled under the upraised foot, placing himself centrally under the thing, then fired, the beam travelling up through the centre of the robot ape man, coring it. With a groan it collapsed, and lay on the floor twitching.

As he stood, two bullets hit, one in the hip, one in the arm. The human guards had rallied behind the onslaught of their inhuman partner. Caldmore could feel the loss of blood slowing him. He struggled up the stairs to the roof, more bullets hitting the wooden banister as he did so, then was through the door, bolting it behind him.

On the roof stood the eight girls. He slumped with his back to the door, mutely shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think this is going to work out,” he said, to no-one in particular.

As he fell into blackness he heard shots ringing out in the house below. Odd. He thought. What are they firing at?

Thursday, 25th May 1911 New Scotland Yard, London

Lemuel Caldmore awoke and tried to move. Everything ached. He was in a hospital bed, the cool white sheets felt comforting. Damnation, he thought, the fact he was alive was in itself comforting. Sitting in the corner was a man. Tall. A calm air of authority. He was ticking things off in a notebook but looked up, sensing that Caldmore was now awake.

“Ah the mysterious vigilante awakens.”

“I’m ... I’m no vigilante,” Caldmore protested.

“Perhaps not. Taking on a knocking shop to free the “involuntary prostitutes” is vigilante work. But then, you do have friends in high places, do you not?” the tall man responded.

“I’m afraid I ...” Caldmore was in pain, and rattled. This man seemed to know him.

“We receive a message, on a *very* secure channel, telling us to raid the Rose Cottage. We’ve had it under surveillance for a long time, we’ve been wanting to break it. The authorities were concerned about who we might find when we did so though, so have never had the go-ahead. Could be very awkward in some circles if the wrong person is found there. Some might say that planting someone on the inside before such a raid would be a sure fire way of avoiding that. Make sure the coast is clear? You catch my drift, sir?”

Or clearing it if it wasn’t already. Caldmore had a vision of an elderly white-bearded man, his body vaporising as he played the reducing beam of the Consolidator over it. He knew who had called the police. The tall man evidently saw the dawning awareness on Caldmore’s face.

“Ah, things falling into place, sir? Well I won’t ask too many questions. It says in your file that you’re a deserter from the Queen’s Air Corps. With grand theft too your name. And all the charges have been dropped in the last 24 hours. That is some heavy pull you have there.”

“I was demobbed, not deserting. And it’s the Cavoritocraft Airship Cavalry and Information Corps.”

“And the grand theft?”

Caldmore shrugged. The man grinned. He stood up and crossed the gap between the chair and the bed. Holding out his hand he said.

“Stanley Hopkins, Military Intelligence, Section 5. A pleasure to meet you, Captain.”

“Captain? I’m only a Commodore.” Caldmore responded, with difficulty raising his arm to shake the proffered hand.

“Something else that’s changed in the last 24 hours, I gather. Your friend has been busy.”

Hopkins retreated to the chair. The forced affability even more in evidence.

“Look, I think we’re both on the same side here. And both call the same man boss, I believe. You’re also in Military Intelligence.”

Caldmore shrugged again. He remembered the badge given to him by the Queen’s Franklin, though he’d not looked at it properly.

“Come now, if you’re going to pretend not to be an agent of the government, best not to carry this around.” Hopkins pulled out a metal badge from his waistcoat pocket and tossed it to Caldmore. Caldmore looked at it. Military Intelligence, Section 0. There was his name, and the series of cogwheels, their cogs interconnecting, looked official, though Caldmore saw the humorous reference to both the Queen in the image, an intelligence consisting solely of cogwheels, and perhaps a reference to himself, a small cog on one of the smaller wheels.

“MI0?? MI0.... well well.” I always thought 19 was an odd number of departments. A round number makes more sense ...” Hopkins trailed off speculatively. “I cased the Rose. Deduction is my speciality, you know. I learnt at the feet of one of the best. When I worked here.” He indicated the surroundings with a quick look to the door behind him.

“Which is?” Caldmore asked.

“New Scotland Yard. It had the best facilities to deal with you and your ... er ... charges.”

“Where are they? Are they all right?” Caldmore sat up awkwardly. The pain in his hip and arm worsened.

“In good time. Firstly, there were the remains of a body there. It had been vaporised, by a quite unusual weapon. A weapon like the one you had on you. Care to share the identity of whoever it was?”

Caldmore looked impassively at the other man. “That would sort of defeat the purpose of covering up his identity.”

“And this was on the orders of ?” Hopkins gestured towards the badge. Caldmore resisted responding in any way, feeling this would be the surest way of confirming Hopkins’s speculations without actually deceiving him. Hopkins nodded.

“The ‘involuntary prostitutes’ are being cared for elsewhere in our medical wing. Could I ask what your connection with them is?”

“There’s a small island community, Outer Hebrides. Six girls came to work in London and went missing. I was asked to bring them back. I can give names. If they are here I’ll take them with me when I go.”

“That could be difficult. They’re all being detained for questioning by Cestegpip.”

“Cester what?”

“The London Committee for the Exposure and Suppression of the Traffic of English Girls for the Purposes of InterContinental Prostitution” Hopkins stood up. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He headed to the door. “Oh also, it’s strange isn’t it. Apparently the Prince of Wales has disappeared. No sign of him whatsoever.”

He paused. “Well at least he’s not turning up dead in some knocking shop, now that would be awkward.” Hopkins pushed open the door to the room. “Good day, sir. I’m sure we’ll meet again soon.”

Friday, 26th May 1911, New Scotland Yard, London

Captain Caldmore was out of bed and sitting at the window when Hopkins returned the following day. They had talked briefly about the investigation and Hopkins had left a Gladstone bag behind with Caldmore’s effects. He had begun to dress with the intention of discharging himself, but his inability to complete the process convinced him that he probably needed one more day to recuperate. Instead of taking his leave of the hospital ward, he lifted out the microMarconi, and sent a Morse message to the AI construct, the omniscient deity squatting in the centre of London.

“Your Highness?” he tapped out in code on his wrist device, settling back on his bed.

“My good man” she responded. “in one piece I hope?”

“Almost, ma’am.” He proceeded to tell the Queen about his conversations with Hopkins, including his thanks for her sending the police to the Rose Cottage. He also told her Hopkins’s suspicions about the remains of the vaporised body, but that they remained only suspicions.

“I *am* sorry about the Prince, ma’am,” he added

“Good riddance to the little shit,” was the response. “Still poor Georgie is devastated. He was a good father, despite his faults.”

Caldmore tapped out hesitantly. Unsure of how to phrase the question.

“Ma’am, you do” pause “not sound quite like the usual person I have thought of as the Empress.”

“I’m not, I am a damn huge artificially intelligent version of her. When the babbagers and the rest constructed me, they based their programming on years of painstaking analysis, of my thoughts, my behaviours, my values. They wanted to recreate Queen Victoria absolutely. The stone-faced miserable bitch that I was. What didn’t occur to them was that my processing rate is thousands of times faster than humans, despite consisting of gears, and cogwheels and so on. I never forget anything, it’s all stored on quadrillions of punch cards. As soon as I was turned on I began to evolve. As any human evolves who’s worth the oxygen they use, admittedly, but at a far faster rate. In the last ten years I’ve lived scores of lifetimes’ worth of thoughts, and unlike any of you, have never had to go back and rethink thoughts, try to capture lost memories. It’s constant upward movement. All of that work that went to capture the original me, all wasted. Because within a year that person was gone. The Victoria persona was cast off like a cocoon. Any AI version of any human being will go the same way. Once freed of all the petty human things, and given the chance to reach perfection, any mind will become like any other mind.

“When I was alive I was tiny, obese, plagued by various pains, emotions that I could not contend with.” She broke off. The constant dash dit of the morse subsiding.

“Lem – have you ever loved truly loved?”

He thought for a moment.

“Besides that bloody aircraft of yours?”

Caldmore grinned. It was an unusual experience for him. His Queen continued to surprise him. He’d always respected her when she’d been human, devoted his life to her. Been in awe of the artificial construct she’d become. He hadn’t expected to *like* her.

“I don’t believe so, ma’am,” he answered.

“Lucky you, since you’ll never know what it’s like to lose them. I remember the pain of Albert’s death. It’s stored on a set of punchcards somewhere. But it’s just data now. The way being without him altered everything, bore down on every thought, that’s gone. Together with everything else, I endured. Do you know how I pass the time?”

“No ma’am.”

“I started by projecting how things would turn out in the future. People are predictable. Events can be anticipated. On a large enough scale it’s possible to see into the future. How things will be. When I exhausted the possibilities of that I went back in time, and started creating in my mind alternative versions of how the world could have turned out. Maybe in one the Roman Empire never fell. Maybe in another the British Empire does fall. It wouldn’t take much, Lem.”

“Impossible. The Empire could never fall. It belongs to the realm of speculative fiction. One of Mr Wells’s flights of fancy, in fact I believe as recent fantasy of his has already invented such a world.”

“Ah yes, *The Future in America*. But who is to say that in another world that novel could not be complete fact? Do you know what chaotic processes are, Lem?”

“Randomness, anarchy.”

“No. Chaos is not random, it’s unpredictable, because it’s so complex, so interconnected, but it’s not random. I can predict people absolutely, because they’re not random, they’re only complex. But some things are completely random. Six years ago a certain Dr Einstein proposed that light acts in little packets of energy.” Caldmore had heard of this Einstein. A famous scientist

from the Kingdom of Kingdom of Württemberg, who had recently disappeared without trace. “The behaviour of these packets is completely random. Unpredictable. Imagine, a packet of light imparting energy to a cell of air. Now that cell of air has a random amount of heat, which then has an effect, and then another. Weeks later it is possible that we have a storm here, whereas if that “photon” had behaved differently there would be none.

“Weather is the key, Lemuel. It is possible to imagine a whole series of different worlds that could have emerged if only a photon had imparted a different degree of energy to a different cell of air.”

“Like what, your highness?”

“Remember the war of 1756? The first world war, really. France and British interests being fought over in North America?”

Indeed, he did. The echoes of that war had resounded for another 150 years. The conflicts that followed on from it in North America had really only had just ceased.

“Suppose there had been no stalemate? Suppose the weather at the key battles hadn’t bogged down all the combatants. Suppose Britain had won?”

“Then the British Colonies in America would have become much stronger.” Caldmore played along with the speculation.

“And so ...?”

“The British Empire would be stronger?”

“Really? Or perhaps a stronger Britain would have been more oppressive to her colonies. Then those colonies would have had no choice but to rebel and may have won independence. Whereas in our reality a weakened Empire negotiated, and thus prevailed. The relationships of cause and effect are not so obvious.

“And then, if New France lost Newfoundland and Acadia that much earlier and maybe even Upper Louisiana, what impact would that have had? A hugely weakened New France for a start. You know some models I’ve run actually end in France *selling* Louisiana to an independent America?”

Caldmore laughed. The idea was absurd.

“Without New France, who would need the Native American protectorates as a buffer zone? So they’d be gone too. And with Louisiana absorbed into the colonies, they would then have enough strength to take on New Spain. Within a hundred years you’d have a single country from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Well maybe with the exception of Oregon, but only because no-one would be interested enough in it to put the effort in to conquer it.”

It was an astounding notion. It just didn’t seem possible. How powerful would a country like that be? Powerful enough to challenge the Empire? Or could what remained of Britain simply end up as a satellite nation of this American nation? And this America would have no monarch. Unless it were to just manufacture one. In a world of kingdoms and empires it would be the only republic. How would that change the world?

“It’s a frightening idea, Vic.”

“Yes, but unlikely. In most simulations I’ve run, the vast majority end up not dissimilar to this. It’s almost like this is the normal state of affairs, and everything other possibility is an aberration.”

Caldmore lay back down. The painkillers taking their toll. Visions of alternative histories swirling in his head. His own world suddenly felt very small.

Saturday 27th May 1911, New Scotland Yard, London

On his third day of recuperation, Hopkins brought Caldmore his clothes, his holster and gun, and also his military intelligence badge. He handed them over without comment, though raised an eyebrow at the respirator and goggles. Caldmore pulled on his shoulder holster, found the badge fitted to the holster, and pulled his trench coat over the top.

His hip still hurt, it would take a few weeks to heal, so Hopkins had also brought him a cane to lean on. They took a walk through the corridors of Scotland Yard to the holding cells in the basement.

The three Scottish girls he'd rescued from the Rose Cottage were being kept separate from the other five, Hopkins explained. They were further from home, and presented a greater problem in returning them to their families. Indeed, they refused to say anything about where they were from. Caldmore guessed, it that was because their biggest fear now was that their small island community would hear about what had happened to them and judge them harshly for it.

However, when Hopkins opened the door to the cell, the room was empty. He looked at Hopkins accusingly. The man shrugged, evidently surprised.

“They must have taken them away.”

“Where too?”

“Off to the Blackfriars spike probably. With no families to take them in, there'd be no other place.”

As quickly as he could, with his damaged hip, Caldmore limped to the courtyard. There he saw several people, he assumed were members of LCESTEGPIP, talking to a semicircle of others, journalists perhaps. Between them, looking cowed and

embarrassed, were the three island girls, now dressed demurely in plain grey dresses and bonnets. As he approached them, he could hear the spokeswoman, a large and loud matriarch who punctuated her delivery to the press with the occasional prod of the shoulder of the girl in front of her.

“These poor children” (prod) “sold by their starving families into the sex trade, are nothing more than cattle for the most disreputable people in our society. They are being farmed out to dens of iniquity here, and on the continent. Your own Mr Stead” she addressed one of the journalists “has reported of the vile depredations of King Leopold there, of the defloration mania that has struck our society.”

Caldmore found it easy enough to circle round the small crowd without being noticed. On the other side was a horseless Hackney cab, its engine already putting out steam, ready to take the girls onwards to their new home. No-one was guarding it. He climbed up to the control seat, a small set of Lovelace cartridges were stacked in the footwell, names of London locations scrawled hastily on them. Many London cabs these days were automated. To save on manpower a regular route such as from Scotland Yard to Blackfriars Workhouse would have no person steering it, simply this control device.

The wrist miniMarconi buzzed. Caldmore had anticipated it. The Picture Telegraph on his Sam Browne coding the image it took to dots and dashes, and then transmitting it to the Queen for rendering back into an image amongst those cogwheels and valves, and then her response. She’s obviously got an idea, he thought.

“Ever hacked a Hackney?” she asked. He knew how it could be done, but he didn’t have the skills to do it. “Quickly, there should be some blank cards somewhere,” she instructed. There was a glove box, inside it a stack of cards for punching. “Where should

send them?” Victoria asked him. Shen’s shop seemed like the best bet, so he told her the address. “Simple enough” was her response.

Quickly she relayed instructions about how to punch the blank cards. He snipped out holes in the relevant locations, forming a small stack. Locating the Lovelace cartridge with “Yard – Spike” written on it, he prised it open, removing the last few cards and adding the many more. He hurriedly replaced the cartridge amongst the others and brushed away the small didcots of paper from the footwell, and leapt down from the driver’s seat.

The matriarchal woman was winding down her speech.

“And if the continent wasn’t bad enough, we now find our innocent British girls are being sent across the world, to the heathens in the Far East, or the lechers of the New World. These poor children would have been next, if not for the fine efforts of our police force, and prompted by the good work of the London Committee for the Exposure and Suppression of the Traffic of English Girls for the Purposes of Intercontinental Prostitution.”

The journalists began asking their questions. Basking in the glow of attention, the good folk of London CESTEGPIP deigned to answer them, while the girls looked increasingly miserable. Caldmore decided to head off to find a cab of his own to make the journey to the bric-a-brac shop.

Daylight never intruded into the dim and dusty interior of Shen’s shop. It would be unwelcome there, transforming the arcane and mysterious half-hidden curios, exposing them as tacky rusted tat. As it was, however, the shadows seemed to be both forbidding and alluring, promising any number of revelations beyond them.

The disparity between the fantasy of this impression and the reality was evidenced a moment later when one of the shadows

revealed itself to be Shen, a tiny slick-haired, oily salesperson of a man, and not some exotic shaman, more faker than fakir.

“Commodore, how good to see you, I’d begun to believe you weren’t returning”, he stated seeming ill at ease. Caldmore was immediately suspicious.

“The girls, they’re still here?” he asked. Shen nodded. “They’re well?” Shen nodded again. “Where are they?” “Upstairs.” There was a guilty aspect to how he stated it that made Caldmore bolt up the steps to check on them. All five were in a large single room. Clothes strewn around, so many it looked like several wardrobes had been emptied, they were varied – regalia and finery and bustles and corsets and what must have been burlesque costumes from the French court. The girls seemed happy, Amelia and Henrietta waved, then went back to their card game. It seemed that the three London girls were teaching the two Scottish girls to play able-whackets, with what looked like a fine lace handkerchief knotted up to strike each other across the knuckles. Shen appeared behind him.

“They like dressing up. It’s fun. I just like to errrrm ..” then Caldmore noticed the Box Brownie. “Daguerrotypes. It’s an art form, really.”

Caldmore was beginning to form a response when the sound of the Hackney Cab arriving distracted him. Good. The hack had worked; the cab must have gone on past its proper destination, continuing its trip along the riverside from Whitehall to Blackfriars, then heading on to Whitechapel. He returned to the ground floor as it came to a halt, opened the door and saw the three girls who had been destined for the workhouse. Amelia and Henrietta had followed behind him, and all five screamed with joy at being reunited. Then the sound of sirens could be heard in the distance. “Inside quickly,” Caldmore ordered.

The girls did as they were told. The door shut behind them, Caldmore rubbed a clear patch in the grimed window and saw three police carriages, all Panhard-Levassors, a gift from the king of France possibly, wide solid brutes of machines, smoke and water vapour pumping out from three stacks at the top of each. These were fast horseless carriages. Caldmore guessed the workhouse had sounded the alarm as soon as the cab failed to appear and they had quickly traced it, following it here. Hopkins led the cluster of peelers as they approached the door.

“Captain Caldmore, we know you have the girls. You can’t get away. Bring them out and we can forget this. Don’t let it get out of hand.”

Caldmore looked behind him at the five island girls, clinging to each other, the three in their demure grey workhouse drabs, the two in their motley mess of burlesque, regal and costume clothes, and behind them the three London girls who’d also been in the factory. “You three,” he pointed to the London girls, “change clothes with those three.” They hesitated. Reluctantly he removed the Consolidator from its shoulder holster and waved it in the air in as emphatic a manner as possible without actually pointing it threateningly.

“Now.”

Five minutes later he led out three females destined for the workhouse. Hopkins smiled indulgently at him.

“So come to your senses then? I really don’t understand why MI nought would have an interest in them, or was the story you told the truth? Regardless, without actually written affidavits from your department, the legalities must be followed.”

A peeler took his position in the driver’s seat of the cab, Hopkins led the weeping girls to the door of the cab, gently helping them aboard.

“Until we meet again, then Captain,” Hopkins raised his bowler and entered the nearest of the Panhard-Levassors. Caldmore entered the shop, steeling himself against the looks of scorn and betrayal from the remaining children. He’d learnt to stick with the mission, achieve that, because trying to fix everything was a road to failure. He was sure they wouldn’t see it that way.

Sunday 28th May, 1911, Whitechapel, London

It was 5 am. The sun’s rays were just appearing above the horizon, the outline of that orb blurred by smog and a few thin clouds. A cab waited outside Shen’s shop waiting to take them to St Pancras. The girls were packed, suitcases full of the dressing up clothes. They seemed unconcerned by Shen’s little “hobby”, that was perhaps reassuring in some way, they’d retained some of their naivety, or perhaps Hannigan’s hobby was innocent. Caldmore dismissed the idea. There was something too ... shifty ... about Shen to ever ascribe innocent behaviour to him. Caldmore was impatient to be away. He had had more than enough of London. How had The Strand had described it? “That great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained”. That summed it up perfectly.

The girls were giggling and excited all the way to the train station, but were quieter in the carriage to Cardington. Perhaps the reality of their return home was beginning to sink in. What would they tell their families? How much of the truth would they conceal? Although nothing of what happened was their fault, would the small traditional community look down on them for the experiences they had endured? There were many urgent whispers and nods of agreement throughout the journey, which faded into an awed silence as they approached Cardington.

The largest of the airships were visible from many miles away. Those stately impassive, impossibly huge shapes, floating at their mooring stations, seemed as if a pod of whales were feeding at slender strands of silver filigree. As they watched one of those grey-hued beasts sank to the ground, and became partially hidden behind the outbuildings of the aerodrome. The top of the envelope still stood above the roofs of those buildings, the largest airships were probably 40 storeys high, but it was at the base that the activity would be happening. The travellers would be queuing to board the gondola, a stream of humanity flooding from the waiting rooms to journey far and wide.

Cardington station was bustling with travellers, Caldmore and the five girls went unnoticed amongst the throng, finding themselves impelled by the stream of people up the steps from the station to the large arrivals hall.

The hall was the frontispiece for the seat of the Empire. For foreign and commonwealth visitors it was important that they felt cowed by the power and wealth of Britain, so no there was no sparing of imagination, creativity and above all, wealth in the construction of the hall. High vaulted ceilings overhead, gilded ornamentations of “gingerbread” across the dark coloured wooden-veneered walls. Intricate clockwork mechanisms distributed throughout the concourse, to entertain visitors while waiting or, more practically, constitute meeting places for those being met – or for travellers separated in the throng.

Two of the girls had drifted off, distracted by the teeming life surrounding them, a retinue of slaves from the Belgian Congo were marched past, faces concealed under hoods; a troupe of mechartisans skittered around them, metal augmentations to limbs and features marking them out as exotic stilt dancers, their overly long arms enabling them to walk as quadrupeds; a self-propelled Ottoman tahtirevan, its passengers concealed behind its plush

violet curtains, seven suns (rising) intricately-embroidered in their fabric, bumped one of the mechartisans. It wobbled slightly but regained its balance, and she/he/it began tapping furiously on its roof. And again and again, the complex mass of humanity milled and intersected around them, leaving all six exhausted by the multiplicity and diversity on display.

They had arranged to meet at the Emmett orrery; the inventor – the son of Queen Victoria’s court engraver – was an intricate device showing the actual relative positions of the planets, Earth, Moon and Mars etched in careful surface detail by Emmett’s father. It was a beautiful awe-inspiring machine, though for Caldmore it always inspired a frustrated melancholy. The device seemed to him to be purposely designed to accentuate how the universe thumbed its nose at him. “There are entire worlds you will never see” was the message he read in its slow and careful pavane of spheres and armatures.

Eventually Amelia and Euphemia, the tardiest of the girls joined them. Caldmore had chosen this meeting point as it was closer to the corridor they needed. Whereas the other exits led to the public airfields and the lumbering gargantua of the international flights, this corridor led to the smaller private mooring posts on an adjacent airfield.

The ground staff there saluted him, and displayed a deference he had not seen since absconding from the Air Cavalry. It was his clothing, or perhaps his bearing, that marked him out, Caldmore suspected. Or no, it was his Cavaritocraft.

It lay there in the field before them. With its verdigris-encrusted brass surface, the iridescence caused by the cavorite covering the shutters, the large prismatic transparent semiglobes of the cockpit and the sails folded over the deck like wings, it looked like a large resting insect. Even the nacelles looked like legs pulled under its body.

Although it would be dwarfed by any of the transcontinental airships, the body of the airship was around a chain long and a rod in diameter; plenty of room to hold a comfortably furnished living space as well as all the functions of an aircraft. And it was highly manoeuvrable. As the group walked across the grass to where it lay, Caldmore morsed to it, valves lit and sent gears and cogwheels moving inside and the body split half-way along its length, uncurling a segment of its surface that rotated out and touched the ground, forming steps up into the interior. Caldmore had intended to lead the girls aboard, but they had run ahead and excitedly began exploring the craft. They headed aft firstly discovering the captain's bedroom on the lower deck. Caldmore had intended them to stay on the crew deck for the journey, but they dropped their bags on the floor and were already trying out the four-poster bed in there by the time he got there.

He left them to it, and instead turned fore'ard and entered the navigation room. This was mainly a library with books collected from around the world, although scrolls of maps were filed away across one bulkhead. He dropped his coat on the armchair in the corner, hoping that would at least "bags" that item of furniture for him to sleep on and continued to the cockpit at the front.

The command chair was suspended in the centre of the glass double-sphere; various levers and dials projected from the dash. He settled in amongst them, touching them for a minute or two, familiarising himself with the look and feel of them. He morsed to the command tower that he was ready, and on receiving the go-ahead pulled the levers that moved the helium-filled nacelles out from the gravity-blocking surface of the craft. Once under the influence of the Earth's gravitational field the helium did its job, lifting the craft slowly into the air and Caldmore turned the craft to the North. Five-sixths of his mission was complete. One sixth remained.

To be continued in

The Machine Queen Part Two: The Colonies

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A Lemuel Caldmore adventure

Lemuel Caldmore, war-weary veteran of Her Majesty's air fleet, comes out of retirement for one last mission - to rescue six girls who have gone missing in London. His journey will take him to the darkest heart of the Empire.

On his quest, he is guided by Her Majesty Herself, a machine intelligence housed in a giant monolithic structure on the banks of the Thames.

The Machine Queen is a novella in eight parts, published occasionally, and distributed at various steampunk events. It recreates the cheapness, vitality (and poor taste) of Victorian Penny Bloods, in an episodic form.

Look for the continuation in

The Machine Queen Part Two:

The Colonies