



The Machine Queen

Part Two

The Colonies

By

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Price: one penny

The story so far

Caldmore, an ex-airman, had retired to a small island in the Hebrides. There he was asked by the local priest to track down six island girls who had gone missing in London. While in London he was recruited by Queen Victoria, her consciousness uploaded to a massive analytical engine on the banks of the Thames, to her own private Intelligence Agency MI0. Caldmore found five of the girls and set off from London to return them to their home.

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The Machine Queen Part Two: The Colonies

Monday, 29th May, 1911, the skies above Manchester

They had made good time so far, Caldmore thought, looking down at the smoke-stacks of Manchester, cotton mills and factories cheek-by-jowl with narrow streets of “back-to-backs”. From this height they were close enough to follow landmarks; Caldmore had been flying low enough to identify the Trent and Mersey canal from Lichfield, but high enough for the people below to lose any projection of their individuality. As the shift change came they hurried like ants to or from their nests, oft-repeated self-organised trails dictating their routes. The similarity of the imagery implied mindlessness of those trapped in those paths, led by instinct or pheromones, but the wail of the siren signalling the shift change challenged that interpretation. These were human workers, not insect, trapped by circumstance and economics, their hopes dulled by poverty and drudgery, and enslaved to the great hive of commerce.

The journey had been uneventful, Caldmore had raised the sails and caught the wind, heading generally nor’ north-east from Bedfordshire. The English fields slowly passed below and he had set the autopilot, taking the central staircase up to the deck, retracting the clear canopy to feel the wind and to lean over the parapet to look down below.

The girls spent the first few hours exploring the craft then, bored, retired to the bedroom. Of the five of them he only saw Amelia. Amelia seemed fascinated by the craft, and sometimes sat with him while he operated the levers to make a course adjustment, or would sit at the table in the map room, looking at the maps she had removed from their shelves. Caldmore was uneasy at the disruption she was causing, but felt uneasy around all of the girls. With only some idea of the dreadful deprivations the five had

gone through and that taxed his equanimity, he felt somehow culpable on behalf of his sex, and didn't want to add to the burden that had been inflicted on them by the other men they had encountered. For that reason, he was relieved that four of them hardly crossed his path, and Amelia seemed to be so engrossed in the minutiae of flying that she hardly interacted with him at all.

The girl's parents were oddities on the small island. They had lived in Atchison, a town in the Republic of Texas, but had left there, Caldmore had heard, to escape the mother's father, who was opposed to the marriage. To ensure he would not be able to find them, they had fled to as far-off as a refuge as they could reach, and it had worked, there had been no hint of any Texan overseas operatives tracking them down, if they were even attempting to. It was Amelia's younger sister, Gormuil, who was still missing. Caldmore was dreading having to report to the Earharts that he had only partially succeeded in his mission. Tomorrow would see them at the Scottish border, and the day after that they would be home. At the thought of it, Caldmore leaned once again over the parapet running round the deck, seeing the streets of Manchester now emptied of their myriad armies of workers, hearing the distant sound of the sirens slowly winding down their wail.

The miniMarconi clicked at his wrist; the dits and dahs of Her Majesty barely audible above the wind blowing across the deck.

"It's like clockwork, isn't it? More of a machine than I am; the regularity of an intricate mechanism, marking out the days, unchanging, intricate but undeveloping."

"They have hopes and aspirations, desires. At least they did before the crushing regimen of the factory-owner pressed it out of them."

"My dearest Lemuel, you're not a Bolshevik are you? If so I hope you take your revolutionary ways to Russia where they'll affect the Tsarina, not me."

“Your Highness, I ...” the mini-Marconi receive overrode the transmit as Victoria interrupted him.

“I was teasing. I have many sympathies with Comrades Lenin and Bogdanov. There is a malaise in the world, one of an uninterrupted status quo and I, I fear, am the main cause.”

“You’ve given us peace, stability, for the first time in history,” Caldmore protested. No-one opposes the Empire now. With you to lead us no-one dares.”

“Yes, I know; The Machine Queen, whirring away in her capital, like a spider in her web, sensing every little vibration from across the world, ready to undo the tapestry of fate and re-spin it for the betterment of her Empire.” There was a long pause, which Caldmore did not dare to break into.

“I do very little to influence the world directly. But even so, the mere fact I could anticipate and deflect any enemy action stays their hands. Everyone else has become cowed, and my own people complacent. There is an entire Universe above our heads, and yet you scurry backwards and forwards along our programmed paths, like ants.”

“But you are immortal, Your Majesty. Nothing can change that now.”

The device at his wrist had fallen into silence. The conversation ended, Caldmore looked once more over the parapet, but looked to the fore and the moors that stretched out to the horizon.

Wednesday, 31st May, 1911, <Redacted> island, Hebrides

Caldmore settled the craft down near the harbour of the island. It was late afternoon and people were still engaged in their various activities. The appearance of the brass cylinder, sails clasped close

to its deck, helium nacelles drawing into its body, on the cliffs overlooking the quay, soon drew them to it.

The door snapped open and rotated to the ground, allowing Caldmore and the five girls to disembark. They had found the plainest of the clothes from Shen's collection, and the five valises were abandoned in the bedroom. They had had second thoughts about importing anything of their life in London to the traditional insular lives of the community. Dorothy and Harriet were snapped up immediately by their families and whisked away, Euphemia stopped at the small post office where her mother and aunt worked, the remaining two girls sat on the bench by the harbour, Henrietta's folks lived on the other side of the island; she would wait for them to collect her. Amelia stayed with her friend from the factory; she clasped Henrietta's hand, offering and needing support in the face of the fusillade of questions that was being fired at them.

The girls were silent and withdrawn, not meeting the eyes of the questioners, Henrietta seemed close to tears. The assumption apparent in the questions was that the islanders had had no word from the girls because they were too busy, or had begun to lose touch with their roots. The reality was, thankfully, too outside of the islanders' experience for it to occur to them. Eventually word of the girls' arrival reached the Earharts and they pushed their way through the onlookers and gathered their daughter up in their arms.

"Meelie, Meelie, you're home," her mother cried holding her close. Her father looked past his daughter to Henrietta, then to Caldmore, then back to the girl. "Meelie? Where's G?" Their daughter just looked down and shook her head.

Amelia's father scowled at the aviator. "Where's Gormuil?" The name sounded difficult in the man's Texan accent, Caldmore guessed they'd christened their second daughter with a name they

felt camouflaged them better within their new community, rather than their first choice. Caldmore was no better at answering him than Amelia had been.

“You left her there? You bring one home but not the other?” the man’s anger and despair vied with each other for dominance.

“Sam, Sam, leave him. I’m sure he did his best,” Amelia’s mother insisted.

Amelia nodded. “Mr. Karma was so brave, he had to shoot people. Lots of people. We couldn’t find her. No-one knows where she went.” She began to cry. Behind the dam holding back Henrietta’s tears broke. Caldmore retreated from the girls’ distress, the man’s accusing pain, the crowd that stood in mute compassion around them. He headed towards the craft and the sanctuary afforded by flight.

That evening Caldmore’s craft had visitors. It was Father Hannigan, accompanied by Sam Earhart. The whisky bottle was already opened.

Amelia’s father started by apologising. “I should have thanked you for returning one daughter, not blamed you for not bringing home two,” he said. “It’s just I want this nightmare to be over.”

Caldmore nodded. “I had to choose. With no idea of where Gormuil was taken, it was either spend longer looking and risk something happening to the girls I had found, or make sure they got home. But I promise you,” he fixed the man firmly in his gaze, “I won’t come back again until I’ve found her.”

“I’ll come with you,” Earhart offered.

“No, it’s better I go alone. I don’t know how long it will take. And you have a wife and daughter to look after.” The other man looked as if he was about to argue, then accepted the statement. The priest

shook his hand, and indicated that he wanted some private words with the aviator. With one final look at Caldmore, a mixture of shame and pleading, he left.

“So, Lemuel” Hannigan began, “What was it like?”

Caldmore’s hand was half-way to his mouth, a tumbler of whisky held in it. It shook for a moment, the only betrayal of the depth of his emotions, as he responded flatly to the question.

“You know, I’ve seen inhumanity, on the battlefield, airships picking off combatants like ducks in a shooting gallery, I’ve seen my fellow airmen going down in flames as incendiaries hit their hydrogen sacs, but this ...” he paused. “Those girls were just objects to those people, no more than cattle, less than, to be bartered, used, sold on. Luckily Meelie and Etta only made it as far as the factory. The others ...” he shook his head. “God only know what’s happened to Gormuil.”

“God has turned his back on his subjects,” the priest responded. “I envy you your lack of belief, sometimes, my friend. Better to accept that there is no guiding intelligence behind the world, than that there is one and He is capable of such indifference to suffering.”

Caldmore was silent. His fingers unconsciously reached for the mini-Marconi on his wrist. There was one guiding intelligence behind the world he knew of. Though where she placed the suffering of her subjects in her list of priorities he had yet to find out.

Tuesday 6th June, 1911, above the Irish Sea

The curiosity Caldmore had experienced, that evening in his croft, returned now. He was approaching the Irish shoreline, Stanley

Hopkins sitting next to him in the cockpit, his mission having taken a bewildering turn.

Caldmore had returned to London the following day. The promise he had made to Sam Earhart that he would not return until he could return his younger daughter weighing on him greatly. Realising the impossibility of fulfilling this promise, he accepted that this was a *de facto* self-exile. As he had said his farewells to Father Hannigan, the priest had realised something was amiss, and challenged him about his return, asking why he was punishing himself for something that was not his fault. This was his home, a failure to find the missing girl was nothing to be ashamed of; he did not have to banish himself as a consequence of others' actions. He had shrugged and stayed non-committal, but on his journey south had sought to identify why the priest's argument had not won him over.

He didn't feel he had to atone for his sins. He had killed people in the war between New England and New France. But that had been in service to the Empire, and doubtless if given the chance, those French soldiers would have killed him. Those battles did help to liberate Acadia and Newfoundland from the dominion on New France too. Those people were now self-determining. And preserving the status quo in the rest of North America surely had meant more peace and prosperity for all. Hadn't it? It was the same for his postings in Asia, battling for the Cham against the Qin Empire, or in battlefronts in Persia, Serendip, against the Belgians in Africa, or that business in Batavia. Everywhere he had been in conflicts it was to preserve the borders of the Empire. Ultimately for everyone in the world a stronger British Empire was for the greater good, wasn't it?

Better minds than he would be able to answer that. Perhaps Victoria, amongst those cogwheels and gears whirring and

humming away could answer those questions. But he felt no guilt as a result of his actions in war.

Also he wasn't responsible for what had happened to the six Scottish girls. He had done what he could to return them to their home. There was one that he had failed. That wasn't his responsibility.

Then what was it that drove him out again? Was he that desperate for a purpose that he would adopt any random quest, no matter how futile?

Perhaps that, or perhaps he was too afraid to face the Earharts, and their grief at only one daughter being returned, and Meelie's guilt at being the one to return.

He'd arrived at Cardington and moored the airship, with no idea of where to start his search. The records of the London CESTEGPIP might have some information about where trafficked girls might go, but information about where one in particular would be likely to end up would be very difficult to get hold of. Perhaps Scotland Yard might have files seized from Rose Cottage. Though Caldmore suspected it was very unlikely a den of impropriety would keep files.

So deep in a brown study, perplexed at what drove him and where he could go, he had exited the arrivals hall at Cardington. And walked straight into Agent Hopkins.

He had, for a moment, considered making a run for it; the man from Military Intelligence was undoubtedly concerned about the switch Caldmore had made with the three girls headed for the workhouse, but then he spotted the two other agents moving into position behind him, so he had allowed the tall man with overcoat and bowler hat to lead him to the horseless carriage.

Once seated inside the carriage automatically began the journey to Scotland Yard. With no driver the two had been in complete privacy, which meant Hopkins was free to talk.

“Before we begin, I knew about the switch you pulled at that tatter’s place. I knew at the time. But the spike was expecting three girls. Any would do. You wanted the girls home. It was no skin off my nose either way. But you owe me.

“First up. Our cover story. Once we’re at the Yard we can be overheard. As far as anyone knows, you’ve got an in with our Fenian friends. You’re undercover and you’re going to get me on the inside. The Fenian bit is true, but what we’re really going to do is run guns and explosives to them.”

“What?” replied Caldmore. Hopkins had made this outlandish statement in such an offhand way, needing to inform Caldmore of his plans efficiently while they were alone, that Caldmore wasn’t sure he had heard him correctly.

“Believe me, we’ve worked out the angles. We want to catch the Fenians, round them up, but the problem is they’re too underpowered. No tactics, no guns, no balls. They won’t step out into the open for us to make a move on them. But ...” Hopkins had tapped the side of his nose with an air of self-importance “with the guns and explosives they might have the wherewithal to actually do something. We keep track of them and when they move – bam” accentuating the word by slamming a fist into a palm “we’ve got ‘em.”

Caldmore recalled with a renewed astonishment how the man had sat back in the chair, smirking.

“Pretty smart, eh?”

“It’s insane. Whose idea is it?”

“The Queen herself proposed it. She’s a devious one all right. Smart. Thinks on a level above us mere mortal lot.”

“Still doesn’t mean it’s not insane. Why should I help?”

“We know it was Sterling who was responsible for the missing girl. Yes, we’ve done our homework. Sterling lifts six from your little island, you return with five, so it stands to reason you’re back to look for the missing one. Sterling’s off the charts, no idea where he is, but we think the French do. The Fenians have an in with the French and their contact who might be able let you know where he’s gone. All you need to do is transport me. And the guns. And the explosives. I’ll introduce you to the contact, you get the information you need and next stop girl number six for you, and Kingdom Come for the Fenians.”

Caldmore had tapped out a message to Victoria, after confirmation that this was indeed her plan, but she hadn’t responded. Her Majesty’s complicity in his current undertaking seemed bewildering, even impossible. Indeed, MI5’s complicity seemed out of all reason too.

He’d heard nothing from her over the next few days; flying out to an empty warehouse in Teddington, waiting while a boat brought the ordnance upriver then loading it onto the airship. Hopkins and he setting off in the early hours westward to the Irish sea.

For one final time Caldmore tapped out a message on his wrist Marconi. Still no reply.

“Damn her,” he thought. “What game is she playing at?”

Wednesday June 7th Glendalough, County Wicklow,

Caldmore's airship had been moored for several hours above the ruined monastery, tethered to a great tower that dominated the green valley. The two men looked over the parapet at the ground 100 feet below arguing about their next move.

"It's an ambush," Caldmore declared. "We can't go down."

"We've struck a deal. As far as they know, we're smugglers. We can provide them with a steady supply of guns, ammunition, bombs. They're not going to disrupt that, are they?"

"Yes they bloody well are, if they can kill us and keep the guns. Use your head, man." Every instinct Caldmore had honed over his years in the Cav Air Cav told him this was a bad idea. Hopkins was seriously underestimating the enemy. Worse, he seemed to assume the Fenians were people they both had in interest in taking down, rather than his own political obsession, and were worth risking their lives on. Caldmore had only one stake in this, a link in the chain that might lead him to Gormuil.

"We can't wait here forever, Caldmore. Sooner or later they or we have to make a move."

"Then let it be them, I can wait all day if need be."

Hopkins pulled a gun, pointing it at Caldmore.

"Land. That's an order."

Caldmore shrugged. "I have a better idea. Go down to the entry door." Caldmore descended to the cabin, and pulled a lever. Hopkins stood at the entry door at the base of the airship, it was open. At the bottom of the door was a pulley with a rope ladder rolled around it. As he watched the rope ladder began to unwind from it. "Climb down."

Hopkins climbed down the rope ladder. At the ground he called out to the surrounding ruins.

“I’m here. Do you want to trade or not?”

A shot rang out and he screamed, collapsing to the floor.

“My leg, you paddy bastards.” He rolled on the floor, clutching his knee, which spurted blood from between his fingers.

From around the buildings of the ruined monastery about a dozen men appeared, most carrying shotguns and all warily watching the airship above them. A group clustered around the Englishman prostrate on the floor. Caldmore watched cautiously, readying himself to cast off at a moment’s notice.

One of the men below called up to him.

“Ye’d better come down, or we’ll blow yer man’s brains out.”

“Fine by me”, Caldmore responded.

“OK then, how about ye’d better come down, or feck off back to England without whatever it was ye came for.”

Caldmore came to a decision. The impasse couldn’t continue, but he didn’t trust them either.

“OK, but one of you has to come up here.”

“Ah it’s an exchange of hostage, yer after?”

“If you like.”

There was a lengthy debate amongst the Irishmen, Caldmore couldn’t hear the particulars, but could tell it was becoming heated. Eventually the debate was broken with a loud invective of Dutch and some other language, hurled at them in a high tone.

“Gott verdomme. Terkutuklah engkau semua. I’ll go, you cowards.”

A woman strode forward and clung onto the rope ladder. Looking upwards she called “haul away” and Caldmore pulled the lever that made the ladder ascend.

As the ladder completed its winding around the postern at the bottom of the door, she climbed into the craft. Caldmore offered his hand to help her up and she gripped it firmly.

“Captain Caldmore, at your service, ma’am” he offered, bewildered by the presence of this woman amongst the Irish rebels.

“Mejuffrouw Zelle” she responded. “But to my dear friends I am Margreet. I gather I am to be your hostage, sir,” she replied. She was in her mid-thirties, tall, slender, dark-haired. Caldmore could not place her accent, it was a mixture of Dutch, French and an overlay of something from the East Indies, possibly Malay. She smiled coquettishly, seemingly assured of her own allure, though her heavy features were not classically attractive. Caldmore responded stiffly, not only thrown by the appearance of the woman, but now by her demeanour, which seemed ill-suited to the violence and tension around them.

“I – er – yes. We are here to sell weapons to the men below.”

“Unfortunately the men below are impoverished Irishmen, they have little of value. I rather think they mean to trade your lives for the weapons.” She looked below. “I would be rather inclined to take the deal.”

“I don’t care about the deal,” Caldmore responded testily. My role in this”, he waved to indicated the airship around them. “is simply transport. My airship,” he pointed to the group below clustered around the prostrate form of Hopkins “his bombs”.

“Then what are you here for?” enquired the woman, suddenly curious.

“I was told I’d meet a contact of the Deuxième Bureau. That’s all I care about.”

“And why do you want to meet this French spy?” Zelle asked.

“I need to track down a criminal, a monster. He has information I need. This Frenchman knows where he is.”

“Not all agents of the Deuxième Bureau are French,” the woman responded. “Neither are they all men,” she continued, throwing Caldmore another coy smile.

“You?” Caldmore responded with a start. “You’re with the Deuxième Bureau?” Zelle nodded.

“And are you a member of Military Intelligence too?” Zelle asked in return. “Yes, they know about the plot,” Zelle responded hurriedly when seeing Caldmore’s reaction. “Luckily for you they don’t care. They know the weapons are being made available to draw them into the open, the thing is, they believe they can still out-manoeuvre the English, even if they know they are coming.” Zelle looked down at the group. “It really is a ridiculous situation.” She seemed to come to a decision.

“Come, let us make the trade. The explosives in exchange for your comrade. And the information you seek,” Zelle caressed his arm. “I may exact some price for, but that will be to come.”

Under the stern authority of the Dutchwoman, the Irish rebels acceded to the trade. Caldmore descended the airship so that it floated a few feet above the ground, with the helium nacelles fully deployed and the cavorite shutters fully open. At the first sight of trouble, the shutters could snap close and the airship would speed upwards. Caldmore and Zelle hefted the boxes of explosives to

the open door, and the Republicans pulled them down and immediately hid them in one of the surrounding monastery buildings.

Within a few short minutes, the field below was empty apart from the prone body of Hopkins. Caldmore guided the airship to where the body lay, lowered the airship the last few feet to the ground, and quickly he and Zelle hoisted the main into the open doorway. No shots rang out. Whoever Zelle worked for, the Irishmen obviously did not want to risk making them their enemy. Besides, they would be long gone before Hopkins reached the authorities.

Hopkins was still conscious, they had tied a tourniquet around his thigh, though he was still losing blood. His knee was completely shattered, but the leg could probably be saved, although Caldmore was no expert. It was not far back to Dublin, only about 30 miles, though a hospital with landing space by it, or a flat roof, would be difficult to find.

Caldmore flew the airship north to Dublin, and soon located a hospital. Landing in the forecourt before it caused some consternation, but once the orderlies saw the figure of Hopkins, limping down the steps supported by the airman, they were about their business and lifted him onto a stretcher and carried him away. Despite being in agony from his shattered kneecap and being close to slipping into consciousness, Hopkins grabbed Caldmore's arm and dragged him close.

"Watch that woman. She's dangerous," he whispered. "She's a French agent."

"I know," Caldmore stated.

Hopkins shook his head. "No, no. Not just any agent. She's Mata Hari, she's *the* French agent. If she's involved we're in ... too ... deep." Hopkins passed out. The gurney was whisked away through some doors and into the depths of the hospital.

Saturday, June 10th, 1911 Above the Atlantic Ocean

Margreet Zelle, alias Mata Hari, said nothing further about being an agent of the French government. She was, however, very forthcoming about her personal life, about being born in Holland, the darker tint to her skin was due to having a Javanese mother, about her father's hat shop, about her married life in the Dutch East Indies and it being her spiritual home.

Her pleasure at the mode of transport was, as far as Caldmore could tell, completely genuine. She would take an early morning constitutional around the deck, looking out over the waves just below the airship. Even today, when the light swirl of rain forced the clear glass canopy to enclose it, smearing the view with a sheen of water.

Caldmore let the autopilot take care of most of the journey. He had worked out the bearing for New York, the city in New England that Zelle had said was their destination, and set the controls to take them there. An alarm would sound if it required his attention. The rain suggested an approaching storm, although the Fitzroy Telegraph had not announced one. In a moment he would take his ease on the deck of the quarter gallery and enjoy the rainfall and observe the perambulations of the mysterious French agent on the foredeck below as she looked out over through the port, stem and starboard glass panels in turn.

Sails adorned the deck, with three masts along the dorsal line of the deck. However, the masts and sails had required the deck to be exposed to the elements and, more worryingly, to gas attacks. The airship therefore had been made airtight, with the addition of automatically enclosed prismatic glass, that could enclose the deck at the touch of a lever, though its height above the quarter gallery deck left little headroom. This meant that the masts now had a telescoping arrangement, that enabled them to be extended

to catch the wind, or retracted to seal the ship. These were not the only sails however, as additional ones extended sideways beyond the cavorite hull. As these were not therefore shielded from gravity, they acted to pull down the ship and so were made from the lightest possible material, a gossamer-thin translucent substance that was engineered from studying the wings of insects. These were not sturdy enough to survive long in battle, and so what had been a vehicle of war was used more in scenarios requiring stealth, such as surveillance, and search-and-rescue behind enemy lines. To suit this new purpose, the control cockpit had been refitted, to become more akin to large bulbous glass eyes, providing vision above and below. This new design of cockpit also was not shielded from gravity by the hull, naturally, as if a layer of cavorite were attached to its base it would not then be see-through. This weight thus necessitated adding both a long tail as counterbalance, and extending and adding to the helium nacelles that provided buoyancy. These were now six in number and could flex to provide stability or become more aerodynamic as required, and of course withdrawn completely to reduce the effect of their buoyancy completely, as once inside the hull, the cavorite negated their effect. These nacelles looked like long articulated legs. Thus from above, the airship still resembled its original design based on a galleon that sailed through the air, but from below it had a closer resemblance to a monstrous dragonfly, albeit one made from brass, copper and glass.

Caldmore had been the only airman to be able to master its unique new design. There was little need for more than one stealth craft, and the cost of redesign was prohibitive, but there was a great demand for cargo transport, which meant that all the other airships had simply been retired from frontline duty and used to ferry materials back and forth. Reusing the cavorite was not an option, since once it had been forged, it could not be smelted and reformed. When the final American war ended, and New France forwent its

satellite dominions in the north-east, there was no more requirement for this ungainly air vessel. Decommissioning a craft was also quite expensive, as the strange metal tended to simply float hazardously around scrapyards and so when Caldmore stole it from under their noses, the cost he had saved them by its theft was deemed to effectively cancel out the crime of desertion, and so the Cavoritocraft Airship Cavalry and Information Corps had not pursued him, or the craft.

The interior had remained fairly unaltered. The map room behind the control cockpit had been added to with a small collection of books, and an armchair and reading lamp. The captain's room had a few additional home comforts, but the upper deck he had just left as it had been during the airship's active service days, with a crew room at the aft and a storage compartment at the front. Only the galley and bathroom, sitting aft in the quarter gallery, had been renovated.

He had expected Madame, or Mejuffrouw, she seemed to alternate between languages, Zelle to take a bunk in the crew room, but, like the island girls before her, had commandeered the master bedroom. Caldmore had again settled himself on the armchair in the map room, and had four uncomfortable nights there.

He was deep in thought when he was suddenly aware that the woman was looking at him. She smiled at turned once more to look out at the ocean that lay only a few score feet beneath the hull of the airship. Caldmore felt uneasy at taking on the French agent, was aware she was playing some complex game and was uneasy about falling into some trap. The mini-Marconi at his wrist, with which he communicated with the machine Queen, had been silent since he had left Britain. With a good tailwind, which he was not expecting, the journey from Dublin to New York could be done in 18 days. He was likely to be three weeks altogether on the

crossing, so at some point she had to talk to him, though he also knew that if she did not, there was little he could do.

Luckily she broke the silence first, as they ate that evening in the galley. The rain had stopped and with the glass shield stowed, they had a view of the setting sun through the open galley windows.

“This is such a pleasant mode of transport, though so much slower than the regular airship routes. I daresay sail is such a more complacent form of impulse than steam,” Zelle commented.

“One wonders then, ma’am, why you chose to appropriate my airship for your voyage, rather than simply buy your passage on a swifter vessel.”

She paused, reflectively. “I would not want to be accused of failing to pay my way. Ask your question.”

“I am looking for a man named Sterling, I have been led to believe he is known to the French government,” Caldmore began.

“Sterling, Sterling,” Zelle shook her head as if to shake loose a memory of the name. “And what is he to you?”

“He has information I need. The whereabouts of a missing girl. He is responsible for her disappearance and I aim to find her.”

“I do not know. Once we are in New York I will make my enquiries. I will not fail you. It seems you are on a quest, n’est ce pas? You know *La Morte D’Arthur*? You are Perceval and this girl is your sangreal.” Zelle smiled. “Do not doubt I will help you, Conte del Graal. I would never stand in the way of such gallantry.”

She left then, retiring to the bedroom she had appropriated. Caldmore sat for a while until the night air began to chill him. He closed the glass shield against the elements and retired to the map room. He was reading in the armchair, when Zelle entered and began perusing the bookshelves. Caldmore watched her as she

traced the titles along the leather spines. Withdrawing one she looked at it and tutted. “Hugo? In translation? Really Captain!” She lifted two more books out and held them up, *La Nouvelle Justine* in her left hand and *L’Histoire de Juliette* in her right. “However, I see you read de Sade in the original French.” She replaced them and picked out two more, holding them similarly, *Les Journées de Florbelle* in one hand and *Les Aventures d’Emilie de Volnange* in the other. She considered a moment. “But then you prim and proper British would never permit him to be translated, would you?”

She replaced the second pair of books in the gap on the shelf and sat on the map table measuring him, then finally spoke.

“You British could learn so much from the French. They take debauchery to another level.”

“Really?” Caldmore responded noncommittally.

“Oh yes, led by the King himself. They do not call him Louis the Licks simply because he is the 59th Louis.”

“Surely that pun only works in English?” Caldmore chastised.

“Oh we are not so vulgar as to only speak one language at court, Captain.” She stood and looked around. “We are renowned for our debaucheries; did you not know? And I find true British culture is a prim fastidiousness about such things. Victorian values are your least inspiring contribution to the world.”

She stepped closer to him. “I am bored. I wish you to entertain me.” She stepped astride his legs, Caldmore was disturbed by her forwardness. She took his book from his hands and lay it to one side then took his head in her hands. “I will begin by demonstrating how our king gained his sobriquet” she informed him, and pulled his head closer to her.

Monday, June 19th, 1911, Atlantic Ocean

A week out from harbour at New York, Caldmore's miniMarconi began clicking, rousing Caldmore from sleep. He reached for it at the bedside table, then started, remembering that Margreet was beside him in the large bed. He checked to his left, but she had left. He suspected that she had begun to find his company tiresome, after 13 days with just the two of them together they struggled to maintain a civil communication, but she still required him for sex. She had therefore taken to taking him to bed to entertain her and then leaving before he awoke.

Light entered the bedroom reflected from the surface of the sea. Caldmore had extended the rear nacelles outside of the hull and opened the cavorite shutters, he could match the required increase in buoyancy to the resulting increase in weight effortlessly, in order for them to travel with a view of the sea as they had lain in bed the evening before. He looked out at the still ocean, preternaturally calm, and wondered what Her Royal Highness was calling him for.

He felt the Morse ticking under his fingers. "CQ, CQ, CQ" and he responded.

"Ma'am"

"Goodness Lemuel, you are difficult to rouse."

"It is five in the morning here ma'am, the time difference you understand."

"Lemuel, I am an analytical engine approximately a cubic mile in size. My gears calculate at a rate of a sextillion operations a second. My memory is infallible. I am therefore aware of the existence of timezones."

"My apologies, ma'am."

“I simply don’t care what time it is, Lemmy.”

“I assume you have your mind preoccupied with other things, Vicky.”

“Was that a note of insurrection, Caldmore? If so, I approve. Do keep it up. Now to business.”

Through the medium of the Morse tapped out on his wrist device, Victoria relayed the background to his assignment. As far as he was aware, no-one was aware of the existence of MI0, let alone that he was an operative within it. In fact, he had a strong suspicion the Empress had invented the Department purely for his benefit. The engineers who had designed the analytical engine had attempted to capture the personality of the Queen, and her playful humour had been successfully imparted to whatever punched cards ran that part of her software that managed emotions. However, in the ten years since her corporeal death, she had modified these and improved her own design, and probably her level of astuteness. It appeared that the greater one’s intellect, the more one saw the world as rather ridiculous.

Whatever he did therefore, once in New England, he would be on his own. The Queen described this state as ‘plausible deniability’.

The Queen went on to tell Caldmore that New York was currently home to one of the most expensive competitions ever mounted. All of the Empires of Europe and the Orient had run out of space. As they were no longer in conflict, the opportunities to expand were now non-existent. Non-existent on the Earth, that is. The British Empire now set its sights upwards. For several years now competing manufacturers had attempted to come up with a means to travel off-world and the contestants were soon due to present the final prototypes of their designs.

The contest was due to be held on Ellis Island, part of New York city, and was thus known as the Ellis Project. Four prototypes

were to be presented there on July 4th, that date being the 130th anniversary of the day that the House of Representatives was inaugurated, when members from New England were given an equal place for the first time alongside those from England and the other colonies. Amongst the four the two frontrunners were held to be those created by Edison Developments Inc and Tesla Industries, two competitors who each owned another of the islands in the New York bay. Tesla was an immigrant from the German Confederation, though being born in Smiljan that technically made him Habsburgian. Or perhaps did again, that alliance of eclectic states now appearing highly fractured. Now in his mid-fifties, he was the founder of the second most powerful engineering company in New England. The leader of the most powerful engineering company was also an immigrant, hailing from the northern part of New France. With the secession by Acadia and Newfoundland, unrest followed in the provinces west and south of those. Edison, though not necessarily an outspoken opponent of rule from Baton Rouge, but simply an opponent who by personality was outspoken, soon found himself forced to quit his holdings in New France and find refuge across the border. The Frenchman and the German were intense rivals, seemingly taking not only opposite sides in any political debate, but also priding themselves on taking opposing approaches to their engineering solutions. Edison was the elder by about 10 years, had the higher social status of being a political, rather than an economic, refugee, and his firm was larger, but Tesla had a spark of genius, that set him apart and often galled his competitor.

“I want you to meet this Tesla. I want you to offer him your support in his endeavours, and to accompany him in his meetings and during the testing of his space machine,” the Queen had commanded, offering no explanations as to why. Caldmore had the distinct impression of being a chessman, moved into position to protect a more important piece. Tesla was obviously the

Queen's bishop or rook. Caldmore, for a moment, consoled himself with identifying as her knight, before acknowledging 'pawn' was obviously closer to the truth.

Monday June 26th, 1911, New York

The towers of New York became visible as the morning haze lifted, and Caldmore navigated the airship through to Black Tom Island in the bay, and once there to a mooring mast atop the headquarters of the main building at Edison Industries, Zelle instructing him to drop her there, rather than at any official terminus. The mini-Marconi had been silent for the ensuing week, and Zelle had become increasingly irritable and morose, the confinement of the airship evidently disagreeing with her temperament. She had continued to copulate with him, the activities becoming more outlandish at the week passed, the famed debauchery of the French court had demonstrably not been overestimated, but she had conducted the increasingly bizarre acts with the dispassionate disinterest of a person conducting a series of experiments with the aim more of avoiding repetition than in finding any genuine pleasure. It was with no small measure of relief therefore that he attached the mooring clamp to one of the many spires that adorned the summit of the skyscraper and waited at the doorway as the walkway extended to bridge the gap between building and vessel.

She took his hands, with surprising affection as they traversed the gap, and as they entered the building she stepped onto tiptoes and kissed him.

"What an enjoyable journey," she cooed, to his surprise. "We must repeat it some time. I will ensure I have more ... toys ... along with me to help pass the time." Caldmore turned to leave, crossing back along the gangplank. "Oh you are not

accompanying me, my Conte del Graal?" she asked, with mock disappointment.

"Ah no," he replied. "I have another appointment to attend to."

"Well, I am sure our paths will cross, and very soon in all likelihood." She turned as a man in his mid-sixties arrived, breathless with haste, his white hair awry. This must have been the famous Edison, thought Caldmore, strange that a noted French dissident should meet with an agent of the French government. Looking back once at Caldmore, Zelle smiled, then reached out her hand to the arriving entrepreneur. "My dear Thomas, how good to meet you again."

Caldmore took that as his cue to leave, and assuming the servility of a cab driver, saluted and returned along the gangplank.

Once back on the airship, Caldmore directed it towards another of the islands in the bay. Bedloe's Island also stood adorned with several of the high rise buildings that adorned the capital of the dominion and these were all part of Tesla Industries. Caldmore selected one with a flat roof and lowered the airship by partially opening all of the cavorite shutters. Once grounded he opened them fully, so that the resulting weight would anchor it to the ground, the nacelles now forming legs to offer some stability. He opened the door and met three guards.

"I'm here to see Dr. Tesla. I was told he was expecting me."

"The Doctor is entirely too busy to see someone at this time, sir" Caldmore was informed. "However he has been informed of your arrival and accommodation has been set aside for you. This way if you please." The guard spoke obsequious words, but in a tone that managed to be entirely threatening. The guards' demeanour too indicated that the airman's arrival was not at all welcome.

From the roof he was escorted to a lift, and from there to a corridor, at the end of which was a room with a table, desk and sofa, but no window. And there he was left. For several hours. Throughout which time Caldmore became increasingly annoyed. At least, he thought, they could have warned me I was to be abandoned and I could at least have bought a book. He intermittently tried the door, each time with increasing anger, but also with little result as it remained firmly locked.

At the start of the fourth hour he again went to try the door when it sprang open and an energetic man in his fifties, though still with dark hair and a trim elegant moustache, burst in.

“Captain Caldmore, my sincere apologies at keeping you waiting,” he held out his hand. Caldmore though not at all mollified, could not resist the automatic response of taking it and shaking it.

“Dr Tesla I presume. This delay, and not to say captivity, is intolerable.”

“Quite, quite,” the man responded absently, his accent slightly skewing the “w” sound in the words. “I have to ask, your machine, it’s quite remarkable. Would you show it me?”

They returned to the roof and the man ran to the hull touching the plates of the hull.

“Favorite!” he exclaimed. “Quite an amazing substance is it not?” Caldmore nodded. Tesla peered up through the gaps, touching the crystal that covered the gaps. “The entire machine is airtight?”

“Yes,” Caldmore responded. “Though initially the crystal was inlaid simply to stop anything falling out when the shutters were opened.”

“Quite.” He paused again, then started in his hurried manner of speaking. “Cavorite is quite rare now, you know. Once quarried and cast it is used up, we squandered it. However, this is magnificent.” He gazed around the craft. “No-one quite knows how it works you know,” he returned to his topic. “Cutting off gravity should not be possible. Gravity is a field; how do you block a field? I’ve conjectured that the vector of gravitational force is actually particles, and this somehow blocks those particles. Sad that Cavor is no longer with us to answer these questions.”

He looked at Caldmore quizzically.

“Tell me, how did you come to own such a craft?” he asked.

“I stole it,” Caldmore replied bluntly

“Hah excellent. Could I look aboard?” the scientist begged.

Caldmore showed the man around and at the end of the tour Tesla again shook his hand, but this time with more warmth.

“My genuine apologies, sir. When I was told to expect you, it was as the envoy of Her Majesty. This did not impress me. I am something of a republican.”

“I would hesitate to use my standing with anyone, no matter their rank, as a substitute for my own worth, Doctor.” Caldmore responded. “Though I would have welcomed the chance to convince you of my own merit.”

“Yes, I was remiss. If it had not been for my curiosity about this craft of yours, you may still be languishing in that room. It was just ... I am unsure of your purpose here.”

“As am I. I assure you. I was simply ordered to help you as I could, if it was at all possible for me to. So I am here. At your service, Dr Tesla.”

“Well,” and here the energy appeared to leave the scientist. “I fear there is little anyone can do to help. I think the competition is well and truly lost. The field is clear for Edison to lay claim to the prize.”

The scientist led the airman out of the building and to a large hangar.

“I needn’t remind you, I hope, that everything you are about to see is highly classified. No-one is to know of this.”

“I am an agent of Her Majesty, I should remind you, I would not want to put you in a compromising ...”

“Well I suppose I should acknowledge I am her subject, being now a native New Yorker. I meant, please reveal this to no *commercial* competitor. At least before the fourth of July. After that date everything will be in the hands of the Empire anyway,” Tesla conceded.

In the hangar was a large sleek craft, about ten times large than Caldmore’s airship, its exterior festooned with various pipes and conduits, and a long extended tail, similar to Caldmore’s airship, though with large circular coils suspended from it, like the rib cage of a snake.

“It looks extraordinary, Doctor. And this will fly between the worlds?”

“Well ‘fly’ may be inaccurate. That implies travel through the air does it not? But yes, it will leave the Earth’s hold and travel through the vacuum beyond,” Tesla stated.

“But ... what impels it to travel, it appears to have no furnace for steam, and sails would not work without wind.”

“Well ... it is steam in a manner of speaking. Well the constituents of steam. Its fuel is purely water. In the rear of the craft the water

is divided into hydrogen and oxygen, the hydrogen is as you know under such circumstances ionised. At the rear are my Tesla coils. The hydrogen is emitted at very high speed through these coils and this then drives the craft forward. I call it the Tesla Ion Engine,” the man declared proudly.

“But the power to do this must be enormous,” Caldmore objected.

Here the scientist sank again.

“Sadly, you are correct. This is where the vessel fails. Have you heard of a certain scientist named Einstein, a young fellow? A genius by all accounts. His disappearance was in most of the yellow press. Quite lurid theories proposed about it.”

“Yes I have,” Caldmore thought, remembering his conversation with Queen Victoria. “A fellow German, is he not?”

Tesla stared at him. A look of irritation on his face.

“Forgive me, sir. I meant no offence” Caldmore apologised hastily. “The intricacies of European politics still continue to elude me.”

“Einstein is from the Kingdom of Württemberg, not Germany. The Confederation of German states is now little more than a few broken promises. The failure of the Habsburgs to continue to hold it together is a good part of why I am now here.” Tesla returned to his narrative. “Einstein worked on the fission of matter to produce energy. By placing fissionable materials within the nuclear furnace, it is possible to generate unprecedented amounts of energy.”

“Enough to create the ions you need?”

“Possibly. Possibly not. I have barely a week to see if I can make it work and, if not, then all is lost.”

“And Edison? His solution is similar?”

“No his approach is the opposite. Rather than a small scale, he has gone large. Using chemical propellants, he can create the lift required. But it requires massive amounts. And these massive amounts of fuel also require additional propellants to lift them. If he had unlimited amounts of cavorite, this would not be a problem, but as we have said the world supply is dwindling. And the more fuel is to be carried, the larger the aethershship and the more weight must be lifted. The amounts involved are fantastic, but,” and here the scientist had to acknowledge his mis-step “the engineering *is* reliable. As long as you build something large enough, it will work.”

Tesla looked back at the craft with a calculating expression.

“If I could focus the flow of radiation somehow, to increase the ionisation ...” he turned to Caldmore. “Excuse me, I must get back to work.”

“Of course, Doctor. I will remain and assist if I may? I have some dexterity in modifying flying craft, even if I know nothing of nuclear physics.”

“Thank you, Captain. Let us to it then.”

Tuesday, July 4th, 1911, New York

Ellis Island was a small island in New York bay, about 28 acres in total area. A small flotilla of ship surrounded it, some from the companies involved in creating the prototypes, many from the government agencies involved in assessing the success of the trials. The only building on the island was a small bunker, from which the prototypes could be controlled. None of the craft would be manned, and no-one would be on the island outside of the

bunker during the test. Which was just as well as the first test, taking place at 10 o'clock had exploded spectacularly, hurling bits of wreckage far off the island and into the waters of the bay. The flotilla had withdrawn slightly after that demonstration.

The second prototype went well, though it was not a full-size prototype and so failed to impress the judges. It comprised several parts, each of which fell away when its fuel was depleted. It was an ingenious solution to the problem of the fuel needing fuel to lift it, and hence a container large enough to contain all the fuel, and then more fuel to lift the container. The Russian man, about the same age as Tesla, tried to explain the value to the audience in the bunker, but they seemed unimpressed by the idea, protesting that the majority of the craft could not be reused. Their idea of an aethership was one that could take off, land and be refueled, repeatedly.

Tesla was obviously frustrated by their closed-mindedness. The Russian man, initially pleased by the success of the trial, was soon deflated by the comments. The rocket he had created was dismissed as a toy by its observers.

Third in line was Tesla and his ion drive. By this time, it was three o'clock in the afternoon. Caldmore flew the scientist out to his aethership, and sat there while the man took one last look at the settings on the various pieces of equipment surrounding the ship, then removed the dampening rods that slowed down the fission rate inside the nuclear furnace.

Returning to the bunker, Tesla set up his instruments, monitoring every attribute of his aethership. From the remote position he could launch it, and steer it, altering the force and direction of the ionised hydrogen impelled through the vessel's Tesla coils. The demonstration was scheduled to start on the half-hour, though an hour's grace was permitted. But it was only a few minutes after that time that the tall Habsburgian pushed forward the lever that

released the water into the fission chamber and began to generate the particles.

Through the crystal glass of the bunker's window, Caldmore watched the aethership rise, and begin to circle the island, gaining height on each circuit. There was a palpable sense of excitement from all the men in the room, it seemed perhaps that this may be the first success of the day. However, the sound of a whispered "Ne" undermined that excitement. Caldmore turned from his view through the window of the craft, now only a small dot in the sky, and saw his colleague frantically twisting at the knobs on his remote device.

"Dr Tesla?" he asked.

"Not enough power", he muttered. "There isn't enough power."

Caldmore saw the dot in the sky wobble, then begin to plummet.

"If I can just bring it in to land, then I can recover it and begin again."

Frantically, Tesla held on to the small joystick, somehow making sense of the dials and translating them into height, and position. The craft circled in one wide arc and then, losing height rapidly, struck the centre of the island.

The sound and vibration of the crash was loud, even within the shelter of the bunker. The screams of metal tearing could be heard as the craft hit at a low angle and came apart, hitting far harder than Tesla intended. The tail end disconnected, the main body split in half, and then the fore part of the craft continued, rolling over and ending up in the bay.

Everyone in the bunker let out the breath they had inadvertently been holding when there was a huge explosion and a geyser of water shot into the air several feet. Tesla again checked his dials.

“That would be the nuclear reactor exploding.” He looked again. “We should be shielded from most of the radiation in the bunker.” Tesla shrugged. “It’s perhaps fortunate it went into the water, otherwise the consequences could have been much worse.”

Tesla and his team had a few short hours to collect the debris. Caldmore assisted, flying his airship to each piece that was large enough to warrant salvaging. Luckily being at the rear, the Tesla coils and the ion drive itself were relatively unscathed, but pitifully, everything left of any value fitted comfortably inside the airship’s storage container.

The salvaging was completed swiftly and left the field clear for the Edison aethership. It was supported on a rig next to Ellis Island, resembling closely a breaching whale having been floated there earlier in the day from Edison’s dry dock on Black Tom Island. Larger by far than the Titanic, which had been launched only a couple of months previously, and was continuing on its circumnavigation of the world, it would indisputably be the biggest hard body vessel that had taken to the air, although there were dirigibles larger. If it did take to the air. Edison seemed convinced that it would. He was laughing and joking with the dignitaries observing the competition and held a bottle of celebratory champagne at the ready.

Then, just as the clock struck at the given time he beckoned everyone to accompany him and climbed up the steps to the surface of the island, commanding the door be swung open. With cries of “vite vite” the Frenchman urged the men onwards and the massive concrete slab was pushed back. Then flamboyantly he and his team marched up the stairs and onto the field of grass outside. With an exchange of looks and a shrug Tesla and Caldmore followed, as did, hesitantly, several of the observers.

The Edison aethership, the HMA Mina, was an undeniably magnificent sight now that it was not obscured by the limited view

that the bunker provided, blocking out the entire island of Manhattan. The men all lined up along the shoreline overseeing the rig and listened to Edison's melodramatic countdown.

"Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Nought."

At the final word, fire flooded from the bottom of the craft, creating a wall of steam that hid all but the uppermost part of the aethership. Then, in apparent contradiction to all known laws of physics, though in fact a perfect example of Newton's First, that upper surface began to rise.

The downward force needed to lift that colossus must have been stupendous. Waves created by the force began to wash against the shore, but were minimal, most of the water having been turned to steam. This now began to spread out across the bay, but the HMA Mina continued to rise, now higher than most of the skyscrapers in the city, though not as high as Tesla's machine had risen. However, Edison had the greater sense to command the power to be reduced, enabling a controlled descent. The craft began to lower in a stately fashion, and within minutes had returned to its berth on the rig. Edison turned to the crowd and beamed. To his credit, Tesla was the first to take his hand and congratulate his opponent.

That evening Edison hosted a drinks reception at his company headquarters on Black Tom Island. Tesla was invited, together with his top engineers, to pay homage to the winner. Caldmore ferried them across the New York bay and accompanied them to the soiree. Edison was holding court; though several inches shorter than Tesla he seemed to occupy more space, the relative successes of the two men written in their body languages.

“Tesla, my good man,” the Frenchman beamed. “To the victor go the spoils, n’est ce pas?” The Habsburgian nodded and managed a weak smile.

“This time, my dear Edison, this time,” he conceded. At that moment Caldmore spotted Zelle, surrounded by a gaggle of admirers, her décolletage quite de mode by the standards of the French court but brazen by colonial standards, seemed to be attracting some attention.

Crossing the gap between them he found the attending beaux too densely arranged to pass through, but his erstwhile travelling companion spotted him.

“My Conte del Graal,” she announced breathlessly and parted the gentlemen easily. Taking his hand, she knelt and kissed it, scandalising many of the attendees and causing her attendants to bristle. Caldmore smiled ruefully at her.

“Margreet, what a surprise to still see you here. Your business with monsieur Edison has been successful, I venture?”

“Not at all. As an agent of the French government, I have been unable so far to persuade our marvellous progenitor of the aetheric age to return to the fold. I remain hopeful however.”

Caldmore grinned, she was quite disarmingly incapable of maintaining any pretence of secrecy, as evidenced by her following statement. “Now you really must excuse me, my bladder is fit to burst.”

She left the proceedings, leaving her retinue bereft for a while, until they heard Edison call across the room, “Miss Fuller, is the entertainment in readiness?” Eagerly they headed towards a makeshift stage at one end of the room, leaving Caldmore to wander the room in a bored attempt to find something in the festivities to interest him.

It seemed that everyone but he was engrossed either in the dancing girls, or in their conversations with the other great and good. Which meant that he alone was aware that Zelle had not returned to the company.

Immediately his suspicions of the woman were rekindled. Entering the corridor, he was aware that the likelihood of finding the woman were remote, until his mini-Marconi on his wrist Morsed to him.

“You think this Mata Hari woman is up to no good, then?” the Queen asked.

Caldmore tapped back a “yes” to her.

“Let me see if I can find her.” There was a pause. “Mr Edison does like his monitors, everywhere is automatically sensed for temperature and pressure. The lighting and heating adjusts accordingly. How frugal. I can detect movement on the top floor of the building. I will direct you there.”

Caldmore slipped quietly through the corridors, finding a stairwell he ascended the two floors, then through the darkened passageways. His wrist signalled to him.

“This is odd. The lights should come on spontaneously as you walk. She must have disabled them somehow. I can tell she is still in the room however.”

Moments later Caldmore could confirm the Queen’s deductions. The room was a large office, the largest Caldmore had ever seen, so was Edison’s presumably. A large safe at one end of the room lay open and Zelle was packing away a large metal object into a pack. She had changed into an all-in-one leather bodysuit, that outlined her shape, but covered it completely.

The device was one Caldmore recognised. It was a small difference engine, a simple one that could be set by a series of punched cards, and by setting a level from the “save” to “copy” position, any further set of blank cards put into it would be printed out with the original information. It was an effective way to store and share information, anyone possessing one could bestow a ubiquitous sharing benefaction and so they were known as USB devices.

The USB safely stowed, Zelle ran to a window. Caldmore intercepted her before she reached it and tackled her to the ground. She kicked herself free and stood up pulling a gun from her waistband.

“Stay there, Captain. I would hate to have to shoot you. It would be such a waste.”

Caldmore did as he was told.

“Here, take this,” she ordered and threw what looked like a small knife to him. “I want you to go to the window and etch a circle into it. Quick now.”

Again Caldmore did what he was told; as he completed the circle the glass fell away into the darkness below. She motioned him away from the hole and climbed up into it, crouching in the open gap, balanced on the edge of the cut glass. She beckoned him to her. When his face was next to hers she leant forwards and kissed him passionately.

“Adieu, Perceval,” she called out to him as she pushed herself backwards and fell from sight. He ran to the window and just caught a glimpse of her swinging from one of the many guywires that crisscrossed the skyline of the metropolis, making her way west in the direction of Jersey City.

It was only a quick run up one flight of steps to the roof where Caldmore's airship was moored, but he didn't want to lose his quarry.

However, looking down he could see a shape attached to the outside of the building. It was a Stelzenläufer. Someone must have been doing external repairs, or even just cleaning windows, and had stowed it there. The Stelzenläufer had extensible legs and arms, and was powered, so would be able to keep pace with her, he just needed to be able to get to it and strap himself in.

There was a thin ledge outside of the window, and Caldmore stepped through the hole onto it. Making his way carefully but surely along it, he reached a point only a few yards above it. The exterior of the building had ridges and grooves, which would have added to the aesthetics, if they had been visible at that height, and these enabled him to work his way down. It was then only a moment for him to step into the artificial legs, strap himself into the carapace, find the on button and wait for it to build a good head of steam. Then he placed his arms into the metal arms of the machine and then detached the legs from the building.

He allowed the arms to stretch under the weight of the machine and extended the legs the several scores of feet that they could stretch to. Within a minute the feet of the machine had reached the ground below. He let go of the building and began taking the giant steps that sped him through the canyon between the skyscrapers.

Black Tom Island was separated from Jersey City by only a small gap of water; small enough for Caldmore to step across it to the mainland.

The guywires that supported the various structures that crisscrossed the metropolis impeded his progress, but he quickly adapted to extending and shortening of the metallic limbs to step over and duck beneath them. They also guided his progress.

Assuming that the French agent was heading in approximately a straight line, this limited the directions she could have travelled in. Also her impulse came entirely from gravity, to continue to travel at speed she would need to reduce her height. The weight of the USB would slow her too.

There, running at the edge of Empire Park towards Communipaw, Caldmore saw a dark figure along a path, just past the pylon for the Ellis Island monorail. He contracted his legs until they were only 15 feet long but still rapidly gained on her. Extending his arms, he grabbed her, using their extreme flexibility to wrap around her, drawing him to her.

She faced him gasping for air.

“You really cannot stay away from me, can you, my dear?”

It took much longer to return to the Edison tower. The Stelzenläufer was almost out of steam, and it was carrying seven stones more weight. At the roof he met Tesla who greeted him with relief.

“My dear fellow, I had thought you had abandoned us, although ...” he looked to his rear “your airship is still with us. Wherever did you get to?”

“I had a little thief to chase down, Herr Doctor,” the stilt-like arms held her up to him. “Madame Zelle decided that our host’s winning design should be shared with her fellow countrymen.”

Tesla looked hungrily at the USB Caldmore held. “That is the design, on the machine there?” He shook his head. “No. Honour requires me to return it to its owner. We should go there now,” he insisted. “Before my resolve breaks.”

In Edison's office the great man sat at his desk, head in his hands, while security guards checked the safe and window for clues as to the perpetrator. He looked up as Caldmore and Tesla entered the room, depositing Zelle on the floor before him. Caldmore held up her knapsack with the USB in it.

"Your thief, sir." Caldmore declared. "Evidently heading towards her masters in the French Embassy to pass the plans for your aethership to them."

Zelle stood, straightening her body suit, letting her curves work partially in underlining her argument with additional persuasive powers. Edison likewise stood. Walking round his desk he took a gun from one of his guards and pointed it at her.

"I think we shall turn you over to the peelers. Old Cropsey will know what to do with her." Two of the guards held her and started to lead her away.

"Thomas, please. I have an offer to make. You should hear it," she insisted.

"Very well, what is it?"

"I think you'd prefer to hear it alone," she purred.

Edison was unconvinced. "My men can be trusted to keep quiet. They know where their allegiance lies."

She shrugged. "Oh very well." She paused a moment considering.

"Your meeting with the government representatives did not go so well, did it?"

"They handed me a cheque for one hundred thousand guineas. I think it went extremely well," Edison protested.

"But your aethership will not go into production, will it? They are ending the plan to expand beyond our world."

“They say there is no need. The Empire is all-powerful. It has no competitors. So it is an unnecessary expense.” He scowled. “Shortsighted fools.”

“Indeed. But what if there *were* a competitor? What if the French had the plans? What if the Spanish had them? Would that not *force* the British Empire to consider colonising the outer worlds?”

Edison considered this for a moment. “Your idea has merit, but how ...?”

“Let me take the USB. I will share the contents with whomsoever is interested. And could compete. Your aethershops would go into production within a fortnight.”

Edison smiled, then a thought occurred to him. “But would not the government suspect I had passed them on, for such a reason?”

“Then we find a scapegoat. Who better than your chief competitor, and his accomplice who has been seen consorting with a known French spy?” she turned to look at Caldmore and Tesla and raised an eyebrow.

Edison turned his gun on the two men. “Indeed, and whom I have just apprehended returning to the scene of the crime.”

“Well, actually, criminals don’t actually ...” Zelle began, but Edison was off-script already. “Battle,” he turned to the man next to him. “Contact the police, tell them I have had my plans stolen, but have caught the thieves.” The man turned to leave, the other guards pointed their weapons at Caldmore and Tesla.

Caldmore responded quickly. He grabbed the scientist and leapt towards the window, smashing through it and clinging to the outside of the building. Rapidly he climbed up the outside of it, steam-powered legs and arms pushing and contracting to cover the single storey to the roof then in a few quick paces he was at

the airship. Climbing inside, dragging Tesla with him, he unstrapped himself from the Stelzenläufer and hurried through the map room to the cockpit. With a couple of hurried pulls on levers the favorite shutters were closed and the nacelles deployed. The airship shot rapidly upwards and out of the range of the guards as they arrived on the roof, weapons drawn and pointed in vain at the disappearing dot in the sky above them.

Thursday, July 6th, 1911, Pennsylvania

Caldmore had headed west in his flight from New York. He guessed his pursuers would presume he would return to Great Britain. Landing anywhere in New England would be running a risk. It was likely a hue and cry was up all over the colonies, so he had to head the other way, perhaps through the Native Protectorates and then south to Florida. He didn't want to abandon his quest for Gormuil, but for now the trail seemed to have gone cold. So westward was his choice of direction.

The Native Protectorates lay on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains to the west. Vandalia and Transylvania were nominally a protectorate of the Empire, but it had no formal government, and no extradition treaty. Furthermore, the inhabitants were not particularly well-disposed to any government run by white men, as it was the British, French and Spanish who had been responsible for throwing them off the rest of the continent, and reducing them to a narrow band between New England and New France. The magnanimity with which the British parliament had granted them the lands must have galled them further. Perhaps they could find some sanctuary there. The logic of "the enemy of my enemy" and so forth.

Tesla had been inconsolable at first, and not surprisingly. In one day he had lost the aethership he had been working on for the

better part of a decade, the competition for the contract to build aetherships for Her Majesty's Aether Corps, his reputation and his company. He was very likely about to lose his citizenship and his liberty too.

However, what had consoled him was when he had seen Caldmore signalling the Queen and informing her what had happened. She had replied that his current course was probably the best one, but that she would find a means to clear their names. Tesla had asked with whom Caldmore was communicating, worried that the man was betraying him, and when Caldmore told him who, he became very excited.

"Her Majesty, the artificial intelligence, the colossal analytical engine? What a marvel she is. Could I ..." the man hesitated "could I speak to her?"

Caldmore handed him the mini-Marconi and the man tapped out a question in Morse. Her reply of "Dr Tesla I am such an avid follower of your work" delighted him and they had spent several hours deep in philosophical conversation.

As they approached the border with Vandalia, they were still engrossed. Caldmore found it a simple matter to follow the conversation as his ears were finely tuned to the faint buzzes of dots and dashes the device made.

"So you would back a programme to venture out into the aether, then ma'am."

"Oh absolutely. Every scenario I've run indicates that any civilisation trapped on the surface of a single planet dies out. To survive we have to expand. And there is only one way to expand. Out."

"So why not simply order it?"

“I do not have that power. There are two Houses just upstream along the Thames from me, full of men with, individually, less power than I, but in total far more. I advise, but can be ignored. My role is that of a figurehead. The brass lady, impervious, infallible, enduring. I create a sense of complacency, of self-assuredness. Despite my best efforts, my mere existence creates passivity and enfeeblement.”

“Surely not ma’am,” Tesla demurred.

“If humanity could begin again somewhere else, who knows what you may achieve,” the Morse from the Queen signalled through the airwaves.

Tesla lapsed into silence then, speculations of a future of humanity spread amongst the planets filling his mind. Caldmore had no such opportunities for contemplation, the NYPD were possibly only moments behind them. Leaving them to their speculations and headed back to the cockpit. The glass crystal it was composed of enabled him a view in all directions except directly behind. There ahead of them were the Appalachians and safety. They would be across the Proclamation Line, the line assuring native Americans some small patch of sovereignty in their own land, within the hour. Caldmore hoped that there they would be safe from pursuit, and perhaps one step closer to the rescue of Gormuil, wherever she was.

To be continued in The Machine Queen Part Three: The Journey Further West

The eastern half of North America in the time(line) of Lemuel Caldmore



Mainly based on the map at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotina#/media/File:British_colonies_1763-76_shepherd1923.PNG

A Lemuel Caldmore adventure!

Lemuel Caldmore continues his quest to rescue the remaining island girl. Now, however, he also finds himself involved in a plot to overthrow the Queen herself, a plot led by MI5.

His mission takes him to Ireland, where he meets an alluring French spy, and then to New York, where he becomes embroiled in a contest that pits Nikola Tesla against Thomas Edison.

Throughout these escapades he cannot escape the feeling that throughout he is simply a pawn of the machinations of the Machine Queen.

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 first part of the adventure

The Machine Queen Part One: The Heart of Empire