

Horatio Vane and the Clockwork Sodomite

Chapter One:

In which our Gentleman Thief completes one commission (and begins another).

Once again, the Protectorate's most renowned (and hunted) Gentleman Thief found himself in a less than advantageous situation: Hanging upside down from the uppermost spire of Saint Paul's at midnight, on a Saturday, had not been penned into his appointments diary as far as he was aware. The presence of seventeen (Vane's pendulum like swaying had not disabled his capacity to do arithmetic) of The Capital's fine constables edging with all due diligence around the outer edges of the dome did nothing to improve the immediate conundrum. His main regret at this point, was that he had chosen the lobster for dinner not three hours earlier at The Hanged Man Club. The choice in itself was sound, as the lobster in question had not boiled in vain and was as exquisite as ever. It was the upside down nature of the current situation that had begun to give Vane cause for discomfort. He decided to muster his entire Merton College education in carefully choosing his vocabulary, as he used his stiletto knife to slice through the silk cord that had caused the inconvenient dangling in the first place. Thinking swiftly and using the most famous (and feared) brain in Europe to decide on what could possibly be his final words to his adoring public, Vane cut the line and bellowed into the wind,

"Fuck it all!!"

It was at this precise moment that Pimlico, Horatio Vane's trusted young valet, appeared through the smog, cycling furiously in order to power the velocozeplin. The outer skin broke the fall, allowing the Protectorate's most renowned (and hunted) Gentleman Thief to evade capture once again, with nothing more than injured pride and six broken ribs.

"Beautifully done Pimlico" winced Horatio Vane, checking for the third time that the leather map case was still inside his jacket.

"But this really is a most ridiculous way for a grown man to make a living."

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Special Inspector Holdridge didn't even look up when the dusty tube was tossed onto the table as he finished his sticky toffee pudding. He merely licked his spoon and nudged the leather casing away slightly before sipping his Chablis and finally addressing his oldest personal friend and greatest public enemy.

“Nicely done H.V. I trust the Catacomb Librarian wasn’t too much of an inconvenience?”

“She was as forthcoming as ever Greggles.” He scratched the marks on his neck. “I trust the payment for this little escapade is situated in the usual place?” The Gentleman Thief held his ribs carefully as he scooped a little of Special Inspector Holdridge’s custard up with his finger and savoured its wondrous flavours while the Spy Master unrolled the casing to gaze at the enclosed maps. The first (human) to do so for eight hundred years.

“The diamonds are with your Valet as we speak old chum. By the way, you haven’t seen The Protector’s Sergeant Surgeon on your nightly wanderings have you Vane? Sir Frederick seems to have gone missing”

“Treves? No, not at all. I’ll keep an eye out for him. Anything else, oh great and powerful Spy Master?”

Holdridge raised an imperious eyebrow at his former school friend.

“I believe our dear comrade Vespasian Floom is in need of your help old boy. He’s down in the lunar study, now do bugger off before someone sees us chatting.” Special Inspector Holdridge finished off his custard then glanced up to find himself totally, though not unexpectedly, alone.

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Horatio Vane was helping himself to a sherry as Vespasian Floom, Lord Adventurer and hero of the Protectorate entered the library. Pimlico, the Valet studied the leather bound titles on the shelves that surrounded and enveloped the room.

“My dear Lord Vespasian, what nonsense have you gotten yourself into now?”

Floom poured himself a sherry and flopped into one of the huge leather armchairs which were ensconced around the room like upholstered wildebeest, seemingly grazing on the paisley carpeted savannah.

“I require your expertise Harry. I fear I have been a little indiscrete, and have lost something of great value to the Protectorate.”

Vane sipped his sherry and raised his eyebrow in one exquisite movement (which bore all the hallmarks of being practised in the wardrobe mirror many times over several years, which indeed, it had).

“Whom have you bedded and what have they stolen this time Floom?”

Vespasian Floom, Lord Adventurer and hero of the Protectorate leapt to his feet, “I resent that remark, we never went near the bed!” He grinned at his old chum.

“I met an Automaton in the form of a rather beautiful lad over at The Palace Theatre on Shaft’s. An amazing piece of magick and machinery he was.” He sipped his sherry. “They’ve Maud Allen doing a rather wondrous version of Salome.” He lit a cigar and smiled that

wickedly famous smile at Pimlico. Horatio Vane picked up a bread roll from a silver platter and threw it at His Lordship's head.

"Leave him alone Floom, he bats for our side not yours. I hear the new Salome is rather good, even Lord Wilde has sent his blessing according to the notes in this quarter's Yellow Book. What was it like?"

"I've no idea my dear chap. I met the clockwork boy in the lobby before the performance and bought him a quick gin. He seemed rather eager to get a good seeing to; I invited him back to the town house for supper and a thorough fucking"

"Why don't you use post boys, Floom? They're to be trusted, and they don't steal the silver."

"Too true Vane, too true. But they put on such airs and graces. Whilst this automaton has been the talk of the Clubs for weeks, I simply had to have him."

Horatio Vane sighed as he refilled both their glasses.

"Fair enough. What did this delightful bit of mechanical rent take then? I presume it is this artefact that you wish me to find and retrieve post haste."

Vespasian Floom hesitated as his glass moved towards his lips.

"I fear the little shit has stolen The Shard, Vane. The Ebonite Shard."

Vane put his glass down rather more forcefully than he had meant.

"Buggering hell, Vesp!"

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Chapter Two

In which motives are gleaned, biscuits are eaten, and our Valet does a passable impression of a rent boy.

They rattled along from the club towards Great Russell Street and Montague House. The steam cab moved along rather cautiously in the teeming downpour (The Capital's Aethomancers had been tinkering again, you could always tell as for days later the rain had a metallic taste to it, and was faintly purple). Pimlico methodically transferred the diamonds from the small velvet pouch into a secure leather wallet in the lining of his waist coat. Then he fished out a humbug mint from his pocket, removed any extraneous bits of lint and flicked it into his mouth.

"So what are we chasing after this time, Sir?"

"It would seem that the young man, or rather the automaton, in question has made off with The Ebonite Shard. It's one of The Protectorate's most valuable and powerful artefacts, what experiments Floom was using it for is anyone's guess. The bigger question is whether the mechanical boy knows what it is or whether he simply stole something that looked shiny and valuable. If it is the latter, this should be easy. If the former, then I fear we have a rather more complicated situation."

"I've heard of this Shard I think. My Alice was going through one of the newspapers you keep trying to make me read, something about Sir Arthur Foundling's return from his exploration of the Aethersphere. His Driftship 'The Redoubtable Cumquott' only just made it back."

"Indeed Pim'. He brought back an important tome that, if it is genuine, may well be the key to our understanding of how the Shard, the Aethersphere and its strange denizens work. They are calling it 'The Skaravaine Codex' after the wondrous city said to be at the heart of the curious dominions within the 'sphere. Sir Arthur could shed little light on any of it, as he was dead within a week of his return."

"A curse, Sir!?"

"No Pimlico. His good lady wife shot him. She had, it seems, built up some rather powerful resentments concerning him disappearing for six years, leaving her to act as de facto MP for Bloxwich South." Vane stared up out of the cab window at the vapourships moving the world's goods across the Capital.

"According to well informed rumours at The Hanged Man Club, the Codex suggests that the Twelve Shards which, until now we have presumed are some kind of repository of arcane knowledge, are actually enormously powerful sources of the Aether itself. There's conjecture that they are possibly connected to the immortality of Our Great Lord Protector Richard and the other Elders." He waved at Lady Beatrice Wellington alighting from her carriage as they joined the squash of traffic down Tottenham Court Road. She had been kind enough to be away last Tuesday, when The Protectorate's Greatest Gentleman Thief and his Valet had called around to her town residence (beautiful silverware and a very nice Gainsborough).

Pimlico finished his mint, “But Lord Cromwell looks really old Sir, as do the pictures I’ve seen of the other Elders.”

“Indeed Pim’. The strange conjunctions of time and place of birth that causes the Elders to be born immortal only seem to slow aging, not stop it.” Vane clicked his fingers, until Pimlico relented, and gave him a mint.

“When he cracked the code and began to create the charts that allow our betters to figure out exactly when and where an Elder will be born, Old Dr. Dee never explained that to Queen Bess did he? Must be bloody annoying eh? Immortal, but still aging, albeit slowly.”

“I saw a newsreel at the picture house with Alice last week. The Holy Roman Keiser was on. He looked awful!”

Horatio Vane laughed, “Well yes Pimlico, my boy, he is 140 years old! And we really must watch that scoundrel. That whole Saxe-Coburg Gotha brood are up to something over there. The evil Dark Widow schemes from Balmoral in her Scottish Dominions; The Bavarian Sorcerers are plotting in the Black Forrest, and the whole of the Empire is starting to flex its military muscles. I fear The Protectorate must watch itself. And now this.”

“I think it may be more than a coincidence that the Skaravaine Codex appears and The Ebonite Shard subsequently disappears, Sir.”

“You are learning my boy!” Pimlico smiled the smile that had trapped quite a few low born serving girls of the public houses around the Capital (no disrespect to Alice).

“And you are quite correct, I fear. That is why we are on our way to see the Gentleman who has been given the task of unravelling The Codex, and whom, if I’m not mistaken, looked after the Shard before Floom. ” They alighted outside Montague House and Pimlico, not for the first time, found himself paying for the cab. They swiftly entered The Office of Protectorate Artefacts Sorcerous.

“Also, my dear Pim’, the gent we are about to meet is rather high up in our Protectorate’s homosexual elite. I’m banking on the fact that if Lord Vespasian Floom has plucked our kleptomaniac clockwork boy, then this esteemed Knight of the Realm has either had him already, or plans to do so very soon. Ah, here we are!” Vane knocked on a set of double doors that had abruptly brought their corridor to an end.

The door suddenly opened and the pair was greeted by a tall gentleman with a somewhat forbidding centre parting and a nose that seemed to be doing a passable impression of a sundial. Calumny Vane removed his hat and bowed slightly (as did Pimlico after a swift jab to his ribs).

“Pimlico, may I introduce to you the Keeper of the Protector’s Artefacts Sorcerous: Sir Aubrey Beardsley.”

“Gentlemen, do come in.”

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Horatio Vane placed his empty teacup back onto his saucer and finished off the shortbread biscuit before continuing. “So Sir Aubrey, the Shard in question seems to allow Aether to flow directly from the ‘sphere?’”

Sir Aubrey glanced out of the window whilst discretely picking his nose, “Indeed, my good man. Though it will not bring inanimate objects to life as such, it is a conduit of energy if you will.”

Pimlico went for the last piece of shortbread and was rewarded with a scowl from the Gentleman Thief.

“And what of the clockwork youth, Sir?”

“I have, as your employer here rightly presumed, indeed had some acquaintance with the boy. He is known to me as Collodi. I, how would you say, enjoyed him several weeks ago at my country estate. I then found the little buggler trying to gain access to my study in the depths of the night. So I had him sent packing. It was unfortunate, as he was a most beautiful device. Very compliant to my wishes, so to speak.”

“May I ask where you met young Master Collodi, Sir Aubrey” Pimlico had taken out his note book.

“Certainly. We met at The Palace Theatre. He approached me for a light and I took him to lunch.”

“Well Sir Aubrey,” Vane rose to his feet. “We thank you for your time on this most delicate of matters. It is good to see you fully recovered from your latest bout of tuberculosis. Ever onwards Pimlico!”

Pimlico shook Sir Aubrey’s hand before hastily following The Protectorate’s most renowned Gentleman Thief from the building.

“Where now, Sir?”

“On towards the Theatres my trusted Valet, where we shall turn you into a rent boy for the evening!”

Pimlico shook his head and hailed a steam cab “Not again!”

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The Protectorate’s most renowned Gentleman Thief knelt with his back against the tall crenulations atop The Palace Theatre of Varieties and lit a fine Jerez & Torres Havana cigar, watching the good and ill of the Capital pass below, up Shaftsbury Avenue and down Charing Cross Road. He had just finished calculating how to gain access into one of the upper floor apartments opposite in Earlham Street when the stairwell door flew open and Pimlico lurched through, swiftly slamming it shut and leaning hard against it. His tight fitting waistcoat was slightly unravelled and he appeared to be missing his hat. He glared at his employer and shook his blond head ruefully.

“The things... I do... for you, Sir.”

Vane smiled and blew a passable attempt at a smoke ring. “Indeed my boy, indeed. Any luck?”

“Well the Caledonian Ambassador asked me back to his club. And Lord Floom took a shine, then realised who I was, and made a pass any way. There were a couple of Aethomancers in there as well, snooping around. Those blind toffs give me the creeps. This is no way to make a living Sir! What would my Alice say if she knew?”

The Gentleman Thief flicked the remains of his cigar over the parapet watching the ember arc into the evening gloom. “Nonsense, Lad, your Alice would be proud. Though I was actually talking about any information you may have gleaned.” He then extricated a steam pistol from his inside coat pocket and pointed it across at the buildings opposite. The diamond grappling hook shot out in a burst of hot vapour, trailing a silken line.

“Oh, I see.” Said Pimlico, “Well, apparently the automaton we’re after will be at Miss Esme’s gathering this evening at Greenwich.” He tidied himself up and in so doing found another sovereign in his waist band, tested it with a bite, and tucked it into his pocket.

The Gentleman Thief smiled again and carefully climbed up onto the main terracotta facade of the Theatre.

“Well Pim, let’s get ourselves ready to hobnob with the elite of Society’s politicians and magicians shall we, and track this little bugger down.”

Pimlico followed his Employer over the edge and clamped his swing hook onto the taught silk as it took his weight and swung him out across Cambridge Circus. Pimlico shouted into the wind whistling around him “From what I gathered in the Theatre Sir, the young gent in question is more of a bugger-er.”

Horatio Vane landed with practiced ease and disengaged himself from the mechanism, as Pimlico expertly descended onto the balcony of the upper most apartment. His employer took out a small cutter and his silk gloves. Silently he pressed his palm against the beautifully etched glass pane. All of the windows had recently been re-glazed in the latest Nouveau style. Vane was extremely grateful as the design presented him with a large circle that he used as a guide as he cut through the glass with the barest whisper of a sound. “I thought, while we had time, we might take a peek at what Lady Elsinore has left lying around her London digs.” The glass disc dropped inward onto the deep woollen carpet of the boudoir, and The Protectorate’s Greatest Gentleman Thief reached in and undid the window latch.

Pimlico smiled and took his own silk gloves out of his pocket. “Very good, Sir.”

Chapter Three:

In which our protagonists attend a party and meet (amongst others) their quarry

Miss Amber Esme had made her sanctum in a magnificent town house at Vanbrugh Park Road in Greenwich, near to The Observatory and College of Aether Magicks. Her Salons were famous and many of the Protectorate's elite vied for invitations to the social gatherings and lectures over which Miss Esme held court. Born into a Barge working family in Oxfordshire, her blindness was quickly recognised as the inner sight of a natural born Aethomancer, and she was soon awarded a scholarship to the Guild College at Great Rollright. Her ongoing studies and the publication of several of her pamphlets on theories in colour magicks (specialising in crystalline greens), brought her to the Capital and a research post at the Greenwich College at the early age of 23. Over the next several years she had carved out a place in the intellectual firmament (it was also rumoured that she had proven to be a far more powerful Aethomancer than had been realised, and that her position within House Raphael, one of the Aethomancy High Guilds, was far more senior than her public insignia suggested). She had recently moved closer to the College of Aether Magicks here at Greenwich and purchased for herself this grand townhouse in Vanbrugh Park Road. It was to here that the great and the good (and the plain curious and odd) came to discuss and debate the main topics of the day. Within this hotbed of gossip and intellectual inquiry she was ably guarded by her redoubtable housekeeper, Mrs. Quib.

"Your coats Gentlemen, please."

Horatio Vane removed his (now somewhat weightier) overcoat and handed it to the diminutive lady, "You are looking as delectable as ever my good woman!"

Mrs. Quib opened a side door and launched the coat through it without a thought or a look as to where it may land. "With all due respect Mr. Vane, go fuck yourself Sir."

"Indeed madam. Come Pimlico, before this foul mouthed mother of Grendel devours us both!"

Mrs. Quib watched as they swiftly made their way into the greeting room, "Self important twats" she mumbled, to no one in particular.

The room was fairly crowded by this hour. Pimlico, relishing the fact that he was a guest and not a valet for the evening wasted no time in grabbing a flute of Champagne and a handful of sandwiches. Vane scanned the scene with a professional eye for the clockwork boy, but to no avail. He recognised many of the people here, some from personal acquaintance and others from newspaper photographs and newsreels. A German Prince chatted and flirted with a well known actress from the Will Barker Studios at Ealing. One of the Major Generals (Oxfordshire, he thought) seemed to be having a heated debate with an important looking Rabi-Mage and Constantine Raithchild (said to be the richest young man in the Protectorate). Jacqueline Touseau, one of the Capital's most successful and powerful Courtesans sat sipping a glass of

absinth whilst breaking the heart of a young Captain of The Protector's Own High Guard. A triumvirate of senior members from one of the more sociable Aethomancers' Guilds (possibly House Gabriel, by their yellow cuffs) stood in a huddle by the aspidistra. As always they were giving the impression of watching and seeing everything, despite the fact that all Aethomancers were blind from birth. The lights from the countless candles glinting sharply off their pitch black glasses.

One of the more exotic (and outstanding) guests was a representative of The Greer. This exclusively Female race had emerged out of the Aether in 1898 at Horsell Common and had since brought many wonders to the Protectorate. The Greer (they did not seem to have individual names as we understand them) was at least eight feet tall with long spines instead of hair and long, thin elegant arms and hands. With three exquisitely lengthy fingers and shorter thumbs, she held a long wine flute that appeared to have been especially made for her race. Her skin was a translucent blue and seemed to glow as she moved around the room, her long silver grey gown swishing behind her. They may have only arrived in our world ten years previously, but they seemed to have mastered the art of English small talk at parties perfectly. Vane had never seen a Greer up close before and she was indeed as majestic as was reported. The Gentleman Thief nervously nodded to her and she bowed back, the corners of her slight beak like mouth turning up into an enigmatic smile. Quite overawed, he wandered over to a small group, expertly swiping a flute of champagne from a tray as he went.

"...Apparently Colonel Younghusband has returned to Tibet. The '04 mission was such a success, The Protectorate decided he should return to Lassa post haste." Horatio Vane recognised the lady speaking as Jenifer Willpepper, MP for South Staffordshire and a prominent member of The Protector's Foreign Affairs Committee. They had dined several times and he had burgled her country estate on more than one occasion. He signalled to Pimlico to scout around and look for the Automaton. A booming voice rang out from group he had joined.

"There is much talk Madam that the trade meetings in Tibet are but a cover for a Grand Meeting of all the Elders. That they are planning something to the general detriment of the rest of us mere mortals. What say you to that?"

The gentlemen who had shouted into the conversation was Jefferson Fitz, an American journalist who was making a name for himself with a series of startling pieces in The Spark Newspaper concerning the machinations of various Elders. Fitz suggested a pattern was forming that could be read as a plot of some kind.

"My dear Mr. Fitz, what your delightful little communist paper wishes to print will, I am certain, bare no relationship to any reality that I am aware of! And I fear that I should not be talking to any of our American cousins since you had the impertinence to refuse to lower your flag to The Protector at our Olympic ceremony this April! More champagne Gentlemen?" Horatio Vane wandered on through the throng.

Pimlico stood against one of the pillars near the corner of the room. It gave him an almost uninterrupted view of the gathering. He smiled to himself. Who would have thought that little Jack Pimlico would ever end up at a place like this, rubbing shoulders with the mightiest folk

of the Protectorate? Everything had changed five years ago, when the fifteen year old had decided to try his hand at breaking into a warehouse in Whitehall. Little had he realised (until he was upside down in a cargo net, over a pit of blades, with an Irish wolf hound attempting to eat his knees) that he had inadvertently chosen the home of one Mr. Horatio Vane. Rather than kill him, or worse, turn him over to the Protectorate Night Guard, Vane had taken the boy in, given him a home and a job and taught him how to do the breaking and entering bit properly. And so, Master Jack Pimlico had found himself Valet to The Protectorate's Greatest Gentleman Thief. Only his beloved Alice, the love of his life, knew what the less legal aspects of his job entailed. She didn't mind. She liked the jewellery. His mind had wandered and he suddenly noticed a rather tall older gent whose face, framed by lush long auburn hair, he vaguely recognised, was standing next to him, watching him with a sardonic smile on his lips.

"My dear delightful boy, you were miles away. Which is exactly where I would care to be, if only one wasn't supposed to be seen at *all* of these damnable soirees? Cigarette?"

Pimlico bowed slightly (out of habit) and thanked the man as he proffered a silver case.

"I quite like it. I don't get to come to these kinds of things often. I work for Mr. Vane over there." Pimlico pointed with this champagne flute while the rather grand gentleman lit his cigarette.

He then refilled Pimlico's glass and followed the gesture. "Ah! Our very own Bohemian Burglar. Several years ago Mr. Vane relieved me of an ornate green carnation carved from jade. A gift from The Holy Roman Keiser Himself."

Pimlico blushed "Oh I..."

"Fear not sweet boy, it was hideous." Another guest wandered past and nodded to the man "Lord Wilde."

Pimlico's eyes widened. His mouth opened and his jaw wandered southwards towards the ornate marble floor.

"I fear so dear chap. Returned from Paris only last year. The fighting of a duel with the Marquis of Queensberry was all very well. Killing him, apparently, was not. But really, I could forgive him his sulking over my fucking his son, but when he accused me of plagiarism! Enough was enough. The oaf had to go!"

"So you went to Paris?"

"Indeed, I felt it inopportune to wait around for our dear Protector Dickie's Night Guard, and so felt a sojourn to Paris was in order. I yearned for our Capital however. Paris is a beautiful place to die, but one could never live there!" He once again filled Pimlico's glass and winked.

"I left a murderer and returned a Peer of the realm! The world turned upside down. Are you looking for someone? You seem somewhat distracted."

"I'm sorry my Lord. I'm trying to find a rent boy"

"As are we all. If only to get some good out of the evening."

“This is a specific one, my Lord. He’s an Automaton.”

“Oh! You mean young Collodi; he is out on the terrace looking at the moon. Very beautiful, but I could never be fucked by anyone who ticks quite so loudly. It would be like attempting carnality with your mother’s favourite grandfather clock I fear. Do enjoy ones’ self, my boy.” With that Lord Wilde spotted one of the junior butlers and expertly glided across the room like a lion that had spotted a rather juicy gazelle.

Horatio Vane had managed to find the hostess of the evening.

“Ah, Mister Vane! Damned fine of you to attend. May I introduce you to some of my other guests?”

Miss Amber Esme was a mere five feet and three inches tall, but she commanded the room by her sheer brilliance. At only Twenty seven years old she was already tipped for Cabinet. It was widely rumoured that she counted The Lord Protector Himself as a close confidant. Her deep red hair and her alabaster skin were imitated across the Land as many society ladies wished to impress with the look of the ‘Scarlet Sorceress’ (Some of them even going so far as to sport the round rimmed enclosed glasses that all of the Aethomancers wore).

“This, Horatio, is our renowned guest at the College for the coming summer, Professor Tesla.”

The Gentleman Thief bowed and shook the taller gentleman’s hand. “It is a great honour Sir. I hope Greenwich College is treating you well?”

The Professor smiled through his great moustache and nodded.”They are indeed Sir. I am already engrossed in Miss Esme’s work. I have found that much of her findings concerning the green/red spectrum of the magickal fields bare striking similarities to my own work on the Teslascope for opening portals into the Aether.”

Vane did his best impression of someone who knew what was on earth the great man was talking about, and simply answered “Really?” He turned quickly to Miss Amber Esme, “My dear hostess, I hear that you have a rather unusual guest here this evening” She smiled at him and sipped her martini.

“Why Mr. Vane. Are not all of my guests of interest and unusual? To whom do you refer?” She cast her ivory cane at the gathered throng. Horatio Vane had often wondered during his many (and not altogether enjoyable) dealings with the Aethomancers, just how blind they really were behind their black mirror goggles.

“My apologies for being so vague ma’am. I am speaking of a young Automaton that has caused such a stir in the Clubs of Soho and the theatres there about.”

Miss Esme laughed. “Ah! The clockwork rent boy. He is indeed here somewhere. Several of the gentlemen have been sniffing around him like dogs on heat. If he’s amenable he could earn himself a small fortune here tonight, I feel. Although I do fear I have committed a social faux par by parading him thus.”

“How so Madame?” Professor Tesla raised an amused eyebrow.

“It would appear that the boy has escaped from a workshop over at the Arkley Windmill in Barnet’s Gate. This would not usually concern me in the least, as I think all beings should be free, even artificial ones. However, it transpires that the mill houses the laboratories and foundry of Count Oberon Malachite.”

Professor Tesla nodded “I know this man. Quite horrid, but a brilliant Artificer. He was responsible for the Mirenburg Golem I believe. An amazing piece of design that was able to transcend into the Aether and return with a multitude of artefacts. It has caused the State of Waldenstein to become something of a political power in the Germanic Principalities.”

“Indeed Professor. Something the Guilds are more than a little interested in. However, Count Oberon is a major patron of Greenwich College and houses somewhere here in the Capital. I fear that if he hears that I am parading his errant creation he will not be overly pleased. My concern is that it will cause problems for the funding for our more personal research. Lord Vespasian Floom is very generous, but even he cannot fund the whole experiment.”

Professor Tesla waved the concern away with his long fingered hand “Fear not madam, I shall talk to the Fellows here at Greenwich and smooth things over. Please excuse me. I see Madox Hueffer of The English Review over yonder, and I wish to discuss an article I have in mind.”

Horatio Vane also excused himself as Miss Esme took the arm of one of her butlers and moved across the room to talk to the Ambassador from the Mogul Imperial Dominions. The Gentleman Thief noticed Pimlico through the open veranda doors. He was leaning against the wall, looking out over the night shadowed garden. There appeared to be a younger man leaning on the rail next to him.

“Well done Pim.” Vane said to himself. He relieved a waiter of three glasses of champagne as he walked through the doors and over to the two boys. They seemed to be watching some sort of commotion out on the darkened lawn.

He handed his Valet one of the glasses, “What on earth is going on out there?” He peered into the gloom.

Pimlico drained his own glass and started on the one his employer had given him. The other lad gazed into the garden. Not looking around as he answered,

“Well, at the moment we seem to have (in the rather beautifully appointed garden of a senior member from House Raphael of the Aethomancy Guilds), some sort of altercation between a priest of the Great Papal Church wielding a cricket bat, and a Great Dane, wielding teeth.”

“Ah. Any sign of some sort of resolution to the situation?” There was a sudden shriek from near the delphiniums. And the unmistakable sound of willow against thin air.

“I fear the Dane may be gaining the upper paw, Sir. I am Collodi, and I believe that you have been looking for me.”

The boy turned away from the ensuing debacle and shook the Gentleman Thief by the hand. With the other he graciously accepted the glass of champagne. The moonlight seemed to

make the boy's face glow. Vane caught his breath. While he did not share the proclivities of Lord Floom or Sir Aubrey (although several gentlemen had given him a bed for the night in his youth, amongst the dark alleyways of Whitechapel, in exchange for a quick fumble), He could see what all the fuss was about concerning the boy. He was stunningly beautiful. Had they built him out of ivory? Were his eyes lapis lazuli? It was hard to credit that this amazing young man was no man at all, but a series of cogs and levers. This truly was an age of wonders.

Vane pulled his gaze from the mesmerising light of the boy's eyes.

"Pleased to meet you Master Collodi. I have a proposition for you".

The boy smirked and his perfect teeth lit the night a little more. "Many gentlemen do sir." His accent seemed to have walked straight from the Eton playing fields.

"I understand that you are the creation of Count Oberon Malachite." Both Vane and Pimlico noticed a slight flinch at the mention of the name, as if the evening had gotten a little colder for the moment. "And I surmise that you are in no mood to return to this individual. Perhaps, if a certain item was returned via myself to its rightful owner (an item that, I'd wager you stole on the orders of this Lord of the Protectorate) I may be able to guarantee your safety and a new life away from the said Gentleman." The Protectorate's Greatest Gentleman Thief took a sip of his drink.

The boy threw his own champagne flute out across the lawn, narrowly missing the priest who was manfully attempting a daring escape via the clematis plant climbing the western garden wall. The Great Dane was busying itself gnawing the clergyman's shoe into new and interesting shapes.

"He is no gentleman Sir!" Anger flashed across those beguiling eyes. "He created me to entrance certain men and find him The Shard. Yet when the task was completed, did he reward me? No! He expected me to return to the ranks of his other hundred puppets." The boy began to pace up and down the veranda in a most agitated fashion.

"To wait until he needed me again as a pawn in his grand scheme against the Protectorate. His frustrations at having only the means to power a few of his creations evaporated when I delivered the Shard to him. But I want to live Mr. Vane! I wish to taste this wondrous Capital as I have for the last few weeks!" he grabbed Pimlico's lapels, Horatio Vane instinctively reached for his pistol, "I want to be as alive as you are. What makes you work? How are you more alive than I?" He sank to his knees and, through some marvel of engineering, wept.

Horatio Vane could see that the clockwork boy was somehow driven to a kind of insanity by his predicament.

"We can help you Master Collodi, but you must help us. Tell me where Count Oberon is. Where are the other Automaton that you spoke of?" The boy looked up at the Gentleman Thief with eyes of pure longing.

"I just want to live Sir." He paused then and collected himself. "Count Oberon has a great house over on Hampstead Heath I believe. I have never been there, but I have overheard him give his steam cab directions on many occasions. Kenwood House it is called. The Automaton

as you title them are housed at Barnet's Gate - up at Arkley Windmill. It is well fortified Sir. But Dr. Treves, whom the Count holds prisoner there, helped me escape. I'm certain he would be able to find a way in again for us."

"Right. Pimlico, you go with Collodi here up to the windmill. It's over in the north of The Capital so steal one of the rather beautiful steam cars from out the front, and make haste. We need to know what the treacherous bastard is up to." Pimlico finished off his champagne and pushed the other boy back towards the party. "And you Sir?"

"I'm off to Kenwood House to deal with the fucker! I'll meet you at the mill. And Pimlico..."

The young Valet stopped, "Yes Sir?"

"Take care, my boy!"

They left the garden just as the wooden trellis holding the clematis finally gave way. The priest managed one last (rather unholy) exclamation before he plunged to meet, not quite his maker, but a rather large and hungry member of the species *Canis Lupus Familiaris*, with the name of Brenda.

Chapter Four

In which a traitor is uncovered and events occur within a windmill

The Protectorate's Greatest Gentleman Thief lost as little time as possible navigating the warren of streets from Greenwich, west through Deptford and over the River at Tower bridge. From here to his inner sanctum was a much simpler drive, as Vane made use of the disused tunnels of The Capital Hydraulic Power Company. His White & Poppe Vapour (a somewhat augmented vehicle that was the envy of the Protectorate's speed freaks) shot beneath the city and into his underground workshop and storehouse on Half Moon Passage, in the depths of his beloved White Chapel. Horatio Vane spent the smallest amount of time dropping off their ill-gotten gains, acquired from Lady Elsinore's Shaftsbury abode.

As he prepared his favourite Purdey Aether pistols and slotted them into his long coat pockets the Teslascope in the workshop crackled into life. Tesla had been developing it to penetrate the Aethersphere and make passage into it a more controllable affair, instead of waiting for the predicted natural phenomena and blasting a drift ship through, as had been the practice for over one hundred and fifty years. Vane had found that, with a few careful alterations, it made just as good a communication device across long distances, as long as the equipment built to use with it was correctly attuned. The orb was glowing blue (meaning the signal coming through was radiophonic only). Pimlico's voice boomed out until Vane ran over and adjusted the volume. Until last month it had been housed in a private collection at the Indian Embassy (very interesting window locks).

"Hello there Sir! I'm just reporting in. We have managed to gain access to the Mill. With the aid of one of the bellows boys who seems to have a thing for Collodi. It's amazing Sir. Beneath the mill is a warehouse of sorts. It's jammed full of Automata. Hundreds of them. Men and women, seemingly from all walks of life. There is also a strong box full of Gold Marks with the seal of the Holy Roman Keiser on them Sir. I haven't found the Shard Sir. I... I have to go. Collodi is getting rather agitated. He wants me to help him do something. I'll contact you soon. Try and hurry Sir. I'm not sure what to do." The Teslascope dulled to its ordinary milky white colouring. After checking his maps as to the relevant locations, Horatio Vane carefully put on his favourite Gebus top hat (taking care with his fingers of the modified metal rim) and ran to his car.

The tunnels sped him from there to the north of the Capital, bringing him out on the southern edge of Hampstead Heath. After leaving the Vapour in a secluded side ally, he made his way up the darkened road way of Mill Field Lane, his black clothed figure only illuminated sporadically by the landing lights of the various ships gliding in to Gospel Oak, one of The Capital's busiest Aerostations; situated on the corner of Parliament Hill. The Protectorate's Greatest Gentleman Thief banged his shin as he climbed the high wall surrounding Kenwood House. The lights were on in the magnificent pile, gleaming white walls illuminated by great lamps. It took Horatio Vane little time at all to gain access (the great and the wealthy were always extremely accommodating about leaving windows and even doors open for the uninvited caller).

Kenwood House was famous for the amazingly beautiful Robert Adam's Library, and it was within this monument to The Protectorate's greatness that Vane found the prospective traitor whom he sought. He stepped out of the shadows in one elegant (and well practiced) manoeuvre.

"Count Oberon Malachite I believe?"

The gentleman span around with a look of confusion on his face. He was a tall, broad man and dressed head to toe in the finest Scottish tweeds. His slightly greying handlebar moustache twitched with rage as he stood square in the middle of his Library and confronted the intruder with what looked to Vane suspiciously like a Mauser 08 needle pistol.

"My goodness Count, do you oft carry a state of the art German Empire firearm about your own Library?" The Gentleman Thief tried to become a little more concealed than he had been, out of habit for his own survival.

"What I do in my own House is of no concern to scum like you!" He pointed the needle pistol and released a thin beam of vaporised crystal into the wall next to Vane.

"Your tracking's off my good man." Vane rolled across the Library, coming to his feet behind a walnut desk. He pulled out his own Purdy and readied the chamber with a half twist. The shot took the head off Plato a good meter behind Count Oberon as he ducked for cover behind an early nineteenth century globe of Mars. At that moment Vane felt a hand grasp him with enormous force from behind, nearly crushing his shoulder. He span and managed to jam his gun under the chin of his attacker and, without a moment's hesitation, blew the bastard's head off. Bits of brass and cogs splintered the walls of the Library as the rest of the Automaton's body crashed to the ground. Vane noticed with a lurch of his stomach that there were also human brains spread along a beautifully bound second era set of The Protectorate Encyclopaedia. "What the fuck have you been doing Malachite?" Horatio Vane raged behind the desk. "What are all the Automatons for at the Mill?"

"Who on earth *are* you!?" Count Oberon moved carefully towards the bell pull in the corner of the room. Vane could see him in the reflection of the glass of one of the bookcases. "Holdridge send you did he? Do you honestly think I'm going to spout my plans and designs to the likes of you, like some penny dreadful Arch Villain!?"

The Gentleman Thief sniffed and began recharging his Purdey. "Actually, I was rather hoping so, yes."

"Damn you man! Insolent retch!" with that the Count hurled himself at the bell pull. Horatio Vane seized the moment and took his Gebus top hat, banged it flat and threw it straight at the treacherous Knight's head. In horror Sir Oberon pulled his right hand up to protect his face. The top hat with the razor sharp edging flew clean across the Library, taking the said hand with it. The howling aristocrat flung a travelling bag from the nearby side table across the room, knocking the newly emerged Vane to the floor. Screaming obscenities in several European tongues, Count Oberon fled from the room, trailing blood and hatred behind him. It took Vane several minutes to recover from the un-sportsman like attack on his groin, by which time the traitor had flown the nest. Vane (gingerly) followed the trail of blood, until it stopped near a tiny private Aerodrome in the grounds. The small Vapourship could just be

seen disappearing into the sky to the North West. Several rather determined looking gentlemen began to emerge from the building, as well as others from the House itself. Vane couldn't tell if they were Automata or real and had no intention of finding out. Two young girls ran from the main house, screaming, straight into the arms of a Policeman who seemed to have stopped to find out what all the bloody commotion was. Within moments Vane was in his White & Poppe Vapour, silently speeding across the north of the Capital to get to Pimlico at the Arkley Windmill.

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It was a six mile drive almost due north to the Mill. As he sped along the roads out of the Capital proper, the Teslascope device in the dashboard (not standard fitting) buzzed into life.

"Vane? This is Special Inspector Holdridge here. We picked up some distress signals from young Pimlico's transmissions to your device in White Chapel."

Vane looked quite affronted, "Have you been listening in on me, Greggles? Damned bad form old chap!"

"Of course we've been listening in on you! You're a bloody burglar, assassin and spy for goodness sake! Now shut up and listen. We've lost contact with the Teslascope at the Mill. My boys are on the way so look out for our Vapourship, it should be over the Windmill by now. Where have you been my friend?"

Vane quickly filled the Spy master in on Count Oberon. From the unassuming town house on Curzon Street, Holdridge fed instructions into the various Difference Engines and Vapour cores which sent orders out to his agents across The Protectorate. Within minutes a squad of the Night Guard were moving in on Kenwood House. True to his word, the Mill was easy to find in the little hamlet of Grendel's Gate as now two Vapourships were hovering above it, flooding light down from great search lamps. There twin orbs causing the surrounding trees to glow as if alight. A detachment of The Night Guard were in place surrounding the Mill, but it seemed to be in darkness as the White & Poppe Vapour skidded to a halt on the gravel path. One of the officers ran over and raised the visor of his Wolseley pattern (night service) helmet. He opened the car door and saluted

"Captain Vane. Sir!"

"Just Mr. Vane around here Mackerel thank you."

"Very good Captain. Mr. Vane. Sir!" There followed much unnecessary saluting. They ran over to the hedge row and the other Night Guards. Whereas Sergeant Mackerel stopped at the hedge and knelt down with the others, Vane kept going and vaulted the thing. He carried on at a sprint taking his Purdey out as he ran and smashing through one of the outhouse windows with a diving role.

The inside of the complex was pitch black. Vane reached into one of his (many) inner pockets and flicked his night goggles into place. A hazy green tint cloaked what appeared to be a kitchen storeroom. In the corner a small man sat, cowering. He turned as he heard in the darkness, Vane move towards him.

The Gentleman Thief flicked on his torch, lit a Jerez and Torres cigar and removed his goggles (a little clumsily, he had not practiced this particular manoeuvre).

“Dr Fredrick Treves I presume?”

“Mr. Horatio Vane!”

“You know me Sir? How flattering.” He puffed on his cigar and grinned. “Have we met?”

“Indeed we have. You stole my best blancmange tongues last August Sir.”

“Ah, so I did. Would you care to follow me sir? I fear there may be a small army of Automaton about to try and kill us.”

“There are, Sir! That rascal Malachite had me activate them and infuse them with the brains and spinal columns of living victims! He has my daughters, sir! The man is a monster!”

“I believe that your daughters will be safe. I shall prevent these fiends from enacting their devilish plot (whatever it may be) and then I intend to kill Count Oberon Malachite.”

“Right you are Vane. Lead on my man.”

They made their way through the rest of the infernal factory. Behind every door there seemed to be some hellish experiment or mechanical monstrosity, abandoned as the Night Guard moved in. On several occasions Horatio Vane had to discharge his Purdey into the manic half living brain of some poor victim. They finally came to a great hall. Dr Treves turned a dial on a small generator and the place filled with light.

“Gods...” Vane dropped his cigar and took in the scene in front of him. The hall was full of human figures, all perfectly still, all connected by pipes and wires to a huge brass and glass orrery like device hanging from the beams in the roof. Hundreds of them of all ages, different races, men and women, some children even. They were clothed as every social class and type of workforce. “They’re an army of infiltration!” He seemed to come round to his senses a little. “Where’s Pimlico? Where’s the Shard?”

Dr. Treves pointed to the orrery. “The Shard was housed in there. It was to power them, give them life. This is all too diabolical!”

“But where is it now. And where the hell is Pim’!”

A voice calmly called out from the darkness at the back of the hall. “I have it Mr Horatio Vane. And Jack Pimlico is back here with me.”

The boy Collodi walked slowly forward into the unnatural light. At first Vane thought he was simply incredibly dirty, but then the clockwork boy moved further forward, holding the Ebonite shard out in his hand like some votive offering. Dr Treves gasped in horror. Horatio

Vane, The Protectorate's Greatest Gentleman Thief, simply raised his Purdey Vapour pistol. The Automaton was covered in blood. It dripped into coagulating pools upon the floor as he continued to walk forward. His other hand was loose by his side, bits of warm guts and entrails slithered from his grasp onto the ground where they continued to steam slightly in the cold night air. Collodi turned his head slightly to an angle and blinked those beautiful sky blue eyes.

"I wanted to see how he worked Mr. Horatio Vane. Why was he free to be, and yet I was not?"

The beam of pure Aether vapour pierced the Automaton which had called itself Collodi through the centre of its polished forehead. It blinked once more and the lapis lazuli light dulled in its opal eyes. It fell to its ivory coated steel knees and stopped. Quite still.

An Epilogue

In which a curtain is brought down on certain activities, and there is a new dawn.

Special Inspector Holdridge handed Horatio Vane his hip flask, which the Gentleman Thief drained of its port. The office in Curzon Street, Mayfair was abuzz with agents and even a few Ministers from the Cabinet office, odd little men and women whose self importance seemed to rapidly diminish outside the Palace of the Commonwealth. Holdridge sat back in his leather chair and watched his old school friend as he gazed out of the window.

“The plans in the travelling case seem to suggest Count Oberon was off to Oxford. We have agents on the way. You should take a holiday Vane. It’s been a week now. All the other loose ends are tied up, we’ve rounded up the errant Automata.” He gestured to a passing agent for a cup of tea. “Lord Floom has the Shard back and His Most Gracious Highness Our Lord Protector has no idea any of this ever occurred. Things like this tend to give him indigestion. So what’s next for you my man?” Vane smiled and lit a cigar.

“Surely that’s obvious. I’m going to Oxford.”

Special Inspector Holdridge sighed then accepted a memorandum and a cup of Assam tea from his deputy, Mr. Kell.

“And what about Pimlico? “

“I’m going with him, Sir.” The boy who entered the office looked suspiciously like the Automaton Collodi, except with maybe more of a twinkle in his eyes and a certain smile not even death could get rid of. His walking and gestures inside the new shell would need some practice, but other than that he seemed perfectly happy in the mechanical, practically indestructible body.

“Good to see you Master Pimlico. Please come in. I understand Dr Treves did a splendid job in ‘mending’ you, shall we say. Oh, by the way Vane. Floom informs me that a small piece of the ebonite shard appears to be missing, any thoughts on this conundrum?”

“Absolutely none whatsoever Greggles.” He tapped Pimlico on his chest. “To Oxford to catch a most loathsome villain, my boy. Onwards!”

Special Inspector Holdridge finished draining his tea cup then glanced up to find himself totally, though not unexpectedly, alone.

Next: Horatio Vane and the Vengeful Count!