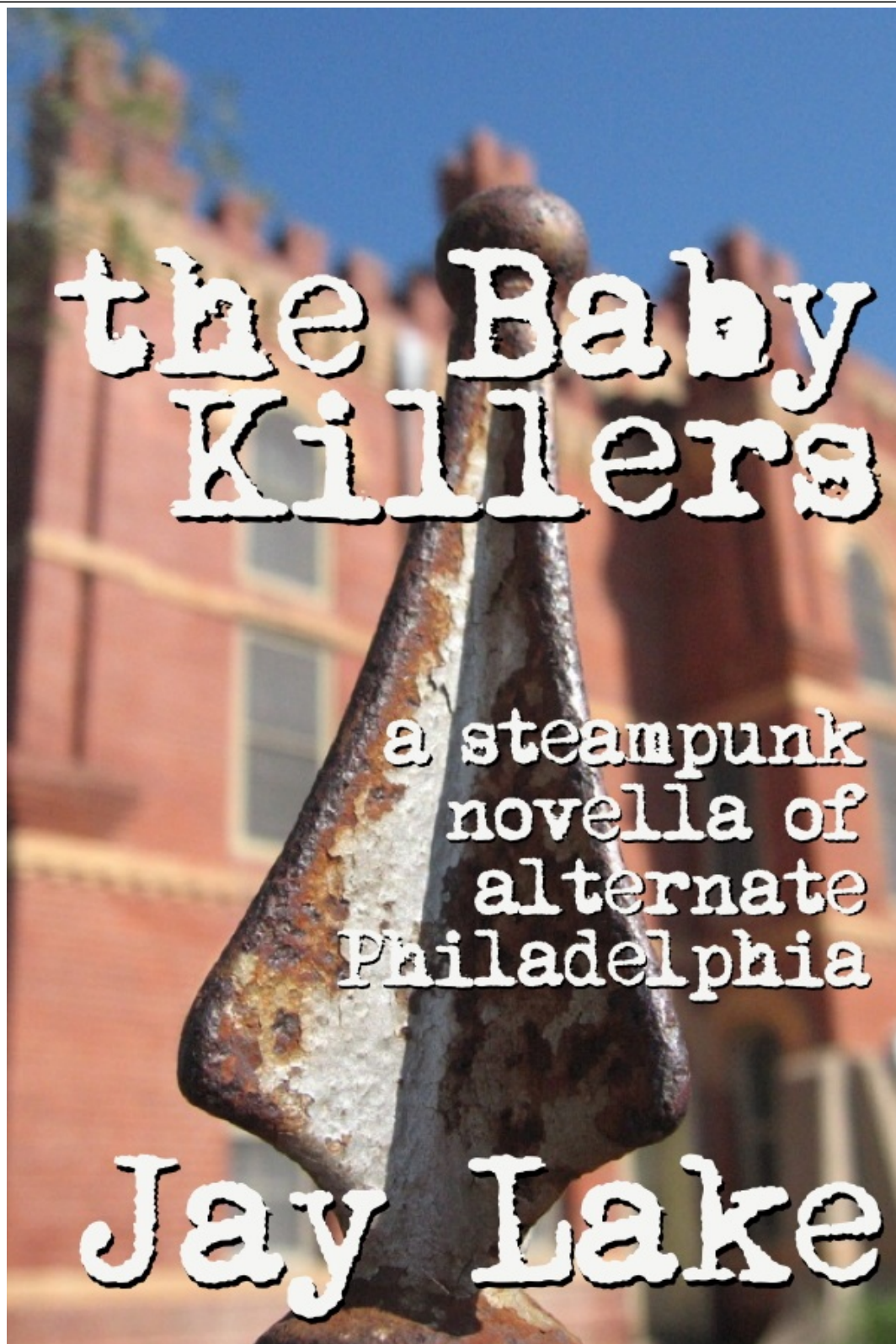




the Baby Killers

a steampunk
novella of
alternate
Philadelphia

Jay Lake



The Baby Killers
by Jay Lake

Smashwords Edition by Jay Lake

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The Baby Killers

by Jay Lake

“Consider the simple glove.” Dr. M.T. Scholes reached out and snapped the elbow-length object of his disquisition. His audience consisted solely of three small children with large, pale eyes, lambent and their grubby faces. An underling had strapped the tots to an examining table with tight-laced webbing and stout leather buckles. Small metal hooks pinned their eyelids open.

No one's attention was permitted to wander when the good doctor was speaking.

He rolled down the cuff to expose a complex internal construction. “This is sheathed caoutchouc for basic protection against laboratory spills and inconvenient bodily fluids.” Scholes paused to admire his reflection in the glove's near-liquid finish. “The glossy black of the rubber also lends a certain desirable aesthetic, the effect of which cannot be underestimated in the unlicensed medical trades.” Scholes cleared his throat and continued. “Below that we find a close-woven mesh lacquered muslin. This deflects blades or edges that might penetrate the outer layer. The muslin is in turn formed atop a coarser canvas mesh interwoven with fine copper and gold wires to ground unwanted electrical currents. Finally, beneath that is a layer of spiderweave silk that complements my excellent complexion and preserves my skin.”

The doctor let the glove slip back into place. The children just stared. They had no other choice.

“So you see, the simple glove, like everything in the modern laboratory, must be perfectly designed to perform many functions.” He leaned so close that their sour-milk breath disturbed his delicate nose. “Much as you soon will be.”

Scholes laughed. Not a proper laugh, more was the pity, though he'd practiced for hours in his chambers. A good, ripping cackle merely sounded deranged from his mouth. He was forced to settle for the sort of polite titter that a Member of Parliament might have found apropos.

The children's only answer was an unblinking regard.

“Really,” the doctor said quietly to no one in particular. “I must find a better quality of audience.”

Philadelphia is one of the most modern cities on earth. Pneumatic skyways link the major districts in the most commodious fashion. The visitor will be quite pleased with the AA trains in particular. A moderate fare premium assures the discerning traveller of the quiet luxury of club appointments, a tended baggage cabin trimmed in the finest Texian cowhide and Arizonac silver, and an unparalleled view of the sprawling seat of American commerce, government and culture.

Wireless towers with their transmitting cones and enormous ears rise above the city like the titans of Greek myth. The steam plants that drive cabling and magneto-electrical generators add the roiling breath in great clouds that serve to screen the sun's rays and enhance the city's salubrious climes. An efficient network of surface and tube railways has been modified to burn Dr. Sansom's patented health-coal, those life-giving rocks soaked in an admixture of vitamins and stimulants so that the smokes of the locomotives will have an improving effect on the populace.

In all, the city would be the envy even of a European power. Other races and regions can only aspire to a metropolis so indicative of the very forces of progress — the Asiatic may have his Tokyo, the Latin his São Paulo, the African his Cape Town — but not even the most prosperous colonial economy can match the glory that is Philadelphia.

Consider now this jewel of the Schuylkill. Our view dives past the buzzing wireless towers. Gleaming underslung carriages travel the cables and viaducts of the skyways as we pass. We then are brought low among the red brick colonial residences and Greek Revival temples of commerce, to skid along cobbled streets amid towering elms and the rushing feet of newsboys shouting out the late headlines of the hour.

Imagine that we travel with one of the new reductive kineopticons. The small machine's pressure tanks hiss as the device follows its punchtaped program and records all before the bowed lens from a dog's-eye view. Our vision would be rushed, the peripheries blurred and sliding kaleidoscopically as the streets unroll before our line of travel until shadow overtakes us with the suddenness of a mugger's cosh behind the ear. There we pass through a corroded brass gate to tumble in splashing darkness amid the groaning of pipes and the rumbling of boilers, finally to fetch up at the rubber-booted feet of an acid-scarred wretch known only as the Gollinoster.

Far from a champion of freedom, no suffragist for the poor and disenfranchised, the Gollinoster picks up the reductive kineopticon. She stares into the wide-curved lenses for a moment before hurling the doomed device into the red-running maw of a nearby furnace. All we see in the end is a flare of mechano-electrical death, accompanied by a hanging sense of bitter laughter.

This, then, is Philadelphia, layered from the highest fliers of wealth and privilege down to the pox-ridden scavengers of the steamways beneath the streets. This city of grandeur, seat of government in the Dominion of the Americas, harbors within its brick-lined core crimes so great and terrible that the stout heart of a Sunday churchgoer can scarcely compass their perfidy. No responsible broadsheet could print these sordid tales without closing its doors from shame.

The gears of justice grind slowly, and must oft be greased with the blood of innocents. The Gollinoster is unconcerned with the peruked barristers of Lawyers Row, and finds judges a nuisance especially when their headless corpses clog the drains. Still, rumor of a monstrous crime about to be committed has reached her ears, and pricked some small access in the clinker that serves her for a heart.

“What next?” you may ask.

Should you stay within our tale, gentle reader, you will see writ before you a palimpsest of looting and living and high misdemeanor, and the curious redresses that are visited as a result thereof. Or perhaps

you will prefer to lay down this ragged gossip sheet and set out a civilized tea. None would pass judgment against you for such a choice.

‡

Like most of his kind, the Governor-General is a man of moral authority and immoral tastes. He serves in this year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ought seven at the pleasure of the Queen. Her Majesty has long since retired to the vats and vacuum chambers maintained by Dr. Owlswick Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. Her wishes are communicated to Prime Minister Joseph Chamberlain via a complex series of aetheric transceivers and difference engines, assisted by, at least according to unkind speculation, a great deal of wishful thinking.

Our Governor-General, chief executive of the Dominion of the Americas, is a study in the diseases of power. He possesses a turn of mind which in a lesser person would result in confinement to a convenient attic, or possibly a penitentiary. In a cousin of the Queen his tendencies are considered charmingly eccentric. Still, the wealthy and powerful of Philadelphia are careful with their little boys and teen-aged girls in the Governor-General's presence. Five decades of carefully studied wretched excess have brought about a corpulent complexion that would shame a Bedlam lifer. He is given to noxious flatulence, and possesses a nervous tic causing his left eye to wander while he thinks.

Thankfully for the state of life in the Americas, that eye sinister rarely wanders.

Still, do not harshly judge Alfred George Bellerophon St. Mark Hanover-Ludd, Duke of the Western Atlantic. Belle, as he prefers to be addressed among intimates, considers himself a good man with the interests of his subjects at heart. His appetites he excuses as commensurate to his responsibilities, just as a poor man might hunger for a roast joint with his Sunday dinner. Observers have noted that Belle's greatest contribution to the political economy of the Americas is wholesale neglect. This has allowed a species of innovation to flourish in the shadows of hobbled regulatory and taxing authorities unable to expand their remit due to Belle's unwillingness to consider proposals requiring any particular amount of political force.

So he slops about the Maxwell Mansion in the Germantown district of Philadelphia, clad in a soft robe made from tribute furs sent down from the Finger Lakes by ancient treaty with the Iroquois, eating pickled cod and stewed oats; and ignoring the harassment of the clerks sent to him by the Parliament of the Americas and his own ministers of state. Thus the realm is governed with interventional *minima* and *laissez-faire maxima* that would have done Jeremy Bentham proud.

"Hoare!" he bellowed.

The Governor-General's factotum emerged from a hallway where he had been lurking, playing at Rochambeau with the Head Clerk of the Revenue Office. That worthy had been trying for over a week to secure an audience with the Right Honorable.

"Sir?" Hoare was a small man of middle years who gave the impression of having voles in his ancestry. He had come to the Governor-General through the gentlemen's trade, and still carried far more deadly weaponry than generally thought necessary for managing a household well away from any war zone.

"Hoare, what happened to that girl..." Belle waved a pudgy hand. Hoare made a mental note to have the jeweler in again — at least two more rings would require cutting off. "The one with the pretty eyes."

"Miss Francine?" Hoare sighed. "I believe her employment was terminated last week."

"Oh, *why*?" The Governor-General could be quite petulant.

"Unsatisfactory performance, sir." Due to being dead. Mortality had significantly reduced her ability to execute the duties of her position. Most of which involved bending to Belle's will, qui-

literally, whilst clad in a state of nature.

—“I don’t recall.”

“Of course you don’t, sir.” Hoare had been adding chloral hydrate to Belle’s evening coffee for quite some time.

“Well, I shall require another one. A girl again, I suppose.” His lips closed in a rounded extension that implied the presence of a nipple therein.

“Of course, sir.” Hoare paused. “The Head Clerk of the Revenue Office is here to see you.”

Belle brightened. “Do send him in.”

Having just won a thousand North American pounds at Rochambeau a few minutes earlier, Hoare was pleased to oblige. After passing the fellow off, he went to his telelocutor, the better to place a call to Agnes Day. The procuress was reliable and discreet.

Besides which, Agnes was well aware that Hoare knew where she lived.

‡

Procuring as such, while illegal, is no great crime. Like most similar violations, the class and wealth of the offender have a great deal of bearing on the likelihood of prosecution as well as the eventual outcome thereof. A poor man who buys another’s daughter for an evening’s pleasure might as a result spend years in the penitentiary for his errors. A wealthy man will be quietly reminded to manage his peccadilloes with more grace.

Thus our great crime is not bound up in the Governor-General’s ordinary sins, which are hardly original by any definition. Nor is it a parcel of the misdeeds of Agnes Day, who would be the first to explain that she only brokered buyers and sellers, and thus is no more to blame for the fate of the girls than the commodities trader who shifts pork bellies is to blame for the death of the pigs.

The trouble arose because this evening when Hoare raised Agnes via the telelocutor, her stable was bare of horses of the sort the Governor-General most preferred to ride.

“This is me,” Hoare said.

Agnes was an accomplished recognizer of anonymous voices. “It’s always a pleasure to hear from you.” She pulled out Belle’s unmarked file.

“He’s gone and broken another.”

She sighed. “Irretrievably?”

“Yes.”

A red pencil drew a line through the latest name. “It becomes more costly over time.”

“I am sure your margins of profit will sustain.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “Probably so.” Agnes tapped her teeth with the pencil. “Is he back to boy again?”

“No. Wants another like the last.”

“Ah.” Agnes looked at the names written on a long sheet of foolscap sitting on her desk. Hopeful girls in from the provinces — there were enough sleepy farms along the Wabash, mining towns up the Cumberland, and Missouri River basin communities to keep the great cities of the East supplied with lush, milk-fed, naïve beauty in perpetuity. Unfortunately, the sort of trade His Excellency preferred required a delicacy of frame combined with an unusually strong constitution.

There was only one name on her list that fit. It was written to the side, circled in blue, with three careful question marks next to it.

“Agnes...” Impatience had seeped into Hoare’s voice.

“I’ll have her over by tomorrow,” Agnes said, drawing a large green check next to the name Татьяна Веригин.

Tatyana Verigin. The so-called “Doukhobor Princess,” living in Philadelphia exile at St. Andrew’s Russian Orthodox Cathedral. Reportedly a bit simple, but beautiful, yet descended from sturdy Russian peasant stock.

And best of all, a political nobody in this town.

Unfortunately for Agnes Day, Tatyana Verigin was also Innocent, in the most narrow theological sense of the term. God, or at least His earthly agents, would soon take note of any distress to her pure spirit.

‡

One advantage of living in a city powered by thundering steam turbines and great underground hydraulic flows diverted from the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers is that illicit industrial installations readily pass unnoticed. Dr. Scholes was well aware of the fate of many of his precursors on the path of contra-establishment genius — he had no intention of being burned on pitchfork tines by an angry mob. Similarly, siting his facility in a remote location such as that foolish *poseur* Tesla had done in Colorado Springs would only draw attention.

There was little purpose in becoming the proverbial sore thumb. Scholes was of the opinion that sore thumbs stood out much less on the desk of an orthopedic anatomist.

As a result of his theories of practical camouflage, his modest establishment blended in well with the Philadelphia cityscape. The facility lurked in the Callowhill industrial district under the name of Petronus Novelty Manufacturing. Dark smokes, eruptions of ungrounded electrical energy and the hollow booming of mechanical mayhem would be remarkable in that neighborhood only in the absence.

That the district also supplied a steady flow of human subjects conveniently devoid of family connections and monied inquiry was only a happy bonus.

This day our Dr. Scholes was settling his latest subjects into their new living conditions. One of the children had most inconveniently expired, ruining a batch of his vivimantic solution and forcing him to order an entire suite of equipment dismantled for cleaning and examination.

The other two continued their unblinking existence. The subjects’ feeble attempts at speech had finally ceased. He viewed this as a constructive development, consistent with the experimental model so painstakingly drawn up over time.

Dr. Scholes set his brass-rimmed goggles firmly in place. The ocular prostheses gripped his face like the hand of a rough lover. The breathing apparatus overfilled his mouth, much as if the same rough lover had gagged him with tube and tape. He rarely admitted this small thrill to anyone, even himself, but the sensual resonance added a certain frisson to this already dangerous and challenging work.

He dialed in the focal length and began the tedious but critical process of connecting the motor nerves from the child’s spinal cord to the mechano-electrical relays that would drive the automaton to do his bidding.

Experimental science was such a chancy business. The precision of engineering held its appeal, but bridge builders rarely stood on the frontiers of human progress. By contrast, the imprecision of the working empiricist was a continued challenge to Dr. Scholes’ spirit.

Almost a dozen years had been lost to Countess Lovelace’s logical paradigms. The tantalizing possibilities of punchtape never yielded results of sufficient flexibility to handle the complex process of acting in three dimensions, over time, in the face of unexpected events. Which was to say, all attempted departures from the controlled environment of the laboratory had been a disaster.

From there, Dr. Scholes had turned to the animal kingdom. He experimented on a wide variety

of brains and nervous systems — fish, birds, rodents, dogs — before settling on primates. Contr could thus be established, sometimes quite effectively, but none of God's lesser creatures had with their mentarium the necessary provisions for understanding more than the simplest of instructions.

That he had turned to human brains at all was in a sense the worst sort of failure. From his earliest days in the nursery, bleeding the children of servants, Dr. Scholes had aspired to transcend fleshly weaknesses such as empathy in favor of stark loyalty and unquestioning obedience.

The irony that his route to that Apollonian goal had led directly through the very Dionysian cerebral matter he most hoped to overthrow was not lost upon the good doctor.

"You, my child," he whispered to the unblinking brown eyes that stared at him through the course of the operation, "will be a father of history."

Or a mother. Just at that moment he couldn't remember if this one was male or female. The child shed no tears, naturally, but a small silver tube dripped saline across the exposed eyeball in lieu of any such emotionalism. The reader will naturally recognize this for the sort of dramatic grace not that only occurs in life, for it is beyond belief when forced upon us by a kinescopic *auteur* or scribbling talesmith.

Encased in stout bonds and thick chains just below the operating theatre table, the brass boiler groaned. The first of its hydraulic reflexes had been tickled into being as a part of the long and complex operation now taking place. Only mechanical eyes and the inferior, mumbling punchtap intelligences of Dr. Scholes' laboratory equipment stood mute witness to the first stirrings of a new life.

‡

Steam is a power which passeth beyond understanding. The water of life, cool and refreshing, in fact the very foundation of the blood that courses through our veins, may by the simple application of heat be transformed into a roaring monster with the strength of giants. It must be bound by cold iron, forged and wrought amid the furnaces of another kind of heat, until this fractious, energetic storm can be rendered into proper servitude.

Thus the modern age of our world was borne on the back of water and rubble ore together transformed by man's first theft, the fire of the gods. And so we prosper — the youthful coal jack in the overweening pride of his first employment, the financier in his humble luxury ensuring the good of millions through just such employment. All carried by the sweating muscles of the iron-bound Steam Age.

There are those rugged individualists — miscreants and mountebanks, some might call them noble innovators others would say — who will turn the strength of any era back onto itself. When Gilgamesh was king in Uruk, surely some clever fellows tried the dusty cellars of Innana's temple for themselves. Likewise the Phoenicians had their rebel captains, the Romans their generals-turned-emperors, the British Empire its men who would be king.

So the Steam Age has its iconoclasts, men who look beyond the pumps and locomotives and mechano-electrical generators to the more obscure, and darker, possibilities of this power.

What of soldiers clad in steam-driven armor, to stride across the trenches and revetments of the enemy? Foucault's gyroscopes and the frontier genius of Cyrus McCormick led first to the Transvaal Rebellion, but later to the Queen's Own Steam Dragoons, those armored striders who carried the day so firmly in the Second Boer War.

Likewise the possibility of improving the performance of difference engines, so that they moved from academic curiosities used to develop surveying grids and artillery firing tables, into the realm of rapid handling of information. James Ritty had expanded his cash registers beyond mere money

handling, sparking so extreme an evolution of the machines that today both the Chancellor of the Exchequer in London and the Minister of the Treasury in Philadelphia will consult the reporting tickers of their great engines even above the sage advice of their most gray-haired political economists.

It is in this context that we must seek to understand the actions of such infamous persons as Tesla, the Patterson brothers, and Marie Trevanion Taillefer. Even the misdeeds of the Tin Rebellion can be comprehended in the context of American frontier politics — a witches' brew of depressed grain prices, excess population, misguided tax policy and meddling by Russian agents out of the deepest West.

Tesla's Universal Man was deranged by any standards, and the ruins of Islip, Long Island even now stand mute testimony to his fundamental misunderstandings of both human nature and the physics of the atom. And so with the Pattersons, Madame Taillefer and others of their ilk. Each in their way saw a potentiality, a pattern, a purpose, in the fundamentals of the Steam Age. Yet some portal of the soul was set closed for them which stands open in the greater mass of men.

So it is with our own Dr. Scholes, whose experiments stand at the heart of this tale. Or to be more accurate, one of its hearts: stories, like squid, have multiple engines of life. The beat of so many disparate chambers serves to force vital fluids along a variety of paths. The valves of his attention, the electrified grid of his purpose, extend beyond the mechanical, the political, the medical, straight to a view on the perfectibility of the natural world which of necessity exclude any men of less intellectual stature and morals than the great doctor himself.

That is to say, all men everywhere.

Dr. Scholes' contribution to the Age of Steam has been to design and build a mechano-electric justice machine. A reaper of men, as it were, stalking on delicate yet powerful legs, reaching outward with the tenacious grip of the forest vine, seeing through deception and even walls with the judicious application of Roentgen rays. He has a scheme for perfection.

Like all such schemes, it is glorious in its vision. Like all such schemes, it is doomed to abject failure. The question to hand is whether he will fail spectacularly, as Tesla did, taking portions of an American city with him into that good night which waits to claim us all; or whether he will fail quietly, his name unremarked by public opinion and history, to lie amid the shallow intellectual graves of a hundred generations of frustrated natural philosophers.

‡

The Gollinoster moves through the sewers and tunnels of Philadelphia like a candirú fish following the urine of an unlucky Amazonian tribesman.

In a world where the germ of men may occasionally produce an Innocent such as Tatyana Verigin, it may also produce an original sinner such as the Gollinoster. In the currents of transgression, the Gollinoster is anode to Tatyana Verigin's cathode. To use an older term, she is a sinner-eater: swallowing prodigious volumes of spiritual abuse and criminal intent as she wanders as a literalized metaphor through the effluent flowing beneath the city. The Gollinoster is Philadelphia's own monster from the id.

Hearing as she does the whispers even of crimes yet uncommitted, the screams of victims not yet beneath the murderer's knife, the Gollinoster might be thought out of her mind. Deranged, in the most conventional sense.

This is far from true. Follow her, and see what her muttering trail brings.

"...damned muckle men moneying about in the mud beneath their boots, don't know powder from postage stamps from the proselytizing Presbyterians who once prayed in my place 'fore falling further

afield than any Philadelphia Friend ever had the fracture to go..." She pauses for breath, then resumes speaking as if the words had flowed unbroken even around the asthmatic gasping of her raw and pale lips. "...Governor-General's gone ghastly great ghoulish man Hoare hollows her out so's the soul slip southward to the fiery locks of Hell and still ain't no one knows not never what happened how whom even me look at me damn it when I'm talking to you, won't wait no neverwind in time hours fall like dominoes at a drunk's table done playing with the barmaid's waiting for an order or odor or outlook looking lost beyond whatever we might see..."

She vibrates sympathetically, like piano string on a stage where a weight has just fallen to kill a gaffer.

She hums in time to the city's heartbeat, and moves within a flowing sea of scurrying rats and favor-currying beggars.

She is the Gollinoster, the real monster under the bed, the true reason small children are afraid of the toilet, the horrid face that stares up at you from a puddle beneath a street grating on a rainy November afternoon.

This day she is drawn by the current of *sin potens* toward the slime-coated arches of the vault deep beneath St. Andrew's Russian Orthodox Cathedral. There is a crime to stop before it can start, the breaking of innocence to be mended before the first shattering crack can appear.

Some things cannot be restored once broken, no matter how powerful the need.

‡

Arkady stirs deep within his casket. His resting place is wrapped in layers of night, cuddled by silk and canvas dyed the deepest black that good money can buy, and strung with a network of tiny silver wires that would render even a schizophrenic spider barking mad. An inconvenient artifact of history for our Arkady, who first rode with Ivan Grozny's *Oprichniki* some four and half centuries before the time of our story.

He was a sere man even in the days of his blooded youth. Arkady became much more so when three Tatar shamans finished working their will upon him after the fall of Kazan. The weapon they had hoped to set against the first Tsar of All Russias twisted in their hands, much as a viper might in the grip of an assassin.

After he had shattered their skulls, boiled their brains while they yet lived, and eaten them clean, Arkady came back to his tsar a changed man. He was bloodless as a *vobla* — the salted fish that keeps forever on the shelf — except when he had been eating. His heart beat to a measure so slow that it took Ivan's court physicians three days to agree that the man Arkady even had a pulse.

Not that he was a man, precisely. There is a later word for what Arkady had become, popularized in fiction that itself was a muddled reflection of the death and life of this hero of the *Rodina*. Calling him Koschei the Deathless seemed childish, as well as technically inaccurate. Those who knew him simply referred to Arkady as the Tsar's Last Man. There was no need to inquire as to which Tsar they were referring.

His illustrious career was marked by sleeps stretching across years interwoven with bursts of violence so incredible that they transcended legend. Arkady developed an abiding affinity for the expansive Arctic regions of Russia. The endless daylight of summer troubled him to no end, but he simply slept away the bright months in the frozen hypogeal bunkers where the Saami stored the slaughter. In the winter's dark he could roam at will as far as his lusts took him.

Our man's downfall came in the service of Alexander III's Special Conference in the last year of the most recent century. In a country with the bloodiest history of any civilized power, and the most brutal repressions known to modern government, Arkady distinguished himself by taking the fine a

of violence a few steps too far. Or perhaps he offended the wrong minister — it is entirely commo
for a single thing to have more than one cause.

The unkillable man was loyal beyond the depth of time. Even his accusers knew better than
call it treason. Yet his ancient malice was an uneasy presence in the marbled halls of a moder
government. The institutionalization of evil had removed the need for such monsters, replacing the
with thin, banal men in dark suits who carefully folded their wire-framed spectacles before carvin
free your genitalia.

In the name of justice and order, a star chamber had met deep within the Kremlin to banis
Arkady. The Patriarch of Muscovy himself set the seals upon Arkady's casket, and a bull was secretl
bled according to ancient Tatar rites in order to close the path of his return. By express order of Ts
Nicholas II, Arkady's confined corpse was shipped from the motherland to the Aleskaya
Departments. By machinations of others within the Imperial court, the casket was then transshipped
British America.

There the world's oldest dead man came to rest in our beloved Philadelphia, amid the vault
deep beneath St. Andrew's Russian Orthodox Cathedral. Perhaps you, dear reader, can foresee th
inevitable clash to come as the great gears of fate mesh to crush the bodies of those bound acro
destiny's rust-addled cogs. Such precognition was not granted to Arkady's keeper, a demented
Rumanian monk named Ion; nor was it granted to the Gollinoster in her subviatic progression towa
the glaring bonfire of innocence who dwelt scarcely yards above Arkady's twitching form.

The very scent of Tatyana Verigin has been stirring the Tsar's Last Man in his casket fo
months. Now the aetheric resonances of sin and innocence set into motion by the Governor-General
demands have begun to catch at the more substantial of Arkady's senses.

Ion, who might know better, is so sotted with gin that he would sleep through a cavalry charg
Thus he does not hear the one hundred and forty-four silver bells strung about Arkady's vault as the
slowly begin to chime.

The unkillable man is on the move. The last of our players readies himself to enter the boar
Agnes Day knocks on the gleaming door of the cathedral's Orkney Street rectory, by the rapping o
her knuckles setting loose all that is to follow.

‡

"Father Constantine," Agnes Day said, with the simulacrum of a delighted smile on her lips.

The father's return smile was just as unsecretly sour. "Mistress Day. I would bid you welcom
but I fear that liberty is not within me." His accent was pure Back Bay, from Boston's most monie
precincts, a cultural signal conflicting with the severe black cassock he wore as part of his Orthodo
faith.

She let the niceties slip as her voice sharpened into a frank asperity. "In which case I sugge
you allow me within, so you will not be seen conversing on the steps with the Whore of Babylon."

"Philadelphia is hardly Babylon." A trace of true humor entered Father Constantine's voice, b
he stepped backward to admit her into the darkness beyond the door.

"I suppose not." Agnes removed her elbow-length gloves. "I rather fancy Boston in that ro
myself."

Father Constantine made a small, disapproving grunt, but took the proffered gloves and hat an
removed them to a stand.

Though the domed cathedral supported by this rectory was only a few years old, the dark wal
and narrow windows contributed to an illusion of age. It smelled of oil and dust, a combinatio
peculiar to the vagaries of male housekeeping amid so much varnished wood.

“I am certain you have not come here on a spiritual journey,” the father said upon his return to her side. He had not invited her to sit.

Knowing her place here, Agnes was content to stand. “All my journeys are spiritual, Father. Each step follows the example of the one before it in a pilgrimage through life.”

“Enough, enough.” His hands twitched with impatience. “You are not half so amusing as you believe, and you are at least twice as difficult as I ever seem to recall later.”

Agnes smiled sweetly. “Once a brother, always a brother. Have you heard from Mother lately?”

Father Constantine sighed. “Mason writes weekly, as always, with news she remains in his senses. However, Mother will not set pen to paper herself.”

She patted his arm. “I’m sorry. I know Mother has little use for my choice of trades and lack of marriage. That latter offends her more, I believe.”

“While I am altogether the wrong sort of priest.” His expression grew mournful a moment, then brightened. “But surely you bring good news.”

“And a substantial contribution to the plate.” Agnes reached into her bag to remove a leather pouch. “Two hundred American pounds, in specie from the Richmond mint.”

The money disappeared into the depths of Father Constantine’s cassock. “Your piety is always noted. As is your familial loyalty.”

“Indeed.” She shuffled her feet, then brightened as if a new idea had just occurred to her. “Perhaps there is a problem I might take off your own hands?”

“Ah, yes.” His voice grew soft. “Our little laborer. I remind you, she is not the ordinary sort of runaway whom we might shelter for a while out of simple Christian charity.”

Agnes matched her brother softness for softness. “And I have far from the ordinary sort of work for her, Floyd. The less questions asked, the fewer lies are answered.”

“To quote a sagacious woman with whom I am unfortunately close kin, ‘indeed.’” He tapped his lips with his fingers. “Wait here. I will be a few moments fetching her down.”

“Do not lose your way, Father. That offering will not stand without support.”

“I know, I know.” He took himself up the stairs, leaving Agnes alone in the front hall to study herself in the mirror. She wondered once again why these priests seemed to take no magazines, or even ordinary letter mail through which she could read.

‡

“Success,” whispered Dr. Scholes.

He laid down the last of his implements, slid his goggles up to his neatly coiffed auburn hair, then wiped machine oil and blood from his face with a towel thoughtfully provided by an underling. His minions were silent, and loyal unto death thanks to certain drugs to which he controlled the access.

The medications came with unfortunate side effects — complete hair loss, eczema transitioning to psoriasis in some cases, progressive myopia and a degeneration of the spinal musculature leading to a classic hunchback. All in all, quite appropriate to Dr. Scholes’ view given the expectations he had of his underlings, but the same drug that ensured absolute loyalty rendered them useless for most endeavors outside the walls of Petronus Novelty Manufacturing. Night raids were possible, but little else.

Happily, the first of his justice machines would soon be ready to enter the public sphere. Dr. Scholes would be able to demonstrate the true power and majesty of his vision. Where his quivering mewling underlings could not pass through the day-lit world without mock, these new creations would not be denied.

The brown eyes twitched. He had maintained the face, reasoning that ordinary people responded best to commands emanating from a human visage. Or demands, as was more likely. The soft bones of the child's skull had been made away with, to allow space for installation of petty clockwork - miniaturized punchtape modules that could provide extensions to the intelligence and capabilities of the justice machine. A widened brasswork carapace replaced the skull, modeled after the Roman galea, complete with legionaries' crest made from the child's own hair.

Dr. Scholes had found it necessary to reinforce the silk hair with pig bristles, and the resulting infelicitation of coloring still troubled him greatly. His underlings were useless in matters of aesthetic judgment, due to both poor eyesight and the mental deficiencies of their common birth.

Still, the appearance was quite striking. He stroked the crest lovingly.

The eyes moved to follow his hand.

"There's my sweet baby," the doctor whispered.

Eyelids had been removed during the course of the final operation. A trio of fine tubes resembling the tines of a particularly lightweight fork fed necessary lubricants and provided an air pressure reserve to clear the eyes in lieu of blinking. The mouth and its associated structures had been left in place, though a much improved mechano-electrical voicebox was coupled to the throat.

Not only could the justice machine project speech far better than the most leather-lunged sergeant of the Royal Marines, it could also emit an array of inhuman sounds with functions ranging from the incitement of dog fights to the generation of migraine headaches in those so unfortunate as to be within range.

The voicebox was integrated within the neck collar mating the head to the body of the justice machine. That collar was worked in iron, with channels for the hydraulic control lines as well as a central core for the mechano-electrical connections depending from the spinal nerve trunk.

A particular dream of Dr. Scholes' was to eventually perfect the behaviors of the body so thoroughly that he could dispense with the cephalic assembly altogether. He had abandoned this plan as a practical research goal due to the limitations of punchtape intelligence, though the simplification of the operating environment over time might well reintroduce the possibilities of that solution.

The body itself...now there was a line of research that had yet to fail Dr. Scholes. From his childhood experiments in replacing the legs of puppies, he had always excelled at visualizing and fabricating locomotors, power sources, couplings, joints, and all the myriad requirements of *mechanicum vitae*.

The brown-eyed head was bolted down to the center of a compact spherical boiler system drawing heat from the burning of concentrated pellets of Dr. Scholes' own creation. Generators of a miniaturized design drew power from the boiler, to provide electrical energy to those portions of the justice machine that did not operate via direct mechanical transfer or hydraulic control from the boiler's head pressure.

Deep within the body, gyroscopes maintained balance and orientation even in adverse circumstances such as poor traction and angled surfaces. Six legs extended from the waist of the sphere at equidistant points around the circumference. They were articulated much as a crab's legs, though each ended in a splayed, padded foot modeled on the architecture of the human foot.

Any foot could be raised and split into a pair of hands equally equipped for combat and the finest manipulations. In testing, the justice machine's manipulators were able to pick up a dry grain of rice placed on a mirror.

Mounting points along the body allowed for the placement of firearms, electrical projectors, mustard gas generators, bone saws and other tools essential to the administration of simple justice and

natural law.

~~This perfection of form, function inherent in every line of the design, was complemented by delicate artistry of bas-relief and sculpted curvature which offered hints of the aero-line sculpting employed in the cars of Philadelphia's pneumatic skyways. This brass and copper tooling highlighted the glory of purpose embodied in the justice machine. *In toto*, the mechanical marvel was sure to delight the dying moments of any aesthete meeting their appointed fate at the clacking metal hands of Dr. Scholes' creation.~~

Even so, his true genius lay in the understanding that the plasticity of thought embodied in the infant human brain was best suited for control of this magnificent device. An older child or an adult had ingrown reflexes, neuronal pathways, and kinesthetic memories that would seek time and again to locomote quadrupedally, bend at the waist, and pursue other actions inherent in the structure of the human form.

Dr. Scholes' theory predicted that babies would perfect his justice machines by rapidly adapting to the requirements of controlling the complex body. Further, they should be pliant to his will without the failings of his drug-addled underlings or the moral lacunae of persons raised in the festering society that was human society.

He reached out with a gloved hand to stroke the faintest pale fuzz upon the cheek before him. "You, my child, are a killer. A baby killer."

A shudder ran through the machine, the body straining in sympathy to some hidden thought that revealed itself only in the clatter of brass and the groaning of metal.

‡

Dear reader, our stage is now set. We have a high-minded moralist in Dr. Scholes, who with his horrific creations is bent on the enforcement of justice within an unjust world. We have our sin eaters slouching roughly toward Bedlam. We have our Innocent cowering within the false walls of the Father's Church, even now being packed off to a debauch which threatens to fill the sewers with the howling and steaming tears of God. We have our villain in the Governor-General and his blackguard Hoare. We have implacable ancient evil in the Slavic vampire Arkady.

All that remains is for the clash of wills to take place. Purposes will cross, intentions will be frustrated, and the city of Philadelphia will be placed in mortal danger. Who shall prevail? Whose perfidy is deepest, whose intentions highest? And how will the Frenchman Le Pétomane, *partisan extraordinaire*, secret agent of *la Troisième République*, hero to Gallic persons everywhere, feature into this wretched morality play now unfolding on the page before you?

Follow the tale, loyal audience, and be rewarded with blood, brass and smoking machine oil in quantities enough to float even the corpse of a king.

‡

Agnes day led Tatyana Verigin to the skyway tower a block from St. Andrew's. The Innocent shivered in the watery light of a Philadelphia autumn afternoon. She was surprisingly slim for a woman of the Doukhobors. The sect was composed of notorious fire-setters and contrarian rebels who preferred to stand naked before God, but most of the time they followed a plow. They also tended to resemble the sturdy peasant stock of their forefathers.

The procuress stole a few glances as she walked. It would not do to set the wind up the back of a new talent. She had long experience breaking girls in, and sometimes simply breaking them, but whatever the final outcome, successfully turning out a young woman to the working stables always began with gentle indirection.

Tatyana Verigin had the pale blonde hair one only found among the peoples of easternmo

Europe. Her tresses were the shade of summer sunlight on silver. Her face was noble enough — she could have passed for a true princess of the Romanovs with her nose and high, smooth forehead. The girl's eyes were that strange shade of violet numbered among the rarest of ocular pigments, that some claim to be evidence of angels in the ancestry.

Agnes would believe *that* the day someone showed her their feathers growing out of their backs.

Most of all, the Innocent projected a peculiar presence anchoring her in the eyes and minds of those around. As the two of them walked the mere block from rectory to tower, they drew a dozen gazes and were the proximate cause of a traffic snarl when a brewer's cart slowed to a halt as the slack-jawed lads on the driving board paid Tatyana Verigin their full attention.

All this while the girl was wrapped in an oversized canvas car coat lent by Agnes' brother.

There was beauty, she thought, then there was nuisance.

Not soon enough they came to the sweeping ironwork of the tower. An aged negro in the maroon uniform of the skyway service sat guarding the lift that stood open at the bottom. Stairs swept around the inside of the tower, their resounding clangor testimony to the impatient and the poor who eschewed mechanical aid in ascending upward.

Agnes meant to impress Tatyana Verigin, not exhaust her. Yet. "Look, dear," she said quietly as the old man rose and bowed, preparatory to drawing open the filigreed doors providing ingress to the lift cage. "We shall rise up like song to heaven, to gaze down upon this city with the eyes of birds."

"I don't think so, ma'am," Tatyana Verigin said cautiously. "'Tis not meet to tread where angels pass."

"My dear, you must begin to think of yourself as one of those selfsame angels. Soon enough I shall teach you to soar on wings of artifice and beauty."

The negro bowed and croaked something incomprehensible in the Gullah tongue. Agnes slipped him a gold sovereign — good British coinage, not the debased North American specie. He smiled as he slid closed the ornate doors. "Double A trains, missies?"

"Indeed." Agnes favored the world with a reserved smile, then slipped her arm within Tatyana Verigin's.

"Ma'am..." the girl began timorously, then stopped.

The lift rattled loudly around them, the Lower North neighborhood of Philadelphia falling away to a forest of rooftops and connecting streets surrounding the blue domes of the cathedral. The air was brisk above the sheltering buildings. As the lift ground to a halt, a shivering could be heard ringing among the wires supporting the pneumatic skyway.

"Yes, dear girl?" Agnes asked into the silence that followed the attendant's opening of the door.

"What is to become of me?"

Her whisper was so faint as to be nearly incomprehensible, but the procuress had expected the question. They stepped out onto the empty AA boarding platform, the common mass of travelers being a level below them.

"Why, just as now, you will soon rise to the pinnacle of American society, and there will find your true purpose."

"Th-thank you, ma'am."

Agnes gave Tatyana Verigin's arm a warm squeeze. "Think nothing of it. I would do no less for any girl lost in this great city."

‡

Somewhere else in this great city, a Frenchman of unique talents and admirable industry paces a stage. He notes the footlights are electric, with the wiring exposed. This offers less danger of combustion

than the limelights that prevailed during his earliest days in the theatres of Paris. He scans the seating visible in the houselights as a rising crest of red velvet holding the promise of audiences yet to come. He walks to the back of the theatre, notes the exits, identifies the places where a person might run to hide or sight a weapon.

All is magic, all is misdirection. One can follow the Nipponese way and conceal assassins in dark wrappings and soft foot-gloves, but a man so dressed is nothing but an assassin — or possibly a buffoon. A far more effective method of concealment is to have the assassin standing in plain sight with his weapon at the ready, an ornamental guard before a royal tomb, or a comic opera singer in a festive procession.

A reprobate who earns his living in violation of the boundaries of public taste and political discernment can do anything, for anything is already expected of him. A hero of the republic whose great feats are clothed in secrecy can do anything, for nothing is expected of him.

Le Pétomane has come to kill a man who is already dead. *Le Cabinet Noir* has determined that this individual is a grave threat to the freedom and security of the French Republic. It has been deemed that only an agent of his special talents can hope to prevail against the Tsar's Last Man.

Meanwhile, he has an audience to scandalize this coming evening. Le Pétomane considers his latest act, perfected in private showings in Paris and Marseille. It is an impression of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, performed entirely in the wind of his body and the shiver of his *gluteus maximus*.

After that, he will be on the hunt.

He smiles at both the pleasures to come.

‡

The Gollinoster stops amid the 5th Street sewer main. The vaults of St. Andrew's are to her right, reached through a layer of brick and stone. A pipe spills outward from the block. It currently carries the slop of someone's cooking.

She closes her eyes and snuffles for the scent which first drew her here. Sin has a smell of its own, like burnt sugar spread upon wet rust. There is a familiar tickle within her nostrils. She begins to lay hands upon the bricks of the wall, looking for a lost door that must be here.

Not even the Gollinoster's nose is so powerful that she can follow the trickle of evil through solid stone. Air must come, the exhalations of men bearing the markers of their souls. All things on this Earth are connected in some form or fashion. A blessed few can follow threads through the entire tapestry of life.

Soon she lays her hand upon a square of bricks that slides beneath her touch. There is the groan of counterweights, the surprised clap of water rushing into a space it had not meant to fill, and the blush of scent telling her she is close, so close, but possibly too late to stop the crime aborning.

The Gollinoster, never hurried, now moves rapidly into the darkness beyond.

She quickly finds stairs. They are narrow and close, but she is used to this. Rising less than half a flight, the passage is just enough to give reasonable protection from spring floods, then descending again to a tunnel somewhat drier but no less damp. Steam pipes hiss close by, the clockwork of a regulatory valve burring loudly with the stress of a bad bearing.

The smell is fading as she approaches. The quarry is lost! The game has moved beyond hope of being stopped before it begins. Then the Gollinoster halts, scenting more carefully.

Something else is here.

Something dreadful.

Not a part of what she is seeking, but related. It has the scent of age upon it, older than anything or anyone else to be found within Philadelphia. It has the scent of evil on it, malevolence greater and

more ancient than even she can encompass.

~~She lays an ear upon a blackened oak door. Inexplicably, all she hears is the tinkling of hundred tiny bells.~~

‡

The Tsar's last man awakens to himself. Fresh blood is in the air, as well as old blood. He can smell both even through the sealed bonds of his casket. A tuneless cascade of bells welcomes him to consciousness.

"*Silver,*" he mutters in the darkness, then smiles, though no one is present to witness the flash of his teeth.

Arkady draws his hands upward. The bonds in which he was interred snap like cobwebs. His joints click as they pop in and out of alignment through a range of motion impossible for any living man. In moments his fingers touch his chest, palms flat and facing away to be set flat against the bottom of the casket lid.

There is a hiss above as the seals begin to melt.

Even the gin-ridden stupor that has driven Ion to snoring at the vault door is disturbed by the smell of wax running, the martyrs' hair sealed within curling away in reeking wisps. The Rumanian monk awakens with a mouth like a chicken coop and the sense of pigs galloping through the echoing confines of his skull.

The network of silver bells surrounding the casket now rings in high-pitched panic, like a regiment of fairies being driven forth by the devil himself. That sound penetrates Ion's dawning consciousness to draw him fully alert even through the alcoholic fog.

The drunken monk stumbles to his feet, tugs at the wrought iron latch of the vault door, and opens it to see the casket exploding in a mist of dry rot, flame and melting bells.

Arkady rises to his feet. Disapproval is etched on his leathered face, the result of four centuries of innate superiority and moral rectitude.

"*Where am I?*" he demands in the archaic Russian of the church above their heads. "*And where is this Innocent?*"

Ion forgets himself and begins to wail. Arkady takes a step forward. The monk quickly recovers. "*Ph-ph-philadelphia, m-aster,*" he answers in Rumanian.

"Philadelphia?" Arkady tries the strange, foreign name upon his tongue. His patience, even his anger, vanishes like last Sunday's incense. He flexes clawed hands and reaches for the cowering monk, whose life is only saved by the toppling of the wall behind them.

A shambling creature in high boots and denim coat, face a scarred, pudding mess, steps into the room. "Where is the girl who strides the world, fire-blooded and blood fired...?"

Arkady turns. Instincts honed over centuries compel him to attack first, moving with the violence of gunpowder beneath a lit match.

‡

The AA car arrived at the Lower North Number Two tower station. Where the ordinaries were of simple enough design of hammered aluminium with smoked glass windows, rather like aero-line Pullman cars, the AA cars had been designed by Italian master craftsmen brought over by the City of Philadelphia to offer an indelible imprimatur to the City of Brotherly Love's most visible transportation mechanism.

They were shaped in a fanciful variation of Phoebus' cart. Bronze-detailed horses swirled from the narrow nose, arcs of clouds trailing along the bottom and aft end of the car. The doors slid open with a faint pneumatic hiss so unlike the chain-driven rattle of the ordinaries. Agnes steered Tatyana

Verigin's elbow to lead the girl into the confines of the car.

—Within was sybaritic luxury equaled only by the finest hotels in town. The Italian designers had modeled the appointments after the luxurious personal apartments of the Medici Popes. Seats of the richest Corinthian leather were scattered about a floor itself covered with hand-woven carpet out of the Safed Koh Mountains above Peshawar, that luxury in turn lay over a parquet of rare tropical hardwoods. The smoked windows permitted a view of Philadelphia while discouraging prying eyes. A bartender awaited the passengers' pleasure at the back of the car, offering cigars and mixed drinks to the gentlemen, while for female travelers carrying refreshing iced fruits and a selection of teas in fine silk bags. Efficient electrical lamps were hidden in ceiling recesses for cloudy days or after dark.

"What do you think, my dear?" Agnes said to Tatyana Verigin as the bartender approached them. "This can be your life."

"Would *mesdames* care for an aperitif?" He was one of those men with a cleft chin and a tapered physique, a mere glimpse of whom could keep a woman awake at night.

Agnes squeezed the girl's arm. "Tatyana, dear?"

"N-n-no." The Doukhobor Princess stared at the hand-knotted carpet.

The procuress met the bartender's eye. They had enjoyed mutually profitable relations in the past. "Just a tonic for me, Marcus."

The AA car lurched into motion. Pneumatic skyways were far smoother than traditional cable funiculars, but similarly subject to the vagaries of wind and weather. In addition, the switching gear required to segregate the AA cars from the ordinaries imposed a slight burden on the otherwise exemplary stability of the first class conveyances.

Of such compromises is modern life made, where even the condign desserts of quality music sometimes give way to the needs of the labor force.

"My dear," Agnes whispered into the delicate alabaster shell of Tatyana Verigin's ear, "you simply must learn to embrace what is good."

"I w-want to go home, ma'am," the Innocent whispered.

"Home? To Russia?"

"I d-don't remember Russia, ma'am. The Fathers hate that I don't, but swear it's true. I m-miss the wheat fields of Saskatchewan."

Agnes swallowed a despairing sigh. Usually it was no trouble at all to truckle these country girls with silk dresses, paste jewelry and their first taste of champagne. They'd come to Philadelphia looking for something more than a sweaty farmboy to plow the field of their loins through the good years of their lives. That was who her girls *were* — young women who fancied themselves on the way up.

A girl who cried for the endless horizons and mind-numbing monotony of the Canadian prairie was an unfortunately novel experience for the procuress.

If it is wheat you miss, my dear, she thought, I can get you grain by the carload. There would be a way in to this one's heart. There always was. Everyone in this life had a key. And there were few locksmiths more accomplished than Agnes Day.

‡

Dr. Scholes named his first justice machine the Baby Killer, for the infant brain that drove the thing. His design took its initial, hesitant steps into a Callowhill alley.

Consider now the slimed, rat-infested nature of such an urban by-way. In a world of overweening mechanical pride, steam and hydraulic lines run everywhere at varying pressures, allow load balancing and power sharing amongst the various industrial concerns and commercial use

of such services. This arrangement provides little consideration for pedestrians, and the sorts impoverished city dwellers who might content themselves with a grubby doss out of the troublesome mass of traffic. The lines forever leak, hissing and screeching through the night. There is always the risk of a spray of scalding steam, or boiling hydraulic fluid. The pipes tend to run close to the ground for load management and ease of maintenance. This results in many doorways approached by a stink and thus deprives these destitute wretches of decent shelter from the weather.

So the great horse doors at the back of Petronus Novelty Manufacturing were thrown open by Scholes' anonymous underlings in their drug-addled haze. A pair of men, veterans of the recent Hispanic Island War, grumbled in their sleep across the alley, not fully waking to their peril.

The first Baby Killer stepped cautiously out into the hissing darkness, a mechanical centaur of spider legs. Its multiplicity of feet clattered on the slimed cobbles. When it spotted the hobos, the punchtape-supplemented logics within the thing's continually evolving mind sprang into prominence. Quickly it analyzed the presence of sloth, lack of gainful employment, and misuse of property. Relay clicked in an attempt to use the justice hardware as yet unmounted on the vacant hardpoints about the thing's waist. Like lightning, a pair of hands unfolded.

With a steam-fed screech of indignant rage, it reached for the men.

One met his death on the instant. A brass claw shattered his jaw and sliced into his neck to sever the brain stem. The other rolled away from the attack, taking a nasty slash on the arm. He ran screaming toward the alley's mouth.

The Baby Killer bounded into hot pursuit, legs articulating flawlessly as it chased the hobo out into the broader right of way of Buttonwood Street.

Dr. Scholes stared after it a moment, then down at the corpse. He shook his head and muttered a low stream of excruciatingly polite invective. This was a catastrophic failure. Where a punchtape intelligence would have seized in the face of such complex behavioral choices, the Baby Killer had simply *run off*.

He slapped one of the underlings. It cowered, whimpering, slobbering out some incomprehensible, fawning words through mushy lips.

"The thing must come home eventually," Scholes snapped. "If only for a want of fire pellets for its boiler." He *could* wait it out. And it could be trained. He'd left the pain centers of the child's brain most certainly active.

Still, such standing by would not do. Too much was at stake, should Philadelphia's indolent authorities deign to take notice of a six-legged killer stalking their streets. The anonymity that he had hitherto enjoyed might well be compromised.

Besides which, there was no substitute for direct observation in good experimental practice. Dr. Scholes brushed some drops of blood from his laboratory jacket. "Bring me my driving coat and my car," he announced.

Underlings scurried away.

"And clean this mess out here." As he prepared to venture out into the cesspit that was modern day Philadelphia, he distracted himself by considering whether to employ the Burckhardt treatment in order to trim the frontal lobes of the other justice machine still awaiting final assembly within his laboratory.

‡

The Governor-General stared out at the autumn clouds. The cables and hoses of a pneumatic skyway line crossed his line of sight. He despised that, much as he'd always despised such contrivances.

The world was meant for beauty, not the crassness of industry and commerce. If only people had

been content to remain behind their plows and amid their herds, the Americas could have been bucolic paradise.

Our Belle is a pastoralist. He would have been happier in the world of Poussin's "Et in Arcaed Ego" than in Her Majesty's possessions. Not that he would have soiled his hands in that era either - someone must provide the exemplars for the lesser strata of society, after all; and his mind was made for leadership, he was just certain of that — but every aspect of life in such a milieu was in simple and more predictable array.

He was currently considering a memorandum brought to him by the inestimable Hoare, who even now saw to the difficulties with his female personal staff. The document in hand advised that a certain Frenchman of dark reputation had come to Philadelphia, and was proposing a particularly immoral and debased form of entertainment at a theatre that would not be named until the hour before the performance.

The Governor-General tried to understand why anyone would humiliate himself so for crass entertainment. The world made so much more *sense* when people knew their place. Anyone who could not see that the old values were the best deserved their fate.

He grumbled and drifted around his parlor, the crumpled sheet half forgotten in his hand. A telelocutor whistled for attention. Belle ignored it. Telelocutors came with people to answer them. If something required his attention, Hoare would ensure that the need was brought before him.

This mansion was foolish, he realized. Full of noisy devices and pipes tucked along the margins of the ceilings. Even the heat was wrong, a clanking steam kettle with fins having taken the place of a good, honest fireplace.

Electricity is not so bad, Belle admitted to himself. It was nice to have decent light when spending time with his girls.

"Hoare," he shouted, misremembering for a moment his man was about a critical errand. The Governor-General shook the paper in his hand. "We cannot have this...this...French debauchery in our city. Persons of low morals going about among the populace. Something should be done."

Belatedly it occurred to Belle that if something was to be done, he personally had the power to do it.

"*Hoare!*" he bellowed. There was no answer, but for a frightened valet peering through the doorway. "Sir?"

"Ah, well, there you are." Though the Governor-General had seen this man every morning for the past several years, he found he could not recall the fellow's name. "Have someone ring the Commissioner of Police. I intend to personally inspect our city's theatres and their licensing this afternoon."

"Erm...yes, sir." The man withdrew cautiously, until Belle could only see the top of his head like a tumor on the doorframe.

"And have my eveningwear laid out. And my car brought around!"

Where the devil was Hoare? He took care of such details with a transparent efficiency.

Being a pastoralist has its advantages, especially if one has embraced the sort of simple-minded conservatism that rejects all change as ill-wrought disaster. The mechanisms of the modern world baffle Belle, and frighten him slightly, and so he pretends they have no effect on him.

All the denial in the world will not save a beetle from the tyre of a passing velocipede.

‡

Arkady leaps far higher than a man-shaped thing ought. He miscalculates, though, for he is barely awake for the first time in years. The burning silver wires with their jangling, melting bells cling

him, and the arch of the vault is lower than the arc of his leap.

~~—That is enough for the Gollinoster to avoid a snapped neck and the accompanying instant death.~~ She backs into the newly opened passage, forcing the Tsar's Last Man to come at her frontally.

He recovers from his mistake, now fully aware of the space surrounding him. His timeless years have brought him new senses — the ability to read a wall without looking toward it; awareness of a million volumes, tiny echoes, and magneto-electrical fields. These faculties are now sorted out from his long sleep in the sealed casket.

Ion shrieks and begins gibbering prayers in Old Church Slavonic. Drunk or not, the monk should know better, at least with Arkady.

The Gollinoster retreats a bit further, drawing the ancient evil from his consecrated resting space into the sewers that are her own territory. Beneath the church she is disturbed by the currents of blessing and prayer that might attend even the most venal of clerics, let alone the night-fanatical devotion to saints and their icons going on day and night within the Orthodox cathedral above.

The sewers run freely with the soil of bodies and souls. There she can gather strength.

Arkady pursues.

Where the Gollinoster shambles, moving like a fat old woman carrying sacks of lard, the Tsar's Last Man whips. His joints fold unnaturally, his ancient muscles have the strength of coiled wire, his skin slides like leathered armor. He is lightning made flesh, an unearthed spark looking for a path to ground.

He has killed more men with this blinding flurry of assault than he could possibly count. For centuries of serving the Russian throne have presented myriad opportunities for administering death on both a mass scale and a most individual basis.

The Gollinoster is an old hand at sewer fighting. She does not always win, but so far she has always survived. There is no patience for politics or the games of empire within her, only the breathing incarnation of the ills to which this greatest of American cities is heir to.

Besides, pressure lines abound within the sewer system.

Arkady erupts into the tunnel, spinning so fast he seems not to touch down on the roiling slop filling the bottom of the channel. So far neither of them has placed a blow. The moment of truth is at hand. His palm swings wide, fingers curled to bring the curving talons of his nails at an acute angle into his victim's face.

The Gollinoster blocks him with a stolid arm. Her rubberized canvas coat tears, but absorbs the sweeping edge of Arkady's nails. She moves far more quickly than a large old woman should to trap her opponent's slim, deadly hand in a meaty grip.

He yanks backward with a grin, knowing she will be pulled forward off her feet into the kick that will shatter her jaw. Except that the Gollinoster, weighted by sin far beyond the usual measure of human mass, does not budge.

Arkady misses his kick completely. He slips backward until his spine bounces painfully off the stone. She shoves him into the sewage and pins him with one ponderous knee.

An ordinary man would drown, but the Gollinoster doesn't need Ion's frantic prayers to tell her she is far beyond the realm of the ordinary. As Arkady begins to lift her away from his submerged chest, she steps backwards. A secondary steam pipe thumps overhead. There is no relief valve close by, so she simply grabs at the hot metal and yanks downward.

It breaks loose with a screech. Arkady pops back up out of the water just in time to receive a faceful of erupting superheated water. The blowback crosses just above the Gollinoster's knuckles.

This is enough. Arkady shrieks with an inhuman noise and scuttles back into the cathedral vault.

like a wounded spider.

~~The Gollinoster briefly considers pursuit, then decides against it. This was not *her* evil. She follows a different trail of misdeed. Instead she turns away from the keening of the Tsar's Last March and seeks a ladder to the surface.~~

It is time to take to the streets and scent out the sin she knew. Words return to her mouth from that stream that seems to always wash around her.

"...Orthodox oddities strapped in stone beneath church's bones, don't send us your tired, your poor, your psychotic masses yearning to wreak havoc, American men make enough sin without wangle more from beyond the sea, streets run overhead like the unmade bed of the city's dream calling me before the turning wheels that run ever faster pushing sin and virtue so true through the rising tide of night which claims every fright..."

‡

The Baby Killer cocked its head to a distant scream. World is light and motion and edges and urges, is, it is, and words lost to mind. No mommy, no milk, but hands and feet and legs and *purpose*. Dark glowering purpose.

The scream is more than the cry of a man dying. It has heard that twice now, the gurgling slip of air seeping at last from lungs given over to nothing more than the memory of meat. This is different, fire in the night of the mind.

The Doctor is somewhere not far behind. The flames in its belly have time to burn, then time to die. For now there is pressure at the head and this noise weaving through the fabric of the city like wire to catch at grasping little fingers until they are torn away.

Ignoring the surrounding tumult, shots echoing off its copper carapace, horses breaking the traces to flee, the Baby Killer scuttles down a cobbled street. It leaves the safety of the Callowhill District behind for the sake of chasing a noise so profound that no one else could hear.

Panic reigns in the justice machine's wake until a madman in an armored Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost with a pair of turret-mounted Maxim guns at his disposal effectively sweeps the streets of everyone who can still move.

Then all is quiet except for the small pings from the cooling brass casings scattered by Dr. Scholes' passing.

‡

A city — any city — is an animal in its own right. Not a dog bedeviled with fleas, nor some leviathan covered with leeches and rays and pilot fish, but more in the nature of a jellyfish, where each portion of the whole has its own life but finds existence with close neighbors commodious.

Like a jellyfish, a city trails deadly tentacles to stun the unwary. Like a jellyfish, a city has a bright side shining in the sun and a dark side riddled with rot. Like a jellyfish, a city is beautiful from a distance, but horrific up close.

So dear reader, consider Philadelphia, so central to the existence of the Dominion of the Americas. Not a true deepwater port, so perhaps jellyfish is a poor choice of metaphors. Still, there is something of the colonial organism here, combined with the circulatory system of a vertebrate. No heart pounds, yet the streets teem with corpuscles, invaders and defenders. When something foreign and dangerous interjects itself, the response both curls away and closes in.

Our Gollinoster is a native of this city, though precious few of the locals would recognize her. Still, when she comes to the surface, she has the smell of the place, much as one's own feces have a certain comforting familiarity despite one's innate revulsion for human waste. Arkady, however, is an infection that will soon inflame until the gangrenous limbs of the city he has disturbed must drop.

away like rotted flesh. Compared to him the Baby Killer is a cancer, a homegrown explosion of feet and ill health crying for an excision.

Except that this cancer carries a knife, and is pursued by a very angry man with a pair of ho-barreled guns.

Perhaps this is not the best afternoon for you to attend to the city's theatres, as our Governor General intends to do. The wise man would be home with doors barred and shades drawn, sheltered in an interior room of his house, knelt down in solemn prayer.

Le Pétomane, of course, has set out for a walk. He has scented a disturbance on the wind.

‡

Their AA car reached the Holmesburg station with a slight shudder followed by a smooth series of clicks. Agnes Day had already tired of this frightened girl she had purchased, who refused all attempts at cozening out of her retreat into depressive silence.

This platform also was empty. There was no waiting elevator cage. Agnes depressed the call button. She wondered if she could simply get Tatyana Verigin drunk and then deliver the Doukhobor Princess to Hoare gift-wrapped and in a receptive state.

“My dear,” she said, trying to find a pleasant tone. “You simply must attend. There is so much to be done before you. But I cannot usher you into the upper echelons of society if you insist on speaking toward your feet and withholding eye contact as if it were your virginity.”

Tatyana Verigin gave her a startled glance, then blushed a deep, deep red that ran to her scalp.

Et cherchez l'homme, thought Agnes with triumphant glee. The Fathers were busier than they should have been with their little refugee from the prairie provinces. Or perhaps there were more reasons behind her sheltering in a Philadelphia church than prairie arson and violent politics.

Now that she knew the nature of the lock on Tatyana Verigin's passions, she could find the key. Agnes Day had a vast experience of keys.

Consider this, gentle reader: What if the procuress is mistaken? What if the true motivation for the Innocent's embarrassed fear is something else entirely?

The Holy Virgin gave birth without being in a state of sin. Yet even the least familiarity with the microscopic homunculi that comprise the path of reproductive passion would suggest that Our Lord and Savior should have been a girl, had He been of virgin born. The miracle of Immanent Conception was doubly so, the one for a quickening without a fleshy shaft passing her gates of pleasure, the other for the presence of the male seed within the purely feminine domain of an unpenetrated organ in a new generation.

One might well consider the proposition that Jesus was in fact a woman. This could explain much that is obscure about Scripture, but is also a blasphemy of the lowest order to those who believe while being a stupendously silly irrelevance to those with the courage to cast off God and replace Him with other, more secular superstitions. Still, the idea has a certain appeal both in the mystical realm and as a sheer artifact of social troublemaking — a pastime most likely appealing to any reader of fictions such as this sordid tale.

So in the canonical Virgin we have a quickened belly without sin. Here, perhaps we encounter the inverse, penetrated flesh without sin, the belly unquickened, the spirit unsoiled. As if Eve had spat out the fruit within the Garden and suckled at the head of the snake instead. One might imagine Adam's reaction to that — surely the metaphor is obvious enough — but then we would have passion within damnation, pursuits of the flesh without the concomitant ills of the spirit.

Sex doth make moral lepers of us all, until desire falls away like rotted flesh to leave us in the state of Origen's sin: a prideful cleaving of stoneless pride.

Once these considerations are offered up for a divine calculus, surely the opportunities for the calibration of sin and Innocence are likewise extended past the reach of ordinary venality. So we have Tatyana Verigin, late of the Saskatchewan prairies, already given up to male passion yet still as pure in heart as the dawn sky within the walls of Eden's garden.

How?

Because her unsullied soul still glows in the divine light of Innocence. She was taken, but did not give of herself. The Doukhobors, a peasant cult of violent pacificism, have among their number cheats and scofflaws as surely as any other human tribe. That Tatyana Verigin did not cleave to the pleasures of thrust and shaft so violently offered her, that she did not indeed embrace the female energies of climax, that she endured without acceptance, embraced without adoption those male energies, has kept her clean.

It has also cloven her spirit, as the good Dr. Freud of Vienna might have observed. The wounded child remains at the surface, the very incarnation of Innocence scented by the Gollinoster. Agnes Da even now converses with this poorly socialized and naïve woman. Below the surface there lurk monsters, created as a result of the lifelong fear of damnation by divine fiat for the most inconsequential sins. That holy terror now collides with the overwhelming shame of physical dispossession. It is most especially in contention with Tatyana Verigin's inner succubus now awakened by that terrible act.

All of this turmoil was of course invisible to the procuress, who merely believed she espied the shame of a fallen woman still playing at being able to bloody the marital sheets. That she was instead in the presence of a true Innocent, fearful of the dark monsters lurking so close beneath her own thoughts like alligators in a Mississippi bayou, did not occur to Agnes.

"Come," she said to Tatyana Verigin as they exited the elevator at the bottom of the pneumatic skyway tower. "I have just the thing for you." A lascivious wink followed this remark, one world woman acknowledging another in a code that the Innocent could not read.

‡

The Gollinoster finds herself at the Orkney Street entrance of the cathedral's rectory. She raises her massive fist to do something she has not done in at least a generation.

She knocks on the door.

It creaks open a moment later. A stout man with a curling black beard stares out. His eyes are white-wide, the stench of panic upon him. When he sees the Gollinoster, he blurts, "Lord save us! protect us!"

"Lord ain't here, never so near," she rumbles in a voice like cracked cobblestones. She finds it very difficult to straiten herself to mere sentences. "I am what I am and you stand before my hand like a man waiting to be judged."

The priest, for such he must be, tries to slam shut the door. The Gollinoster stops it with her flattened palm.

"No more, little father, no further, no farther, you cannot bother to stop me from the Innocent of yours I seek to speak with..." She wrestles her mouth closed in hopes he will understand.

"My what?" he squeaks.

"The one here...woman, girl, from across the world, you hide within like kitchen-cooked sin. She leans close, breathes sewer gas and ancient sin into his face. "Not killer that lies beneath cathedral basement a charnel heap."

His complexion turns green. "Killer...basement..."

"Is there someone else home?" she asks, the memory of politeness asserting itself in an o

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