



An Unfortunate  
Engagement

*A literary serial in several parts*  
Chapters 1-4

By G. D. Falksen

# Steampunk Tales Free #1

Foreword: A word from the publisher.....	3
Part One: In Which the Heroes are Introduced, Engines are Examined, and an Explosion Occurs.....	5
Part Two: In which Gunshots are Fired, Bombs are Found, and a Crime is Uncovered.....	11
Part Three: In which Airships are Debated, Ruffians are Encountered, and a Journey Begins.....	19
Part Four: Clocksmiths are Interviewed, Architecture is Critiqued & Complications Arise.....	31
Author Bio.....	39

## Foreword: A word from the publisher

If you enjoy this free issue of *Steampunk Tales* please consider purchasing one or more of our full magazines available at [www.steampunktales.com](http://www.steampunktales.com)!

With many of us feeling the stresses and strains of a world economy in decline, the time is right for the resurgence of escapism into the magnificent and fantastic worlds of classic pulp. These magazines of the 1920's, 30's, and 40's provided an inexpensive medium for the distribution of exciting and imaginative fiction. The works of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard (to name a few) provided a shorter form and lighter brand of fiction in which anything was possible. These stories were, above all, written to entertain. Today, many of us walk around with small yet powerful computers in our pockets that make reading such a magazine pragmatic, easy and affordable. What better time to bring back the classic entertainment of a bygone era?

Steampunk is a genre of great complexity. At its core is a solid backbone of Victorian science and historical speculation, but this is fleshed out by the fantastic notions of retro-futurism. Inspired by a century's worth of technological imagination preceding the First World War and by countless cultures across the world, steampunk is one of the most diverse genres in literature. Its themes range from the factual to the fantastic, from adventure to intrigue to horror. In many respects steampunk is an aggregate, and like cyberpunk which gave it its name, steampunk borrows aspects from the pulp and noir stories of the 20's, 30's, and 40's; indeed, if anything, pulp and steampunk are close cousins. Steampunk is about more than top hats, goggles and clockwork. It is about joining the imaginations of two different eras into something unique and beautiful. Steampunk is about creativity. It is elegant technology.

In publishing *Steampunk Tales*, I wanted to lean toward the fullest range of possibilities within the aesthetic. Steampunk fiction can be horror, romance, adventure, a detective story, etc. By encouraging writers to approach steampunk and elegant retro-futurism on their own terms I believe I'm serving the readership in the best possible way.

This free issue contains the first four chapters of G. D. Falksen's fantastic adventure serial titled *An Unfortunate Engagement*. These first four chapters were originally published in *The Willows Magazine* which is now sadly defunct. We're happy that Falksen has chosen to continue writing this excellent series and we're honored to be its exclusive publisher from here on out. Look for chapter 5 in issue #2 of *Steampunk Tales*.

G. D. Falksen's *An Unfortunate Engagement* is a steampunk adventure tale filled with action, excitement, thrills, chills, and of course mad science, set against the backdrop of the Edwardian era. Join Alex, Bruno and Francis as they travel across Europe braving countless dangers and mishaps in search of advanced airship plans stolen by mysterious parties motivated by a terrible secret goal. Watch as they do battle with ruffians, spies, Bavarians, Russians and even the dastardly French in their quest to right a terrible wrong and make the world safe for Britain. You won't want to miss a moment of the action as each step draws them closer to the heart of a terrible malevolent conspiracy.

Enjoy the first four installments of *An Unfortunate Engagement* for free. Meet narrator Alex and friends Bruno and Francis as life on a pleasant English country estate is forever changed by a single act

of violent sabotage. See them travel into the wilds of Darkest Europe, following the breadcrumbs that lead them ever closer to a truth they will soon wish they had never uncovered.

So, there you have it! This is the first free issue of *Steampunk Tales*. We hope to release more free content in the future, but for the full experience please check out (AKA buy) our regular issues. They're reasonably priced and contain a full 10 stories of original steampunk pulp fiction written by an A+ lineup of award winning authors. Inside you'll find stories that fit the narrow description of the genre, but you'll also find pieces that hover somewhere outside (but in the general vicinity) of what you'd normally expect from steampunk fiction. Above all, I hope that you find this collection fun and entertaining to read!

Kind regards,  
John H. Sondericker III  
<http://www.steampunktales.com>  
Steampulp Publishing, LLC

## Part One: In Which the Heroes are Introduced, Engines are Examined, and an Explosion Occurs

*True and remarkable genius is a rare and felicitous thing, one which arrives often only once in a generation, and when it makes itself known one cannot help but stand amazed at the true ferocity of its intellectual prowess. I consider it my great honour to have known, indeed even to have worked alongside, one such Great Man. Although it is, perhaps, forward of me to say so, I do believe that my good friend Francis Edgar B---, now Earl of C---, must be counted among the finest minds in the history of the world. In a startling turn of events which even the Lord God Himself--please pardon my the blasphemy of my enthusiasm--could not have foreseen, dear Francis saved the British Empire from certain destruction at the hands of vile Continentals--who shall for now remain nameless--and thereby preserved the fate of the very world itself.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The events of which I speak took place in the summer of 19--, a time when the loss of our dearly beloved Queen Victoria--if only she had reigned forever!--was still fresh in the memory of Britannia's entire empire. I was fortunate enough to be spending that glorious summer with my dear friend at the family estate in the country. At that time, the then Earl and Countess C--- were abroad, leaving the house in the capable hands of Francis, and the household butler, Mr. Waithredy. Comfortably ensconced in most of the eastern second floor of the house since mid-February, I had spent the past several months assisting my dear friend in his various incidents of experimentation, while engaging feebly in my own ignorant attempts when left unattended. With much of the family either married off or abroad, Francis and I had much the run of the house to engage in our childish pranks upon Nature's laws and God's order. In March we had raced Hildebrand motorized velocipedes through the upstairs gallery, foolishly scuffing up the helpless wooden floors and drawing curses from the servants tasked to polish them. Thank God we had the presence of mind to remove the grand rugs beforehand, or else I might well have been cast from the house by Waithredy as a poor influence on dear Francis. Come the first storms of the spring we attached copper wires to a lightning rod in the South Tower and wound them down to a nickel Edison battery, very nearly setting fire to the servants' quarters in the process. Of course, it was all in good fun, the well-meaning antics of two hot-blooded youths determined to become the next generation of Nature's masters. Come the warmth of summer, Waithredy and Co. were quite relieved when we moved our locus of investigations to the old and disused stables some distance from the main house.

But perhaps I have moved on too quickly and left some mistaken impressions in your minds. You see, the mishaps that constantly plagued our work were never the fault of dear Francis, but rather the expected result of my incompetent bumbling getting in the way of his unimaginable genius. Even the infamous "Glider Incident" of which the servants have spoken even until this year, was entirely my own doing; for it was I who insisted that we attach the gear-driven propellers to a

perfectly decent glider, which ultimately resulted in the tragic death of twenty square feet of Countess C---'s beloved flower beds. Using a network of clocks, wheels and wire to remotely prepare our afternoon tea seemed like a good idea at the time, in spite of the machine's inability to cease pouring when the teacups were full. The true tragedy were the metal strings that spiderwebbed across the east wing of the house, causing no end of trouble among the servants. Still, Francis called the device an absolute success after the first time one of the upstairs maids came running through the house screaming about ghosts and flying teapots.

Now then, returning to that glorious summer, one sunny morning found Francis and myself out for a pleasant ride across the estate, cantering enjoyably through the rolling hills and fields surrounding the house. Tall in the saddle, Francis was truly the image of an English gentleman: collar high, blood-red coat well brushed before wearing, and boots polished to their finest black. I had made all endeavors to mimic the perfection of his appearance, but I fear the end result was somewhat lacking. Even the dear fellow's brown moustache was positively virile, while naturally I was without such. Timepieces tucked away inside our black vests, we were quite the dashing pair to behold, if I may be allowed the liberty of saying so.

Swinging around to the cobblestone walk that led down to the stables, we caught sight of Francis' other guest, the delightful Dr. Bruno von H---, a fellow gentleman-scientist and the only Continental I have met and found as agreeable as any Englishman. Quite the charming eccentric, Bruno could normally be found in proper if somewhat outdated garb: it was his custom to be seen always in a perfectly tailored frock coat of black or gray, highlighted in blues and reds with a matching vest and silken top hat, and always with polished boots instead of shoes. To this day I have never seen the man with fewer than two pocket watches at any time, accompanied by a leather-banded wristwatch which only he or dear Francis could wear while still preserving masculinity.

\*\*\*\*\*

Today, Bruno was dressed down for work--his finery replaced with sturdy work clothes normally reserved for the lesser class of person in this great Empire of ours, including a firm leather vest filled with all manner of pockets and clips for securing the necessary tools of the engineer's trade. He had even gone so far as to replace his customary gold and pearl timepieces with simple watches of hard steel. We could tell he was preparing for travel as his beloved frock coats had been replaced by a long, double-breasted duster of sturdy leather, such as I hear the Americans used to wear in their western territories. Neatly trimmed hair blowing in the morning wind, Bruno raised a gloved hand and waved to us, signaling our approach. As we pulled into the court before the stables I could see that he was busy loading the carrying basket at the back of an abnormally long motorized velocipede. It was a curious machine with four distinct wheels and a veritable battery of exhaust pipes extending out and back from an overly large engine. Indeed, even the driver station was unusual, being much lower in position than a normal "bicycle" seat. Upholstered in red leather with a high back and even armrests, Francis felt this particular innovation deserved special praise. I did not have the heart to tell him that it was no doubt one of the reading chairs from the library that Bruno had surreptitiously obtained.

“Francis! Alex!” Bruno greeted us. “Back from a healthy romp in the meadows?”

My dear companion slapped his thigh cheerfully and laughed. “Not much of a ‘romp,’ Bruno old man! Much more of a leisurely canter. Good for the buttocks, you know.”

Bruno's eyebrow arched decidedly at this, and he twirled the tip of his moustache between thumb and forefinger. “Well, yes, if you say so old man.”

“And what perilous mischief are you engaged in now, dear Bruno?” I ventured, peering with the utmost curiosity at the dear fellow's curious machine. “And what on Earth is that!”

The foreign gentleman patted the heavy engine of the device affectionately. “You like, eh? Of course you do, no doubt about it. This, my dear, is my latest invention, the Mk. 2-A Self-Propelled Quadricycle. Powered by a fully self-contained boiler-driven pressure system, reinforced by heat-trap batteries, driven by genius....”

Such statements were characteristic of dear Bruno, but intended only in the best of sentiments. Many were the dreamy evenings I had spent listening to those two chatting away over cigarettes and billiards, debating the future of scientific discovery. On several occasions I have taken part myself, although I fear that such incidents only display my own ignorance for I have often found myself agreeing more with Bruno's logic and deductions than with dear Francis, a thoroughly inexcusable thing I admit.

“A boiler, Bruno?” Francis demanded. “Why not a common motor?” He laughed freely at the very thought.

Bruno returned the sentiment in good nature. “Francis, you old fool, where would be the fun in that? No, no, the steam pressure is more than sufficient for my purposes, and what's more I can store the heated vapor for later. Insulation, you know.”

“Fantastic!” I found myself exclaiming, swinging down from the saddle in a rush and hurrying to examine Bruno's work. I could identify numerous sealed capsules of riveted brass latched onto the side of the machine's boiler engine, and connected to the device through heavy pipes with pressure gauges and multi-coloured knobs. These no doubt captured released steam that was stored like a charge in an electrical battery, although how Bruno expected to regulate the process was entirely beyond my limited understanding of pressure engineering. No doubt Francis--with his

squinting, confused expression--had already determined countless flaws in our companion's design.

"So it's, um..." Francis mused distantly, "some sort of steam car?"

"Well, yes."

"What an utterly ghastly idea!"

Bruno grinned at the vote of confidence. "Knew you'd like it, old man!" He looked at me with his overpowering cheer and charm. "Right up your alley, eh my dear Alex? Bet you can't wait to take her out for a whirl!"

"Well, I--" was my feeble, half-hearted reply. Certainly, I was truly fascinated by the prospect of trying such an incredible piece of engineering, but as the house belonged to Francis' family it was his right to have the first crack at it.

Our Continental friend was not about to wait around for the duration of our decision-making. Swinging into the plush leather chair, he tossed us a cheerful salute. "Well, I'm off. See you two later, eh?" He snapped his gloved fingers. "You ought to come out for a luncheon. Bring tea and sandwiches and all that. Just you two, no servants..." his voice trailed off and for a moment I thought I could hear him murmur '*sneaking, spying Bavarian swine!*' although it may have been something entirely different. I certainly hesitate to suggest that dear Bruno is capable of saying such horrible things about good, upright English servants. Then, more cheerfully, the good fellow added, "You know, just the three of us."

"Yes, of course," Francis replied, perhaps a bit concerned at the license Bruno was taking with the C--- family estate. "Bruno, old man... where exactly are you off to?"

"Why, to the dirigible, obviously! I'm not about to let Ferdie von Z--- beat me to the air!" And with that, he was away, his curious machine rumbling off down the path as the boiler and pipes shook furiously.

Both Francis and I knew well what he was speaking of. Since the idea had struck him several

months ago, Bruno had been exhaustively engaged in constructing some sort of massive balloon-ship, having commandeered an old barn and decrepit farmstead at one end of the property for such a grandiose purpose. It was always a delight to visit the dusty workshop with its mouldering wooden walls, and we often joined in the work on lazy afternoons. Ever the traditionalist, Francis would joke that such a craft would never fly, and to his credit he was most convincing in his insinuations. While I am not given to gossip, I will convey that rumour had it that Bruno was paired off against another German ballooning enthusiast to see who would be the first to take flight and thereby conquer the sky. It seemed a touching, if unrealistic ambition at the time, for who then could have possibly believe that men would some day fly like birds?

Watching Bruno's departure wistfully, Francis and I led our horses across to the stables and passed them over for a healthy rubdown. Returning toward the house, we passed a while in idle conversation. I attempted to address the subject of the proposed expedition to Switzerland, a rather brilliant idea that Francis had put forth while mildly under the influence of drink; but sadly my dear friend was no longer of the mind to consider such things. Evidently, Calais was the furthest point abroad he wished to contemplate while in the throes of sobriety.

At the side door Francis and I paused, thinking better of reentering the house in such clement weather. We took to the garden path, though our riding clothes made us stand out somewhat fantastically among the flora. Carefully avoiding the decimated patches of flowerbeds, and the furious gardener we knew could be found there, we meandered off toward Bruno's makeshift workshop. It was as the footpath wandered so carelessly through the copse of trees surrounding that old farmstead that a singularly terrible and fantastic event occurred, one which hailed the onset of such an incredible happening that to this day I must at times doubt my sanity in that moment. But on that pleasant day, the first indication we ever received of Continental treachery was so simple a thing that no one could have predicted the monstrous outcome.

With the crash of a thunderclap and a gout of flame rising to Heaven above, the barn that had been haven and laboratory to our dear friend and guest, with singular ferocity and determination, summarily exploded.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Here concludes Part One of my narrative. Dear reader, if tales of high adventure, English chivalry and Continental treachery are your fare, and if you are not afraid of wondrous Science or those who would master its--largely--immutable laws, please await the next portion of this truthfully fantastic tale.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*A. Westminster, London 19--*

## Part Two: In which Gunshots are Fired, Bombs are Found, and a Crime is Uncovered

*Dear reader: when last I left you, I fear I halted my narrative in a most uncharitable manner, leaving you to wonder and worry at the fate of the second greatest scientific mind of our modern world. As you will recall, it was in the balmy summer of 19-- that these events occurred, while I was enjoying a few pleasant months with my dear companion Francis Edgar B---, son of the Earl and Countess C---, and a singular individual whose brilliance and genius set him head and shoulders above any other scientist in the world. To my immeasurable delight, we had been joined in company by Francis' sole intellectual equal, the German gentleman-scientist Bruno von H---. Throughout the course of his stay, Bruno was well engaged in a race to the air with the now famous Ferdinand von Z---, and had commandeered an abandoned farmstead at the edge of the property for the construction of his great "air ship." It was here that disaster struck, revealing the depths to which the Continentals were willing to stoop in the pursuit of empire building, and without the timely intervention of dear Francis, the good Lord only knows what might have become of dear Britannia.*

\*\*\*\*\*

As was his custom, Bruno had secluded himself in the great rotting barn that served as his workshop. After a pleasant ride through the grounds, Francis and I had been intending to meet our dear friend for a pleasant lunch, no doubt accented with a lively debate regarding the right of mankind to venture into God's great sky. This had been our custom for some time, ever since Bruno's arrival at the estate; and it was the sort of thing one generally expected to enjoy without interruption. When the first shattering explosion bellowed across the sculpted trees and manicured lawns, my heart leapt from my chest in shock. By the time the second and third eruptions had carried showers of wood fragments and soil into the air, I was already on my way, dashing madly through the trees in the direction of the sound. I could only think that some terrible accident had befallen poor Bruno, and I dreaded what state we might find him in. It may seem odd to you that I should react so singularly to a mysterious explosion, but I must confess that minor disasters were a hallmark of Bruno's work, and my entire concern was for the health of our friend rather than the cause of the disturbance. In my ignorance, I failed utterly to consider that something more sinister might be afoot.

Distracted by the light of his own genius, Francis stared somewhat blankly in the direction of the noise. Given the urgency of the moment, I was forced to take my companion firmly by the hand and drag him, bodily, along the footpath toward the farmstead. As we approached the farmstead, a torrent of gunshots sounded in the air, evoking an abrupt response from Francis.

"Dear God!" he exclaimed in the heat of the moment. "Dear God, socialists! Help! Help!" It was

utterly characteristic of dear Francis to think of such people in a time of trial, although why working-class solidarity should leap to mind at such a time was beyond my very limited powers of reason.

“Come along!” I answered, pulling all the stronger as Francis, distracted by the concerns of social reform, pulled away. “Think of Bruno!” I implored, and this seemed to do the trick. At long last, Francis accepted the urgency of our dear friend's plight, and followed me in a brisk run through the trees.

The sight of the barn sent shudders through me, and I gasped for breath to think of what must have befallen our Continental comrade. The roof had gone entirely, fragments of rotting wood and tile scattered around the surrounding forest and overgrown fields. The windows, such as they remained after years of neglect, had all been smashed to pieces; and even sections of the brick and mortar walls were cracked or broken from the blast. Clouds of dust and dirt were thick in the air, which set Francis and myself coughing horribly. More shots sounded from somewhere above us, and upon looking up I saw a tall figure in a colonial riding duster peering out from behind the broken edge where the roof had formerly met the hayloft wall. Presently, I realized that it was Bruno, somewhat singed and dirtied but nonetheless recognizable. He was shouting loudly in German, uttering phrases that I shall not repeat for fear that you, dear reader, are also acquainted with that tongue. It shall suffice to say that the principal objects of his verbal fury were both Bavarians and illegitimate swine, sometimes singularly but more often both at once.

As he leaned out from behind the wall, carefully, as if fearing to be seen, Bruno finally made known the source of the gunshots. In one gloved hand he held what I believe to be his most favorite of arms: a Mauser automatic pistol. You may have heard of such things, or seen them even, although their popularity over a trusty revolver will never seem sensible to me. Holding the weapon by its 'broom handle' grip, the man fiddled about with the large, boxy magazine which rested just ahead of the trigger--no doubt loading additional rounds to the unnecessarily large supply. Just what Bruno's attachment to the firearm might have been I could not say, but he would never be seen without it any more than another self-respecting gentleman might be seen without a walking cane to ward off ruffians.

In the next instant, Bruno's gaze fell upon us; I naturally raised my hand in greeting, hoping that he was well in spite of the ordeal. The man's reaction was rather unexpected, for he twisted about in place and leveled his weapon directly at Francis, shouting again in his native tongue. What fit of madness had taken him, I did not have time to assess; for with great but--thankfully!--imperfect precision, Bruno commenced firing upon us. Ever the diplomat, Francis took a moment to chastise the obviously misguided Continental, while I, more practically, pulled the both of us to the relative safety of an especially sizable tree.

“Bruno!” I cried, somewhat frantic in my exclamations. “Bruno, it's us!”

The sound of my voice paused the man, and he peered down from the hayloft at me as my face protruded 'round the edge of the tree trunk. There was a long moment in which he studied me carefully, as if suspicious that I might have somehow falsified my identity and was actually some insidious spy cunningly disguised as a well-bred English native. How he could possibly think such a thing was beyond my understanding, but he was, after all, a Rhenish gentleman, and thus given to certain eccentricities.

Finally, he decided that I was not some disguised phantom, and leaned out fully into view. "Alex? Alex, my dear, is that you?"

"Yes, of course it is, Bruno!" I shouted back. "Who else would it be?"

At my side, Francis offered his contribution to the dialogue: "He's not going to shoot at us again, is he?"

"Be quiet, Francis," I answered. "I say, Bruno!"

"Yes?" came the reply.

"May we come in? Or is it frightfully important that we not?"

Bruno seemed surprised at this question. "Why do you even need to ask such a thing?"

"Well, you were just shooting at us," I reminded him.

At this, Bruno's face fell slightly, and he took a moment to regard the pistol in his hand. "Oh. Yes. Of course. Well, you see, I wasn't expecting to shoot you, but there are... complications..."

"What sort of complications?" Francis whispered to me, his voice hoarse with worry for dear Bruno's safety.

“Francis, do be quiet.” Nevertheless, I relayed the question: “Bruno! What sort of complications?”

“Why, Bavarians, of course!” Our friend was shocked that we had not reached that same conclusion ourselves. “Obviously!”

I removed myself from the safety of the tree and carefully approached the barn. “Bruno... what Bavarians?”

It was at that moment that the gravity of the situation found cause to announce itself. Before Bruno could speak, another gunshot sounded--this time far louder and more resonant than the crackling thunders of the Mauser. From the tense and alert expression upon Bruno's face, I determined that he was not responsible. A ping and a dull thunk reached my ears from somewhere behind me, and I turned to observe dear Francis, his face slack-jawed with fear for my safety, staring at a hole in the tree trunk where a bullet had recently found its mark. Before Francis could speak, I had grabbed him by the hand and together we fled in short order into the confines of the barn, while Bruno resumed his wild shooting and even wilder cursing.

The unseen attacker continued his exchange with Bruno, and it soon became evident that at least three or four such persons must have been involved to account for the very quantity of gunfire. Within short order, I had identified the attacking weapons as rifles, but could not place from sound alone the nature of their construction. Doubtless Francis had already beaten me to that realization in any event, for he was crouched in a corner, arms wrapped about himself for concentration, with one ear pressed up against the brick wall. He was murmuring something very rapidly, but I could not make it out. To this day, I can only assume that he was calculating the possible models of weapons being fired upon us, although once or twice I am certain I heard the Lord's name uttered for no foreseeable reason.

Useless as ever, I fear I did nothing more than examine our surroundings. The explosions had decimated the interior of the barn. Where once had stood wooden supports, ribbing for the roof, and even stalls for storing hay and perhaps animals as well, there remained nothing but pillars and planks of charred wood scattered across the open space, covered by shattered and scorched tiles. I could see where the bombs had previously gone off, for they had left three deep depressions in the soil beneath, as well as a distinct outline of shattered stone on the nearby walls. The great dirigible balloon, which had formerly occupied the place of honour, was no more. The great sheets of canvas that once formed its hull were now less than a memory of curled ash. The frame, a skeleton of thin beams and metal cables, had collapsed into a heap of charred rubbish. It was a tragic thing to behold, and I felt myself shed a tear for so the loss of so beautiful a piece of scientific achievement.

As the exchange of gunfire continued nearby, my search took me in a circuit of the detonated structure. At one point I crossed by the remains of a ground-floor window and, taking a moment's pause, I peered out into the nearby trees. I could see three distinct individuals, dressed in the rugged garments of country folk, taking aim at us with a thoroughly un-British set of weapons. These were some of the curious lever-loading rifles of the Americas, the very sight of which made my stomach turn with disdain. I had heard Bruno speak well of them in the past; but then again he is Continental, as I have said, and his eccentricities must be allowed-for.

At the far end of the barn, comfortably distant from the sounds of bullets ricocheting from the sides of crumbling bricks, I discovered what one might now identify as a 'significant clue.' It was a box, wooden and elegant, as if assembled by a master craftsman rather than being cobbled together by amateur saboteurs. A sturdy handle was placed at one end, and a gilded faceplate covered much of the container's top. Placed into this was a cluster of small keyholes surrounding a larger version of the same, like a great ring of children circling their mother. There was no latch or mechanism for opening the curious parcel, but with some careful prising I managed to remove a section of the wooden panel. The sight within was both spectacular and magnificent. It seemed as if the entire interior of the box were a massive piece of clockwork, with gears so carefully interlaced that they seemed almost as tangled as wild shrubbery. The vast network of mechanisms spiraled out from the central frame, where a key-wound spring waited to issue commands of action to the waiting cogs. The mass of gears, identifiable as four distinct and identical copies of one another, traveled outward to the corners of the box, where each ended with a spring-driven wheel dotted with pieces of flint. The purpose of the device was made all too clear when I identified four sizable packets of oilcloth, one at each side, wrapped around what looked suspiciously like dynamite. I had discovered an unexploded bomb.

For a moment, my heart beat someplace just inside my throat, and a dizziness of fear supplanted my brain's place within my skull. Tense beyond description, I stared into the gearworks with dreadful anticipation, fearing the device's imminent detonation. Then, as that moment passed--thankfully!--without incident, I bid myself to relax and use reason to observe the terrible device before me. The clockworks were all still, and not even the smallest gear was in motion. The visible springs were loose, and I could see chipping and scarring upon both the flint wheel and the metal sparking plates. No doubt, the bomb had been armed and activated, but the machine had somehow misfired, failing to ignite the explosive packages. It was a good thing too, for surely I--at least, and likely my dear friends also--should have met my end.

Coming to my senses, I noticed that the gunfire had finally ended. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Bruno bound from the hayloft, landing lightly upon the mucky ground without so much as the slightest stumble. I motioned for him and Francis to join me, and they did so. Francis was again taken with one of his contemplative episodes, and Bruno was obliged to transport him bodily to the meeting point. Once there, both of my companions regarded the curious clockwork device with inhaled breaths and gasps of shock. Francis in particular gazed with unblinking fascination, while Bruno, balanced evenly upon the soles of his boots, rested his chin upon the back of one hand while he studied the maze of gears.

"Well, thankfully it hasn't exploded," Francis observed, entirely for Bruno's and my benefit. It was

kind of him to think of us, in the event that we had missed that significant point.

“Obviously!” was Bruno's rather uncharitable response. “The damned thing’s misfired, and fortunately so, I must say. Not that the rest of the lot didn't do more than enough damage.” He looked with glaring eyes upon the wreckage of his beloved skycraft, the product of countless hours and exhausted genius.

No doubt furious at the damage done to his family's property, and the risk brought upon his household, Francis abandoned his genteel heart and adopted a veneer of indignation. “Yes, well, it is rather your fault, old boy. It's your damned ‘air ship’ despite whoever wanted to blow it up! They only started shooting at us when you showed your face!”

I felt it appropriate to venture my own contribution to the exchange: “Please calm down, Francis dear, there's a good man. Now let's be reasonable here. Why would someone do this? Bruno, do you think this was that Ferdinand trying to sabotage your work?”

Bruno laughed darkly at the thought. “Old Ferdie? No, no. Not his style. He’s already gotten one of his ‘*luftschiffs*’ into the air; he just can’t keep them there. He’s got a leg up on me on that account, and he doesn’t realize that I’m actually some real competition. He doesn’t have the foresight for this sort of thing.”

Francis snorted somewhat unpleasantly. “Flying ships... the idea... Decent-sized balloons are quite enough, Bruno, without you damned Germans mucking about and lashing them together.”

“I believe that we're all missing the point,” I hastened to remind. “Bruno, who could have possibly wanted to blow up your workshop? Or even have known where it was, for that matter?”

“Well, Bavarians, obviously,” Bruno insisted, “but you've got a point there: why? The bombs went off before I arrived, and the *swine* only gave fire after I did first...”

“You started the gunfight?” Francis demanded, his face becoming a rather distinguished shade of burgundy.

“Of course!” Bruno replied. “And rightly so, I might add. Imagine: blowing up a man's private

workshop... the idea!" He tapped one gloved fist into his palm. "But what were they after...?" Suddenly, and quite without warning or explanation, his eyes flashed as wide as saucers. "No... They couldn't have!"

Leaping to his feet, the eccentric Continental rushed to one side of the wrecked barn, and began to shove charred boxes and rubble away from one patch of ground. Finally, he had revealed a small pit, lined with bricks to maintain its size and shape. Rising to my feet and peering across, I could just make out the shape of a small iron safe lying upon its back in the ground. From this, Bruno produced a heavy leather portfolio with worn edges and corners, and tore it open frantically. Looking inside, he froze and stared, dejection slowly drooping his shoulders and posture in defeat.

"*Gottverdamm!*..." he hissed between clenched teeth. "They're gone. They're gone!"

Francis made a sharp noise. "Of course they're gone, Bruno! They ran off that way while shooting at us!"

"Not the Bavarians, you daft fool! My plans!" Bruno thrust the open mouth of the portfolio toward Francis, holding it wide open to show its utter lack of contents. "My plans are gone."

"What plans?" I asked, placing a gentle hand upon Bruno's shoulder to steady him.

"*The plans!*" he exclaimed in return. "The airship plans. Everything! My notes, my drafts, all of it!"

"But surely you have copies... somewhere?" I ventured, half assuring and half questioning.

Bruno sighed and flung down the empty leather folder. "Of course, I have copies of the important bits, and what's more, it's all still up here." He tapped his temple vigorously. "But don't you see, Alex? Those plans were decades ahead of anything Ferdie's fooling about with. That means that someone out there is running off with directions for building the most advanced piece of aerial technology in existence..."

"And we have no way of knowing who they are, where they are, or what they mean to do with it..." I finished, as the terrible gravity of the situation descended upon the three of us like a heavy summer storm.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Oh, dear reader: if you are not shocked by these proceedings, and by the dreadful hints of things to come, then you are made of sterner stuff than I, for I am not too proud to say that my blood ran cold at the very thought. Whether Germans, Frenchmen, Italians or even rebellious Scots, the unknown phantoms responsible had threatened life and limb of dear honourable Bruno, sought to end the life of Francis with rifle shot, and moreover had been so audacious as to destroy a perfectly decent English barn. Britannia could not stand for such offenses, and neither could we. So, if this talk of bombs and gunfire has not shaken your nerve, dear reader, return again when next I continue my narrative, and pray God that you have the courage to see this tale through.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*A. Westminster, London 19--*

## Part Three: In which Airships are Debated, Ruffians are Encountered, and a Journey Begins

*There are moments in one's life upon which all future opportunities and outcomes depend. These incidents are the stuff of which character is made, and, while few choices can be said to be truly correct or in error, we are defined by our conduct at this critical times. The events I have recently relayed to you--the time spent with my dear comrades Francis Edgar B--- and Bruno von H--- in the summer of 19--, our countless explorations into the furthest reaches of scientific endeavor, and that final, climactic destruction of an utterly innocent bystanding English barn at the hands of persons unknown--were merely the precursors to that great and terrible event which has made me the person I am today. In the space of fifteen minutes, Francis' peaceful country estate had witnessed the quite unexpected detonation of the aforementioned barn, the resulting destruction of Bruno's prototype "air ship," an exchange of violent gunfire with the perpetrators, and finally the terrible discovery of their dark purpose: the theft of Bruno's advanced luftschiff diagrams.*

\*\*\*

You must imagine how the three of us felt on that formerly blissful afternoon as we crouched in the remains of the barn, amidst heaps of broken brick, scorched metal and smoldering ash. Four of the bombs had been placed by the unknown saboteurs, yet only three had found it proper to detonate. The last had presented itself to us for our intellectual examination, and I now puzzled through it with the vigor and single-minded glee of a young schoolchild. At my side, Bruno stared with a healthy blend of dejection and fury into the empty recesses of his leather portfolio, while Francis, distracted by the winds of genius, stared rather dully at the passing clouds and hummed a song about goblins. As the most brilliant mind among the three of us, he had no doubt become bored with the trivialities of the situation, and had turned to more philosophical contemplations.

Constrained by my more limited intelligence, I found it necessary to study the complexities of the device before me. Housed within a beautifully polished wooden box, the bomb was largely a mass of delicately interlocking clockworks of such perfection and intricacy that they made my head swim just to look at them. The packets of explosive tucked away into the four corners were rather anomalous, obviously intruders into the beautiful maze of gears which surrounded them. With gentle hands, I carefully removed the dynamites from the box and set them aside. In their absence, the spring-loaded flint wheels which were intended to detonate the bomb would be relatively harmless.

At length, Bruno rose to his feet and threw the empty portfolio to the ground in a fit of rage. The German was a man of great passion, and I expect his fury was more a sign of helpless frustration than any mere outbreak of temper. As the leather satchel flopped into the blasted earth, Francis jumped in shock, no doubt roused from a deep and intellectual reverie.

"I say!" he shouted. "What the Devil do you think you're playing at!"

Bruno ignored him and began to pace back and forth in short, circular arcs, one hand tugging at his chin while the other rested somewhat ominously on the grip of his Mauser automatic pistol.

“Don't you dare ignore me, you Rhenish lout--“ Francis continued, enraged at our comrade's insolent attitude.

Sensing the restless energy within Bruno's movements, I quickly moved to counteract any outbreak of violence between the two gentlemen. “Francis, do be quiet!” More calmly, I addressed our companion. “Bruno....” Rising slowly, I intercepted the angry Continental with a gentle hand on the arm.

At first the man jerked away from me and reached for his pistol. Then, as he remembered my identity, he sighed and folded his arms. “Yes, my dear, to answer your concerns, I am quite all right.”

“You aren't acting it,” I noted.

“Yes, well...” Bruno's face fell into an even deeper scowl which twisted his handsome features into a frightening countenance. “Well, I mean to say, something about this whole thing sits poorly with me.”

From his position on the ground, Francis could be heard to grumble, “It was *my* barn that was blown up. That sits poorly with *me*.”

“Not now, Francis,” I sighed, “Bruno and I are speaking.” I turned back to Bruno and carefully led him to the clockwork device. “I understand that you're angry, Bruno, and I don't like this any more than you do. As you said yourself, some lunatic out there is running around with plans to the most advanced aerial technology ever made.” I gripped his arm fiercely to emphasize my concern. “The very thought of it chills me to the bone, I assure you.”

“It was *my* barn to blow up, not *yours*,” Francis repeated, no doubt focusing on the financial concerns of having private property destroyed.

“Francis, please be quiet,” I said, my voice somewhat harsher than the situation demanded. In my ignorance, I took his attitude to be sullen, when in fact I am certain he must have been concerned by considerations far too complex for us to understand. For my part, a certain issue was busy tickling the back of my thoughts. “Bruno... there's something odd about that bomb, don't you think?”

“Well, quite--“

“I mean, it's very complex, isn't it?”

“Rather, yes,” Bruno agreed.

I lifted the now-impotent explosive and studied it with great intensity. “Why is it so complex? It must have cost a fortune.”

“Four fortunes to be exact,” my German companion noted, tipping his head to indicate the remains of the three successful bombs.

Perhaps irritated that our mundane conversation about bombs and fortunes was interrupting his intellectual musings, Francis inserted his own explanation. “Someone wanted to kill Bruno, and was willing to pay a fortune for it. Sounds perfectly sensible to me!”

I fear that the insightfulness of Francis’ statement had passed me by, and rather than confess my ignorance as to why such a thing was in any meaning of the word ‘sensible,’ I continued speaking to Bruno without hesitation or pause. “That strikes me as rather excessive. I wouldn’t spend a fortune to kill you, Bruno--”

“You wouldn’t?” the Rhenish gentleman asked, eyes glimmering with rhetorical sorrow. “Oh, Alex... I thought I meant more to you than that....”

My reassurance was swift and sincere. “Bruno, I would gladly spend an unending array of fortunes on you, you know that. But why would I spend good money on a fantastically complicated clockwork bomb when a stick of dynamite and a simple fuse would do the trick?”

Bruno rubbed his chin. “My thoughts exactly.”

At that moment another thought occurred to me, and I buried my nose in the mess of gears with the ferocity of a pig seeking a truffle. The care and craftsmanship of the machine was far too devoted for any casual bomb-maker, and the pride I saw in the cut of each delicate gear and precision-wound spring brought tears of admiration to my eyes. The fragrances of the box’s exotic hardwoods drifted past my nose, and I cannot describe, dear reader, the manner in which whole ensemble made my head spin with bewilderment. This was not a tool of destruction, whatever its function had proven itself to be: this was the product of loving hands and generations of practice. It seemed inconceivable that such a device might have been made for any form of self-destruction, or that the maker had not left some mark to immortalize this mechanical *magnum opus*.

The fervor of my curiosity was appropriately rewarded. The central gear that served as the device’s metal heart was marked with an elaborate and flowing script that circled around the keyhole. Invisible from a distance, the maker’s mark was nevertheless clear upon closer inspection. Written in French were the words: *Monsieur D--- and Sons, Quality and Fine Clockworks, Paris*.

“I say... Bruno!” I exclaimed. “Bruno, look at this!”

The Rhenish gentleman followed my pointing finger and, with darting eyes, took in the circle of delicate letters. “My god!” he exclaimed. “Alex, you’ve done it!” He clapped his hands upon my shoulders and gave me a comradely shake that set my head a-bobbing. “My dear, if Francis weren’t here watching I could kiss you.” At the mention of such impropriety I flushed deeply, but it was to Francis that Bruno offered his apologies: “Sorry, old man, but I’m a hot-blooded sort of fellow, and I speak when the moment takes me.”

Across the way, Francis blinked in confusion, startled as he was from his philosophical reverie. "I beg your pardon?"

I thought it best to return us all to the matter at hand. Detaching myself from Bruno, I brushed myself off and readjusted my collar. "Francis, we've discovered the identity of the bomb-maker!"

My voice was, perhaps, somewhat too breathless and excited for such a topic, and dear Francis continued to regard me with a confused expression. "So we can contact the authorities and let them make the rogues pay for my barn?" he asked with slow and measured words.

Ignorant of finance, I huffed slightly and shook my head. "No, Francis, it means we now know where to start looking for Bruno's Bavarians!" At my side, Bruno muttered something untranscribable, and I gave him a furious look. "Bruno! Bruno, shame on you! That is vulgar, uncharitable, thoroughly un-English, and highly difficult to accomplish without the aid of a professional practitioner of medicine!" I caught my words as both my companions looked at me with most unnecessary interest. "Or so I should assume!" I clarified with a decisive gaze into the distance.

After a significant pause, Bruno, quite without warning or apparent cause, bounded to his feet. "Well, with that last eye-raising revelation, I must be off!"

As the man bounded for the nearest sizable opening in the wall--which may ironically have been the remains of a doorway--I fumbled somewhat clumsily to stand and, with arm outstretched, called after him. "Bruno! Bruno! Where are you going?"

The man halted in the doorway, one hand resting upon the broken stonework. Turning to face me, with the sunlight setting his hair and mustache aglow in a torrent of bright auburn that was almost crimson, the proud Rhinelander uttered a statement which at any other time would have seemed ludicrous, but which at that moment amounted to prophecy.

"Why Alex... I'm going to save the world from Bavarians, of course."

\*\*\*

At this point, I feel it necessary to pause in my narrative for a brief moment to help emphasize the very strangeness of the whole matter. For my part, I was dumbfounded, left to stare in both admiration and astonishment at Bruno. The gentleman was infamous in academic circles for his bold commitment to haphazard undertakings and daring success; while among the leisure set he was often held suspect for his charming vigor and perpetual state of action. I cannot with sufficient clarity convey to you, dear reader, the degree to which Bruno embodied the pioneering spirit of scientific endeavor, just as surely as Francis served as the paragon of its reflective and immutable side. I have often regarded Bruno as the laboratory and forge to Francis's smoking room and gentleman's club.

While you may well think Bruno temporarily mad for his wish to rush headlong into danger, let me

assure you that his disregard for personal safety was as much a part of his nature as his very soul. While one might have been tempted to take Bruno aside and reason with him, such would have been an expedition to the furthest bounds of futility. I could see in the burning violet of Bruno's eyes that he was set without doubt upon this course. There was nothing to be done save to ensure his continued survival.

\*\*\*

“Very well, Bruno,” I agreed with some quiet resignation. “You can count on our support.”

At my side, Francis, who I expect had misheard part of the conversation, immediately and forthrightly condemned any such statements. “He most certainly can *not*!”

I fixed Francis with a firm stare. “Yes he *can*, Francis. We're going to Paris to find Monsieur D---, or at least one of his sons, and there's no point disputing it. We can't leave Bruno to go chasing after some nameless Bavarians all on his own! He could be killed!”

“Hmph,” Francis replied, arms folded and head tilted away firmly. “I, for one, shall not be going *anywhere* outside the bounds of this estate in pursuit of Bavarians, and that is final!”

Sighing deeply in acquiescence, I slowly stood and folded my hands like a dutiful child. “If that is your final word, Francis.” There was a soft tear in my eye at the prospect of our parting.

“It is.”

“Then Bruno and I shall depart for Paris ourselves. I hope to God we shall return to you alive and well, with many tales to tell.”

For reasons I have yet to understand, Francis's jaw dropped, quite literally, and he stared in shock at my brave face. Upon later reflection, I expect his shock had nothing to do with my defiance--which should cause no sensible man of intellect any dismay--and rather was the coincidental product of a sudden burst of genius which had struck him in passing.

Returning to his senses, Francis wagged a finger at me, somewhat brusquely but in the most gentlemanly manner possible. “Alex, that is preposterous! It's not safe for you to travel by yourself, least of all in the company of a hot-blooded Continental!” He gingerly looked toward Bruno. “No offense intended to Bruno, of course.”

Bruno dismissed any such apologies with a flick of his hand and looked away with a deep inhalation of breath. “Whatever you say, Francis,” he agreed.

Now firm again in my somewhat impertinent resolve, I took a step toward the most brilliant man of my generation. “Francis, I am going to Paris with Bruno to sort this matter out and to see to it that he isn't killed. Now, if you are remaining behind that is entirely your concern, but do not presume to tell me whether or not I am permitted to travel outside of your company. If you do not wish me to leave your side, then I suggest that you join us. Otherwise....” I had hoped for a somewhat more triumphant finish, but all I could conceive of at that moment was a curt, “Hmph!”

“Alex,” Francis roared, displaying a fury which I had never before seen in him--no doubt the product of his impressive male virility--“I forbid you to go to Paris with Bruno! If he wants to charge off to the Continent and have himself killed, that is entirely his business; but you and I are remaining here, and that is final!”

\*\*\*

The week's end naturally found the three of us on our way to Paris. Francis had held firm to his (no doubt reasonable) demands that I remain behind with him, even presuming to chastise me while I was in the midst of having certain particular traveling garments packed for the journey. Bruno was not exempted from this repeated chastisement. I recall one pointed conversation--which, I must confess, I surreptitiously observed from behind a curtain--in which dear Francis, beside himself for want of my safety and good sense, berated Bruno for daring to bring an “addle-headed fool” such as myself, on so dangerous an expedition. However, as the days wore on, Bruno and I, through a joint application of charm and reason, convinced the stubborn genius to join us--in the interest of preserving my good health, of course.

Perhaps foolishly, we traveled without servants--a point which Francis never failed to note during the ensuing complications. This was entirely at Bruno's insistence, who made it quite clear that he had no intention of attracting unwanted attention by bringing “unnecessary baggage.” The Channel was calm enough for our crossing, and Francis consoled himself by observing the antics of several sea birds, using them as a point of comparison to rebut Bruno's plans for flight. I was duly impressed by the argument--which, to my foolish ears, seemed so complicated as to be redundant or even blatantly flawed--although Bruno rejected our friend's words outright with a single, frank appraisal: “Rubbish.”

From Calais, we took a train to Paris and were soon settled into a particularly comfortable compartment, alone save for our baggage. While we waited for the train to finish loading, I felt the need to pose to Bruno a question that had bothered me since we had set sail across the Channel.

“Bruno... tell me: we all know people have been flying about in balloons for the past hundred or so years.”

“Well, yes,” he conceded.

“In that case, what makes your designs so peculiar? Or even Ferdinand's, for that matter?”

The Rhenish gentleman laughed charmingly, but his amusement seemed to stem from a genuine delight at being asked, rather than any entertainment at my expense. “The first good question I've been asked today!” he stated rather bluntly. “Two things, my friend: capacity,” he indicated this by opening one palm, “and scale,” he signified with both arms outstretched to encompass a tremendous conceptual size. “Anyone can make a balloon fly, perhaps even direct one decently enough. What I am speaking of is a real, full-size airship.”

I was not quite ready to accept this, thinking back to a recent ballooning exhibition I had been privileged enough to witness. “Haven't people already invented ‘airships,’ Bruno? I mean, dirigibles--“

He quickly cut me off with a resounding, "Oh! What rubbish! 'Airships?' None of those under-sized, glorified children's toys deserves the title! If one's dirigible can hold but one, or two, or five, or even ten people and still take to the sky--"

"--then it's hardly an *airship!*" I anticipated, with a satisfied nod of both head and forefinger. "That would be more like an--"

"Air *boat!*" we both finished together, the very coordination of which set us laughing like schoolchildren. Francis, intent upon more serious contemplations, was far from amused. The very tone of his perturbed stare made his inner sentiments clear to the both of us, and was--presently--sufficient to quell our amusement.

Clearing his throat, Bruno finished his explanation. "You see, Ferdie and I are competing in an entirely new field of battle: rigid-framed, fast, long-distance air vessels; hundreds of feet long and capable of transporting dozens, perhaps one day *hundreds* of people, not to mention cargo and other assorted whatnot."

Francis was dubious of such claims. "Hundreds of feet long? What do you mean, 'hundreds of feet long?' You build the damnedable thing in my barn!"

"Well, it was a scale model..." Bruno was only paused for a moment before he replied with equal measure, "but the designs are solid, and given enough manpower, my plans could guide the building of something larger than Ferdie has yet dreamt of!"

And so, the debate resumed anew. As the train rumbled off out into the countryside, I found myself gazing out of the window at the pleasant French landscapes. While no part of the Continent could ever compare in majesty to England's mountains green--as the hymn rightly describes--I was forced to concede the innate visual pleasure of rural France. Beside me, Francis and Bruno argued without pause the various ethical considerations of building flying passenger liners, but their conversation soon faded away into the distance as a dreaming state overtook me. I fantasized, perhaps foolishly, of taking to the air in one of Bruno's vast airships, and traveling direct to Paris, Berlin or even far-off New York, all without once leaving the sky. I must confess that I was even seized with an amateurish urge to determine the most economic system for developing a world-wide airship fleet, completed with imaginary time-tables.

After some time, the constant pattern of the countryside, which had previously lulled me into a state of placid passivity, now stuck me as true as if an elephant had appeared in the window. I could not say for certain what had upset me, for the lush countryside--cluttered as it was with all manner of barns, rustic warehouses and other charming farm buildings--remained as pleasant as ever. At my side, my companions continued their debate about the sanctity of birds and angels, and I was quite at a loss for what had disturbed my rest.

Suddenly, Francis, in the lively spirit of the moment, announced that Bruno's madcap fantasies about trans-Atlantic dirigibles would only ever be taken seriously by the likes of the Americans, and promptly declared that the floating passenger ships should hence-forth be referred to as "air liners." In a fit of rage, Bruno leapt to his feet and accused Francis, in most ungentlemanly tones, of being "ignorant, simple-minded and wholly without the daring imagination upon which the advancement of science depends!" With that, he was gone, storming off down the corridor without another word.

I was speechless for several moments, and could do little but stare at Francis for want of an explanation. The dear man met my gaze with a dismissive shrug, but evidently Bruno's outburst had struck him dumb as well. Looking back to the window, I distracted myself from worry by observing a nearby circus, the massive tents of which could be seen some distance from the rail

line. Nevertheless, I could not ignore the germ of apprehension that lurked within my breast. It was not safe for Bruno, already a man of great passion, to wander about a train of foreigners and holidaymakers while in a state of anger. I had visions of accidental disputes boiling over into heated confrontations, and while they may have been unfair to Bruno, I was not about to take unnecessary risks so early in our journey.

Rising to my feet I politely excused myself from Francis' company, and made my way down the passage in the direction Bruno had taken. Midway along, the way was blocked by another passenger: a man of impressive stature dressed in an ill-fitting traveling suit and hat. The man pressed himself up against the windows as if to allow me passage, but as I carefully stepped past him he grabbed me most improperly and flung me into the empty compartment opposite him. Taken quite by surprise, I stumbled off my feet and landed soundly upon one of the seats. Before I could rise again, the stranger was upon me with such vigor that I feared for my honour and, more importantly, my dignity.

I ought not to have worried. The ruffian grasped me firmly by the shoulders and shook me hard. "*Ou est l'Allemand?*" he demanded in French. "Where is the German?"

There were several unpleasant moments while my breath struggled to return to me, but at last I gasped, "The German? Heavens, Sir, what are you talking about? Do you mean Bruno?"

At the mention of my friend's name, the stranger's eyes lit up in glee. I had hoped this to be the first sign of a reprieve, but the man proceeded to shout more strange nonsense at me. "Yes! Yes! Where is the Bruno? Where is he?"

By this point, I had had quite had enough. "Dear Sir, please unhand me." I posed the request politely but forcefully, fixing the stranger with a firm, English look. When his compliance was not forthcoming, I repeated myself. "Sir, I will thank you kindly to release me."

When the man failed accede to my sensible request, I took immediate steps. After a liberal application of my lower extremities, I forced the ruffian to release his hold upon my shoulders. For a few moments he stood hunched over, grasping his bruised body. I took the opening to quickly stand, adjusting my garments as I did so, but evidently the stranger had not had his fill of English dignity. With the sort of howl one expects from rampant Frenchmen, the ruffian lunged at me, fingers wide--no doubt, to choke the life from my throat.

The subsequent collision of his face with my hand seemed more than adequate to calm the situation. The man fell backward into the seat opposite me, and I took advantage of the moment to catch my breath and adjust my collar. "And that," I said, "is quite enough of that. Kindly do not inconvenience me in such a manner again, or I shall be forced to contact the railroad authorities." With a curt nod of my head, I quickly made good my escape.

I searched the remainder of the first car thoroughly, but with a greater haste invoked by my recent encounter. I was terribly afraid that some mischief had befallen Bruno, or that he had perhaps offended an unusually large contingent of Frenchmen who were now busy scouring the train in search of him. Finding no sign of him in the first carriage, and eager to avoid a repeat of the past few moments, I quickly moved to the second. I received a number of unpleasant looks from the inhabitants of each compartment I peered into, but I answered each with a pleasant and apologetic smile, and I would like to think that doing so earned my forgiveness.

It was not long before I found Bruno, but the curious circumstances of our reunion were far from what I had anticipated. As I first approached the compartment, I caught sight of Bruno standing with his back to the door, one arm stretched out as if pointing toward something unseen. I pushed

open the door with a very relieved smile, which promptly faded from my face as I realized that the room held a second occupant.

In the seat facing Bruno, reclining with a very particular brand of restrained dignity, was a woman whose refinement and beauty I cannot begin to describe with any justice. Her proud face could easily have been sculpted from solid marble by the great classical artists in homage to Pallas or Diana, while her slender body wore a dress of pale blue with the elegance of an English lady. Her small hat had been laid aside, revealing a delicate pile of hazel curls. A single lock had impetuously fallen from its place and now rested against one temple with a devilish defiance of order that I found both charming and enviable. In summary, she seemed to me the perfect personification of the Americans' "Gibson girl," embodying that Yankee ideal of beauty and independence to a greater degree than anyone has yet seen in Mr. Charles G---'s drawings. It is no exaggeration to say that I was utterly overcome with admiration.

Therefore, I found myself very distressed to realize that this paragon of modern womanhood was in a position of grave distress, for I could now see that Bruno had drawn his beloved Mauser pistol and had directed his aim as if to shoot the helpless stranger. I could only think that some fit of insanity had taken my German friend, for I had never before seen him treat any woman with such a degree of hostility.

"Bruno!" I cried, rushing to put myself between his weapon and the woman in the seat. "Bruno, have you gone mad? What are you doing?"

Both of the compartment's occupants were shocked by my sudden and unheralded arrival, but Bruno recovered his wits with characteristic rapidity. "Alex!" he shouted, his voice tinged less with anger than with an unexplained fear. "Alex, come away from her at once!"

"Not until you stop pointing your pistol at this poor lady!" I retorted, hoping to bring him to his senses. It was obvious that Bruno's Continental passions had gotten the better of his adopted English reason.

"That woman is no lady," Bruno answered with a particular sort of harshness in his tone. "She's a *Bavarian*."

At this, the situation suddenly came into light. I could not understand how so elegant and well-dressed a woman could be involved in anything untoward, but it was now certain that she was dangerous enough to legitimately raise Bruno's ire. This realization was helped along by the sensation of cold metal being pressed into my flesh. The woman, with a speed and agility I have yet to see repeated even among English sport enthusiasts, had risen to her feet, using myself as an effective shield against Bruno's Mauser, and had proceeded to place the barrel of a small, ivory-handled pocket pistol against my cheek. Where she had hidden the thing upon her person was left to the imagination, but her capacity to use it effectively was not in the least bit a subject of doubt or speculation.

"Why thank you, dearie," she murmured into my ear, sounding like nothing so much as an approving governess. Fixing Bruno with a commanding look, she addressed him in an equally commanding tone. "Now, now, dear Bruno... throw that pistol away before you cause any more mischief."

Bruno growled in frustration, but he complied. "If you dare harm--" he began.

The Bavarian woman tossed her head and laughed. "You sentimental old fool.... Just do as you're told and I won't have to attract undue attention from the other passengers." With a neat little curtsy, she retrieved her hat and placed it--still elegantly, I must confess--upon her head. Drawing me along with her, she retreated to the door. "*Auf wiedersehen, lieblich,*" she said, her attention directed specifically at Bruno. Then, with a flourish, she thrust me quite uncharitably at Bruno and vanished into the corridor.

I am pleased to say that I righted myself before both Bruno and I were knocked to the ground, but I do confess that I was forced to lean somewhat heavily upon my companion in the effort to regain my balance. Without a moment to lose, I rushed to the door to give chase, but found no sign of the woman. I looked back at Bruno, surprised that he had not dashed off himself.

"Leave her," he advised. "She'll be gone by now... possibly even off the train, if I know her."

My face clouded with regret. "Bruno, I'm sorry--"

"Don't trouble yourself, Alex," the man intercepted. "You saw me pointing a gun at an apparently unarmed woman: what were you supposed to think?" He drew a black paper cigarette from the case in his breast pocket and set about filling the compartment with a curious aroma of Indian spices. "I expect she'll make herself known to me again, far sooner than I would like to contemplate."

I sighed and collapsed onto one of the seats, still furious with myself for the mistake. "You obviously know each other," I remarked. "Who is she?"

Bruno retrieved his pistol and sat across from me. "Her name is Angelika. She's a spy for the Bavarian Crown. We have been... 'at odds,' shall we say, for the past several years. I was unusually fortunate to catch her by surprise."

I nodded. "Bruno, I think your encountering her here is no simple coincidence."

"Oh?" He was sincerely curious, arching one eyebrow charmingly as he leaned forward over one knee.

"Yes. Just before I came upon the two of you, some unpleasant individual I have never before laid eyes upon had the audacity to lay hands upon me. I was very much suspicious of his intentions, until he began shouting at me--with a distinct lack of eloquence, I might add--for the details of your whereabouts."

"Hmmm.... Bavarian, you think?"

"I'm somewhat doubtful. He took to shouting at me in French, and his English sounded much the same."

Bruno pondered this for a short while, tapping his cigarette thoughtfully. "How very odd. I can't recall doing anything to upset the French..." he paused, "recently." Shifting position, he gazed out of the window with the proud stature of a well-bred hound. "I wonder what they're after."

"You, obviously," I noted with a certain degree of polite humor. "The ruffian recognized me, so the parties responsible must know who I am and how we are associated. Whoever stole your airship plans must have sent him after us to kidnap you."

My companion nodded, yet his expression was grave. "If Angelika is involved, it would explain the coincidence of finding her here, but why would the Bavarians employ a Frenchman?"

At that moment, an erratic sequence of realizations aligned in a great conspiracy within my brain. "Francis!" I cried, leaping to my feet in a manner most reminiscent of madness.

"Francis?" Bruno repeated, staring at me in wonder.

Rushing for the door, I offered a breathless explanation. "If they know of me, they'll know of Francis. He's alone and helpless!"

Bruno pursued me into the corridor, imploring me to wait, but my great fear for Francis's safety spurred me onward. I rushed back to our compartment, frantic and quite undignified, and flung open the door, already fearing the worst. Within, I saw the still form of my dear friend lying, eyes closed, upon his seat. I rushed to him, heart in my throat, and grabbed for his hand to feel a pulse.

To my immense relief, Francis's eyes fluttered open and he stared at me in a most charming blend of confusion and indignation. "What? What? What is it?" he demanded shortly.

Behind me, Bruno, traveling far more sedately, stepped in through the doorway, lit cigarette in hand. "Nothing, old man," he said, dismissing Francis's abrupt consciousness with a wave. "Go back to sleep: you're simply having an abnormally pleasant dream."

Whether in his confused state Francis truly believed Bruno's words, or whether he simply chose to advantage himself upon the excuse, I to this day do not know. With a deep and unashamed yawn, the most brilliant man of my generation closed his eyes tightly. As he drifted back to the world of immeasurable dreaming, Francis could be heard to murmur, "It can't be that pleasant a dream, Bruno: you're in it."

\*\*\*

*I know that this must shock you, dear reader, to learn of respectable English travelers being accosted by strange Frenchmen, but you must not think that the Continent's railways are any more dangerous than they ought to be. I feel certain that, had not larger forces been at work in Europe, our journey would have been far more sedate and pleasant. Nevertheless, our situation was quite different from that of the ordinary traveler, and I dreaded what unknown events lay before us. My unwanted encounter with the strange ruffian had been enough to shake my normally reliable nerve, but it was the mysterious Angelika who troubled me most. I have no doubt that you, dear reader, dread and anticipate--as I did then--what monstrous Continental conspiracy could have intruded upon our peaceful and law-abiding lives. As the train continued along to Paris, my mind raced with thoughts of what terrible schemes and dangers awaited us. The truth of the matter was far more sinister and treacherous than I could possibly have imagined, as you shall learn if you dare to read when next my tale resumes.*

*Sincerely yours,  
A. Westminster, London 19--*



## Part Four: Clocksmiths are Interviewed, Architecture is Critiqued & Complications Arise

*Dear reader: after the shocking events of my previous narration, I fear you may have developed an intense aversion to the rigors of travel. This is only to be expected, owing to the assault upon my person in a French railway carriage by a ruffian of Frankish extraction and mysterious intent. Yet let me assure you that the terrible events of my journey had only just begun. You will recall that I had left England for Paris in the summer of 19-- in pursuit of a particular Monsieur D---, a clockmaker responsible for the construction of a gear-driven time bomb the like of which had been used to destroy an innocent countryside barn. Accompanying me was my dear friend Francis Edgar B---, a scientific genius whose family had shown me so much kindness throughout my early life; and Bruno von H---, a charming gentleman-scientist from the Rhineland. Bruno's almost fanatical suspicion of the Bavarians had developed a somewhat prophetic quality during the journey when a beautiful Bavarian assassin called Angelika had very nearly taken my life. As we approached Paris, my head swam with grave imaginings of what might lay before us, but, as I shall relate to you, the reality of what was to come proved far more terrible than anything my mind had predicted.*

\*\*\*\*\*

We arrived in Paris without further incident but I must confess that I was extraordinarily relieved when we arrived at our hotel. I cannot speak for my companions, but I found my personal accommodations to be particularly satisfactory and took the opportunity to freshen up after the journey. I suspect that Francis was of a similar mind, but Bruno was impatient to be off and I could not stand the thought of letting him run about among the French unattended, certainly not after the events on the train. Francis protested to such a hasty departure, as was his just prerogative, but he refused to let me accompany Bruno on my own.

Nevertheless, we were treated to a pleasant stroll through the Paris streets while we attempted to locate the clockmaker's shop. On several occasions, we sought the assistance of local Parisians in our search, and while it soon became apparent that Monsieur D--- was a craftsman of some certain prestige, time and again we were met with a peculiar blend of helpfulness and disrespect. I hope that I do not overstep my bounds when I tell you, dear reader, that of all the places I have traveled to--including select portions of America!--to this day I regard Paris as the most disagreeable by far. It is not so much the city that troubles me as the curious attitude of the natives, who regard themselves as inherently superior to any others they might encounter--an attitude which, one must remember, remains entirely the prerogative of the free-born Englishman. Let us not forget that it took the French until 1789 to throw off the chains of absolutism, and in doing so they proceeded to make an absolute mess of their much-lauded Revolution.

It came as a consequential shock to me when Bruno, without any semblance of warning, stated quite boldly: "You know, Alex, I do so love France."

I stared at him dumbfounded for a few moments before gathering my voice sufficiently to question his odd comment. "Bruno... I thought you hated France...."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," he answered with a hearty laugh. "I love France! I hate *the French*..." he clarified, a smirk dancing about upon his lips, "but I love *France*." He turned toward a particular iron monument of incredible height and folded his arms in disdain. "*That* monstrosity, on the other hand, I find to be extravagantly distasteful."

I peered past him at the great pile of metal. "Oh, I say!" I said. "Yes, that is rather...." I searched for a polite word. "Pointed."

“Hmph,” Francis snorted, no doubt affected by some contaminant in the wind. “I rather like it.”

“Yes, you would,” Bruno agreed.

Francis seemed somewhat confused at Bruno's statement and studied the German as if suspicious of his motives. “Yes, wouldn't I?” he finally concluded after a certain hesitation. “What is it?”

“*La Tour Eiffel*,” Bruno answered. “An inverted pockmark upon the landscape of Europe.” He threw an arm about my shoulders and swept his hand across the sky to encompass the spire's peak. “An unsightly advertisement of what every Frenchman will promise to his lover, and none will ever find the capacity to deliver.” He stepped back with the look of a refined aesthete regarding a profoundly unpleasant bit of gutter. “I shall be glad when they tear the damnable thing down.” With a flourish, he turned his back on the tower as if to blot it out of mind as well as his sight. “Come along, let's find that clockmaker.”

\*\*\*\*\*

For being a craftsman of a certain fame and quality, Monsieur D--- proved to be surprisingly anonymous in his profession. His shop, while spacious and well-appointed, had been hidden away along a largely disused boulevard in one of the less fashionable portions of the city. I would hesitate to say that the area was poor, but certainly the clockmaker's shop seemed to be the economic cornerstone of the entire neighborhood. Its face on ground level was a great wall of windows displaying clocks of all manners, forms and purposes ticking away at the direction of some deep universal timetable. This was the place where our much-awaited answers were to be had, and it would not do to be found dawdling.

I interrupted Francis, who had begun to chastise Bruno for distributing alms to the poor, and pushed the two gentlemen into the shop ahead of me with great politeness and equally great force. Beyond the display of intricate clockworks, we found ourselves in a wide but uncomfortably shallow chamber cut across by a counter of significant size and standing. Behind this sat a pale-faced youth with dark hair, a well-managed suit and an expression that does not bear transcription. Peering over his nose at us, the young man gave a polite smile and waited patiently.

I paused, leaving my companions the option of taking charge; but found to my dismay that Francis had been waylaid by a particularly clever mechanical bird which dutifully chirped to hour, half-hour, minute and a random assortment of associated seconds without any sense of pattern or reason. Bruno, by contrast, had lifted from the countertop one of the clocks on display and seemed about to give his most frank and unwanted appraisal to the clerk.

“*Bonjour, monsieur*,” I greeted the young man, interceding before Bruno could transform a simple timepiece into an international dispute.

“Yes?” the clerk replied, something unpleasant in his voice leaking through the polite smile he offered. “You are here about a *clock*?” He stressed this word in particular as he snatched away the piece that Bruno had been examining.

“In a manner of speaking. May we have a word with Monsieur D---?”

The clerk waited for a calculated moment before responding. “No, I am afraid not. You may 'have a word' with me. Monsieur D--- is very busy and cannot be expected to wait upon every *tourist* who wanders by.”

My face fell somewhat distinctly. “Are you absolutely certain? It is a matter of some urgency.” I lifted the clockwork bomb, which I had carried with us since the hotel, and placed it gently upon the counter. “It's about this, which I believe was his creation.”

The clerk peered at the object as if its very presence offended him. “I cannot say that I recognize it. I doubt very much that Monsieur D--- will wish to see it either. Now, if there is nothing else I can do for you--”

At this moment, Bruno took charge. Reaching out with the speed of a striking viper, he took the clerk by the collar and pulled the surprised young man halfway across the countertop. Leaning in to speak, my dear friend could be heard to growl, “Now listen here, you unpleasant little frog. I'm

an unusually impatient and ill-tempered German, and I want to speak to Monsieur D--- immediately, so I suggest you get to it before I incorporate this shop and everyone in it into Alsace-Lorraine." With that, he thrust the young Frenchman away from him as if ridding himself of a soiled handkerchief.

While I expect the clerk was more affected by the proximity of Bruno's snarling face than by the threat itself, the result was instantaneous. As soon he had been released, the clerk scurried backward, humble and apologetic as if in fear for his life. "Uh... yes, sir!" The young man stumbled into the doorway leading to the back room. "Um... *ja, mein herr--*"

The clerk's use of German did nothing to placate the raging Bruno. "Unless I say otherwise, you will politely and humbly speak *French* to me, boy, and *you will like it!*"

"*Oui, monsieur!*" the hapless clerk all but squeaked before he fell backward into the workshop room behind him, shouting for Monsieur D---'s assistance.

I stared at Bruno--speechless at his unruly behavior--and he smiled in return. "I think that went rather well, don't you?" he asked.

"Alsace-Lorraine?" I queried.

Bruno laughed. "Naturally. Just the mention of it turns the most rational Frenchman into a veritable lunatic. Many's the pleasant afternoon fight I've started.... Ah, ha!"

At that moment, the door behind the counter opened and from the back room appeared a small, amiable old man with a rapidly diminishing collection of gray hair atop his aged head. Marked with an expression of distinct bewilderment, the man had doubtless received little in the way of comprehensible explanation from his erratic clerk. The old man, doubtless Monsieur D--- himself, removed a monocular eyepiece and quickly replaced it with a pair of delicate spectacles.

It was my intention to speak first, but Bruno proved the quicker. Without warning--indeed, without any semblance of sense or reason--he bounded across the counter, pistol in hand, and loomed over the little clockmaker like a cat regarding an especially fascinating mouse.

"Alright, Frenchy," he growled, "who paid you to make the bomb? Was it the Bavarians? The Italians? The Swiss?"

The poor clockmaker stared blankly at the agitated Bruno, and I felt it only proper to intercede before a misunderstanding arose. "Bruno!" I snapped, somewhat uncharitably. "Bruno, behave yourself!"

At this, my friend seemed to catch himself, and he quickly offered an embarrassed laugh by way of apology, gingerly sliding his pistol beneath his coat. "Ahem... yes.... Sorry about that, Frenchy." He set about straightening the old man's tie and collar as if he were an approving parent. "See, there, no harm done."

"Yes, thank you, Bruno," I interjected, noting Monsieur D---'s continued bewilderment. Sensing that the entire situation demanded a significant reorganization, I directed the clockmaker's attention to the box. "You are Monsieur D---, is that correct?"

"Yes," the little man answered, smiling pleasantly.

"Lovely, lovely," I said with a smile of my own. As I pushed the clockwork bomb across the counter to him, I continued, "Do you know what this is?"

Monsieur D--- laughed pleasantly. "Of course I do... I made most of it, you know." He ran his fingers lovingly along the sides of the box before removing the faceplate and gazing with admiration at the intricate gears. Before our departure, we had removed the flint wheels and explosives to circumvent the risk of detonation, and the old man did not seem in the least bit surprised that they were missing. "Absolutely beautiful. My finest work, if I may be afforded the liberty of saying so."

"What is it?" I asked, eager to exhaust the man's understanding of the dreadful situation.

"Why, a music box," the little man replied. He motioned to the empty spaces in the box's corners.

"Of course, it will do you no good until the chimes are put in place here."

"Who commissioned it?" It was Bruno who asked this, determined to overcome his earlier bout of impropriety by sheer force of personality.

From Monsieur D---'s reaction, he seemed to have succeeded. Smiling pleasantly, the old man confided, "A very pleasant German lady put in an order for five of them." He hesitated. "Well, surely you must know her. How did you come by it?"

I was quite at a loss for words, and stumbled over my reply. Doubtless, I would have incriminated all of us had Bruno not diverted the clockmaker's attention. "Oh, yes, it must have been dear Angelika," he said. "She gave it to us, you know, but getting anything useful out of that woman is rather like...." He abruptly changed topics with such casual precision that even I very nearly missed the transition. "It's a truly magnificent device, of course. Did you design it yourself?"

Monsieur D--- was immediately distracted from his moment of suspicion. Puffing up with a sort of limited pride, he adjusted his tie nervously. "Well, no," he confessed, "although I consider it a great honour to have been given the opportunity. And I do feel I did the plans justice...."

At my side, Francis began to shake the clockwork bird that had fascinated him. "I say! I say, is this thing broken or something?"

"Who drafted them?" I asked hurriedly, grabbing the toy away from Francis.

"You will not believe me," the clockmaker insisted, "but if I recognized the signature, it was none other than Max U---."

"Max U---?" I repeated, shamefully ignorant of the name. "Who is Max U---?"

The Frenchman was stunned by my stupidity. "You have never heard of him?" We shook our heads in unison. "Herr U--- is perhaps the greatest clockmaker in the world. His designs are very complicated, yet there is a certain sublime efficiency to his work. Here, here, let me show you."

The old man scurried into the back room from whence he returned bearing a great portfolio bursting with intricate schematics. These he proceeded to explain to us, joyfully comparing his handiwork with the original blueprints in a particularly significant manner. While I found the display both charming and informative, time was running short; and I was relieved when Monsieur D--- promptly concluded his display with a simple, "Well, and so forth, as you can see." Perhaps embarrassed at having discussed such a tangential topic so fervently, he quickly set about returning the clock blueprints to their folder. "You see, the best and most daring clockworks in Europe have always begun in the U--- family's workshops. They entered into the trade ages ago, before anyone thought it would take off, and clockwork is in their very blood. I believe one of his recent ancestors was responsible for bringing the idea of the cuckoo clock to the Black Forest, which is where his branch of the family remains today."

Bruno's eyebrows darted upward. "So he's German, you say? He's not Bavarian, is he?" I noticed one hand instinctively reach for his pistol, and I gave him a pointed look to quell any such behavior. "Monsieur D---, you have been immeasurably helpful," I said, leaning forward and smiling in sincere satisfaction. "You must be very busy, so we won't keep you long, but before we go I do have one final question."

"Oh, anything," the little old man chuckled, bobbing up and down in delight.

"Do you know how we might contact Herr U---?"

\*\*\*\*\*

I could not, even given the eloquence of the Bard himself, describe with any justice the bounds to which dear Francis' temper leapt upon hearing that Bruno and I meant to depart for Germany on the morning train. I must confess that this was more Bruno's plan than mine, but I could well understand his impatience given recent events; and I was not about to abandon him simply for the sake of convenience. Francis, however, wasted no time in professing just how strongly he objected to the idea of traveling yet again after so short a time. He particularly could not see the reason in visiting a secluded country village in the *Schwarzwald*, which must certainly lack any of the amenities found in our Paris hotel. While I insisted that I would find no offense if Francis chose to remain behind with the majority of our baggage, the dear fellow would not hear of such things. Now, as before, that noble paragon of an English gentleman insisted that he accompany us, if only to shelter me from some of the more eccentric concepts Bruno was known to expound upon at odd moments.

We traveled much of the way by train, this time without incident; but were finally obliged to transfer to a carriage for the remaining leg of what we had intended to be a very brief excursion. We

traveled lightly, leaving the majority of our things behind to wait for our return to Paris. Bruno had taken this a step further, changing from his suit into the charming field garments and riding-duster he preferred when testing his latest experiments. The country air was warm and vibrant, and I found myself strangely revitalized by the rustic, sun-lit surroundings. The looming trees were more beautiful than the most elegant cathedrals of civilized Europe, and I was delighted to catch sight of all manner of beasts and birds going about their daily business. I must confess that until our visit, I had always taken the name of the "Black Forest" quite literally, and was pleasantly surprised to find none of the shadowed lairs, lurking goblins or black-armoured knights that I had fantasized.

The sun was already descending as we arrived at our destination, and the colours that were painted across the landscape still defy my most fervent attempts at conveyance. The town in which Herr U--- made his home was small and peaceful, nestled in a dip between a pair of rolling hills within the forest. The buildings were all charmingly archaic affairs of weathered stone and wood, and we received more than our fair share of suspicious looks from the locals as we stepped down out of the carriage. A few somewhat strained inquiries directed us to the house of Herr U---, where we found a small boy of perhaps ten years drawing a series of interlocking spirals in the dirt with the end of a stick. Seeing us, he stood up quickly and dusted himself off as if coming under inspection by a disapproving mother. He displayed no fear at our approach, and his face was filled more with fascination than with any other emotion.

Reaching the lad, I bent down to come closer to eye level and offered him a warm smile. "Excuse me, young man," I said in German. The boy, for all his boldness, still watched me cautiously. I thought it best to make introductions as a way of gaining his trust and goodwill. "My name is Westminster," I said, still smiling, "but you can call me Alex, if you like."

The boy became somewhat more cheerful at this. "Hello, Alex. I'm Otto." He bowed to me like a perfect little gentleman, and I replied in kind.

"Tell me, Otto, is this the house of the great and famous *uhrmacher*, Herr U---?"

Otto nodded firmly. "Yes. He's my father," he added proudly, standing taller as if to reach his father's no-doubt mythic height.

"Well, I'm certain he is," I agreed. "Otto, it's very important that I speak to your father. Can you fetch him for me?"

Without a word, Otto nodded in that charming manner children so often do, and rushed into the house, calling for "Papa." Almost instantly, the door opened and the boy returned, dragging after him a tall, bearded man with a healthy, slender stature and the delicate hands of a hereditary craftsman. The poor fellow had obviously been interrupted in the midst of his work, for he wore a crude smock dotted with all manner of fine tools and instruments over his clothing. Tucked under one arm I noticed the boxy shape of a wooden clock, which seemed literally stuffed with all manner of gears and springs. The man, no doubt Herr U---, had joined us with a look of grave concern upon his face and a heavy length of polished wood in his empty hand. No doubt there had been some misunderstanding, for he breathed a deep sigh as if relieved to be meeting strangers.

"Herr U---?" I asked, taking a tentative step forward. The man nodded in confirmation. "Sir, it is very important that we speak to you about a very complicated music box that I believe you designed for a Bavarian woman by the name of Angelika."

All three of the men around me showed visible surprise at my forward divulgement of the facts, but I was in no mood for skirting around the issue. At length, Herr U--- indicated Bruno with his club and asked, "You're Herr von H---, aren't you?"

Bruno smiled. "Naturally. Always nice to meet an admirer." He waved toward the house. "May we come in and sit down? That box my dear friend is carrying there is quite heavy with clockwork, and you may wish to have a look at it."

Herr U--- nodded slowly. "If you would like, you are welcome to come in and sit down." For some reason, which was not then apparent, he felt the desire to enunciate his next words with extreme clarity: "But I will understand if you would prefer to turn around, get back in your carriage and leave this place, because there is nothing that I can do to stop you."

"What a curious thing to say!" Bruno laughed, patting the man on the shoulder. "Of course we'll come in, don't be silly!"

Sighing deeply, Herr U--- bent down and pressed his unfinished clock into little Otto's hands. "Otto," he said, "I want you to bring this to the Schusters' house and then stay there until I come to get you. Do you understand?"

Otto nodded dutifully. "Yes, Papa." Turning his bright eyes toward me, he smiled, bowed politely again, and then dashed off down the street just as a child ought to do.

Herr U--- stood and led us into his house. The interior proved to be a sight in and of itself. While unusually spacious, the building was filled to the bursting point with endless piles upon piles of clocks and gears. Timepieces of all sizes, many lacking all but the most rudimentary of housing, were placed in some mockery of good English order alongside heaps of gears, springs, tools and mysterious accoutrements. A great chorus of ticking filled the air like a swarm of buzzing insects, and I feel no shame in admitting that I suddenly found myself shockingly light-headed. With loose springs, clock hands and God knows what else snatching at my garments, I was very much relieved when we were finally seated in what appeared to be a quaint kitchen at the back of the house.

Inhaling deeply to regain my breath, I placed the clockwork bomb onto the table and pushed it across for Herr U---'s inspection. The man was curious for a few moments before he pried the top open and caught sight of the clockworks within. At that moment there was an instant recognition. Nodding gravely, he fixed me with a firm look. "To answer your first question: yes, this was my design."

"Then do you know my second?" I asked with a wry sort of interest.

The man pondered this for a moment. "Why did I build it? Because I was paid. Who commissioned it? Representatives of the Bavarian Crown. Do I realize what it is? Yes... it is an overly complicated clockwork bomb designed to be passed off as a music box to the unsuspecting clockmaker who constructs it."

He tapped the clockworks approvingly. "Forgive me," he said abruptly, standing in a sudden burst. "Where are my manners? Let me fetch you something to drink. Beer?" There was a strange hopefulness in his voice. When our expressions conveyed our disinterest in the substance, his expression fell slightly. "Wine?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Francis cried, speaking for the first time since our arrival. The demands of genius were doubtless occupying his attentions prior to that point.

"Of course," Herr U--- answered, his tone almost mournful. "I have just the thing set aside for you." He rummaged about the room very purposefully for some time, until it almost seemed as if he were waiting for us to recant our interest in the drink. Finally, shoulders drooping somewhat curiously, the man produced a bottle and some glasses from a nearby cupboard and rejoined us at the table. As he poured the wine, he returned to the subject at hand. "The workmanship of that device is very impressive. Who actually built it?"

"Monsieur D--- of Paris--" I began.

"And Sons," Bruno reminded.

"Yes, and Sons." I took a drink of the wine and found it to be delightfully sweet with an exotic hint of something tantalizing and elusive. Strangely, a few sips proved more than sufficient to loosen my tongue considerably. "You should have heard the man speak of you, sir. It was like hearing an artist speak of the great Masters!"

For all his pride of authorship, there was a perpetual discomfort in the lines of Herr U---'s face. "Well, the Frenchman has done an impressive job here. I only hope he never learns what he's played an unwitting part in."

There was a growing discomfort in my abdomen, and I leaned forward to catch our host's gaze.

"Tell me, sir, just what *has* he played an unwitting part in?"

Herr U--- paused and leaned back in his chair, obviously ready to speak but hesitant to undertake such significant a discourse. "Some I know, some I can only presume. I know Herr von H--- by reputation," he said, taking a moment to look with great emphasis at Bruno, "and his *fearless enthusiasm* is a veritable trademark. I was hired to design an unnecessarily complex bomb, presumably so that if you survived the explosion your curiosity could be counted on to drive you to

the clockmaker in Paris, whose enthusiasm for my work would drive him to offer up my name... then direct you to me... and then finally to the Bavarians.”

I felt my head began to spin, and a curious sensation filled the space behind my eyes as the world around shifted at peculiar angles. At my side, Francis began to look this way and that as if enthralled by a darting horde of invisible flies. “Bruno!” I exclaimed, quite in spite of myself. “Bruno, the Bavarians are drawing you into a trap!”

Bruno snorted, somewhat perturbed at the accurate analysis of his mind’s inner workings. “Well, I suppose we did follow the bread crumbs here, but I have no intention of setting foot in Bavaria, certainly not now after learning all this.”

I suddenly felt a presence step into the space between myself and Bruno, and woman's voice spoke softly into our ears. “Of course not, Bruno darling.... That is why we met you here.” It was Angelika.

At that moment there can a tremendous racket, as if dozens of large men in steel-shod boots were stomping up and down upon the ceiling. I struggled to rise, but my feet had become like air and my head something akin to a lead weight. In the next instant, the already cramped room had become crowded by a group of men of impressive stature, all shouting in German for us to keep our hands on the table. The noise and movement threw my vision into a great riot of stimuli, and it was all I could do to make out Herr U---’s solemn and anguished face.

“The wine!” I exclaimed. “The wine was drugged!”

Angelika’s triumphant face drifted into view. “Well deduced, dearie... A fine Bavarian vintage I blended myself. Enjoy the aftertaste... it has a hint of citrus.” She turned toward our host and tossed a small purse--doubtless filled with Marks--onto the table. “You’ve played your role perfectly, Herr U---. As agreed, you and your family will never be troubled by us again.” As Herr U---’s jaw tightened somewhat dramatically, Angelika added, “Little Otto is safe... so long as you follow our agreement.”

At my side, Bruno folded his arms in what appeared to be great indignation. “Oh, Angelika... It seems you never could get enough of me. But... if it’s me you’re after, let the *Engländer*s go. They’ll run back home like frightened puppies and never bother you again. I can’t have you dividing your attention between me and the likes of old Francis there, can I?”

Angelika’s resulting laughter was unpleasantly clear and beautiful. It would have been ideal if uttered by a young debutante upon a pleasant spring afternoon; in this time and place, it was horrific in both sound and conception. “Bruno, Bruno, Bruno... Your honour is surpassed only by your arrogance. I rather suspect that having these two ready at hand will make you more... pliable.”

This last word was murmured in Bruno's ear in a dreadful display of social impertinence. The sheer proximity of Angelika’s lips to said ear is a subject which I shall not comment upon, but which I trust you, dear reader, can clearly--and chastely!--envision. Bruno smiled grimly, and with the speed of a jaguar drew a slender dagger from the sleeve of his coat and thrust it upward at Angelika’s exposed throat. The woman let out a gasp of surprise and struggled to jerk away, but Bruno was the faster and his aim was true.

Nevertheless, one of the Bavarians was quicker still. With reflexes that made my head spin all the more, a particularly lupine fellow with a sharp chin and pronounced spike of beard snatched Bruno's hand at the wrist and gave it a bone-crushing squeeze. Bruno resisted valiantly, inducing the dagger upward to press into the fleeing Angelika’s flesh, but in the end his strength gave out and his hand opened limply. I struggled to rise, seeking naïvely to come to Bruno’s aid; but it was a wasted effort. A rough sack was thrust over my head, blotting out all but a feeble dotting of light, and in the darkness the border between wakefulness and unconsciousness faded away into a dizzy spiral.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Dear reader: I feel ashamed to end my narrative upon this frightful note, but I am left with very little choice in the matter. I shall not elaborate at the moment, but dreadful circumstances have*

*demanded that I depart from my typewriter until the danger has passed. Who could have imagined the terrible purpose to which dear Bruno's peaceful air ships might be set? For now, let me assure you that I and my companions were very much alive, but that our situation had abruptly become quite dire. Trapped in the hands of treacherous Bavarians, our fate--indeed the fate of glorious Britannia itself--now hung by a single thread. As we would soon learn, the Bavarians were but one small portion of an even greater threat that now prepared to crush Europe between its mighty jaws. Steel your nerves, dear reader, and prepare for a tale of treachery and deceit as terrible as the betrayal of Judas himself, when next my narrative resumes.*

*Sincerely yours, A. Westminster, London 19--*

## Author Bio

G D Falksen

Author: An Unfortunate Engagement

G. D. Falksen is a fiction author and history student presently pursuing two Masters degrees. He has appeared on MTV, and in print articles for publications such as The New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, Marie Claire Italian, and Time Out New York. His work has been featured in The Willows Magazine, Steampunk Magazine, The Chap, and Egophobia. In addition, he has been a guest speaker at various conventions on the East Coast.

Website: <http://www.gdfalksen.com>