

THIS COULD  
CHANGE  
THE WORLD

A Steampunk Tale

by

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“What do you have in the portmanteau?”

Jordi clutched the reinforced leather case to his chest as he sat awkwardly in the seat. The carriage raced across the countryside, the wheels making a clickity-click as they passed over the joints in the rails. He had never been on a journey like this before, never been to the big city. Indeed no-one in his family had left the town of Omnipa before or since the rail had come. Not that they felt isolated, they had the news-sheets and many people had come to visit them. Jordi's father was an important man in Omnipa and received a large number of visitors in his role as the local arbiter. Jordi was the eldest and the cleverest one of the arbiter's children. He was always listening and thinking; experimenting with the ideas of the new age of technology. The thing in the case on his lap was a product of his latest tinkering.

Looking through the glass set into the sides of the compartment he saw trees, fields and the occasional puff of black smoke from the locomotive. It was another world, and he realised just what a small part of it Omnipa was.

“Well?” the voice repeated. It came from the other occupant of the compartment, a young woman, dressed in the fashion of the city. When he had boarded, the compartment had been full and he had stood in the corridor. People had since left and now, as they approached the terminus, there were only the two of them. Jordi felt intimidated by her beauty, he had stolen glances at her and now they were alone.

Her slim figure was set off by the tight corset in green lace and leather that she wore. Her long skirt was split to the waist, revealing mesh-clad thighs and long, polished boots as she sat opposite him. Jordi was nineteen and not unaware of women, but he was still unsure of how to behave around them. Especially those women who were a little older and seemed more worldly-wise than he. There were few as interesting as this one in Omnipa, his mother would have shaken her head and muttered a few choice words at the sight of her. Jordi was fascinated by the emotions certain females produced in him, but he not yet sure of how to approach the species to ensure that they continued. And he didn't understand her enquiry; in his experience, women had no interest in things scientific.

“Pardon me, madam; I would not have thought that you were interested,” he replied politely. “It is a device I have constructed myself. Its function is...complicated.” He felt that he should say no more, he did not know her and his mind was filled with the propaganda of the government. According to the news-sheets, the country was full of thieves and the agents of foreign powers. His mind raced with sinister possibilities. She was not dressed

as folk were dressed at home, all the stories he had read or heard featured villains and spies who were easy to spot by virtue of their difference to normal people. And she was forward, in Omnipa young women would not speak uninvited, lest their parents hear of it.

The woman laughed, it sounded almost musical, like a stream rushing over rocks, her eyes sparkled and the green hat perched upon her head bobbed as her bare shoulders shook. "You silly boy," she said. "I don't wish to steal it, or know all its secrets; I'm merely making conversation, to pass the journey."

"I'm not a boy; I'm nineteen, nearly twenty in fact," Jordi replied quickly, then realised that he had said the wrong thing; he felt his face flush as she laughed again.

"Clearly there are no women where you come from," she said between giggles. "At least none to entertain you since you pulled their hair in class."

The woman appeared to be only a few years older in age than Jordi, yet she was obviously far more versed in life; especially in the ways of the city. If he had only known her story he would have been shocked.

She was a clever woman, but she had found that brains alone were insufficient for advancement. Society being what it was, other methods were needed. She had, therefore, made a plan, starting her career in the junior ranks of government under the patronage of an older lover with connections in the reaches of power. When she had gained all she could from him and had established herself, she had moved on to another, greater prize. She was presently returning from a tryst by the coast with a potentially useful contact in the ministry. After the string of older men in her life; she was attracted to Jordi's youth and handsome looks.

The carriage entered a tunnel and it went dark in the compartment, Jordi sensed movement beside him. When they emerged into the daylight he found that the woman was sitting beside him. Her body touched his; he could feel the warmth of her like the sun on a summer's day. He clutched the bag tighter, convinced that it was about to be taken from him.

"Now," she said, in a soft, beguiling voice. "Let's begin again. I am Millicent Wasperton and I am pleased to make your acquaintance." She seemed not to notice the contact. Jordi, however, was not used to having anyone except his family in such close proximity. He felt flustered yet strangely flattered by her attention. His nostrils filled with the sweet, cloying aroma of rose.

"I'm Jordi Byler," he replied, with a catch in his voice, he tried to wriggle sideways without offending her but the shape of the seating prevented it.

Millicent laid one lace-covered hand on his arm. "Do not be nervous, Jordi," she said. "I am a respectable lady, I wish only for company on this tedious journey."

"But we do not know each other," said Jordi. "To sit so close is not proper."

If Jordi had hoped that his words would dissuade her, he was mistaken. She continued to stroke his arm. "And why are you travelling to the city?" she said in that dreamy voice. "Are you off to seek your fortune, or in pursuit of adventure?"

"I'm to see the Minister of Science," he grandly replied, imbuing the phrase with an almost religious flavour. Her ears pricked up at that but she kept her voice the same.

"Why so?"

"My father says I must show him my invention. I have made a working model of it myself. My father says that what I have in here could change the world."

Millicent stopped. His words had made her reconsider her next move. Unsure, she moved back to her original seat. The boy and his story had become more interesting and she had thought better of her conduct. At first sight, she had thought that he was handsome in a rough, uncultured way and her mind had turned to a possible dalliance. They were alone in the compartment, the door was lockable and they had time to pass before they arrived. He was young and a typical provincial, he would be strong but inexperienced. He may require tutoring but that in itself could be fun. No, it could not be, she now firmly decided.

His words and her instincts were telling her that this meeting could be fortuitous for both of them. There might be some advantage that she could gain in befriending this boy and his invention. Of course, she was more interested in her own benefit than his; but the boy may yet have his uses. If it were a good idea it could certainly do her prospects no harm. And if it was not, well never mind. Instead of her own desires, she now concentrated her thoughts on the contents of the case. She would have to be the big sister instead of the seductress. At least for the moment.

"Do you wish to enlighten me about this invention of yours?" she asked. "For that is a big claim to make. And we at the ministry see all sorts of people who say they have such devices." Her tone implied that most of them were a disappointment.

“Are you employed by the ministry?” he said, again the word was spoken reverently.

“I am an employee of the Ministry of Science. Truly,” she confirmed. “In my bag are my credentials if you wish.”

“Oh no, madam, I believe you. Of course I can explain,” Jordi replied. “What is in here could certainly mean the end of the way things are presently done.”

He stopped as a rail official entered the compartment, his blue uniform adorned with gleaming bronze buttons, his cap badged. A row of medal ribbons hung over his breast pocket. His eyes were covered by a device of brass and polished wood, holding lenses. He reached up and pressed a lever at his ear, with the whirr of clockwork, the lenses rotated, focusing his gaze on the pair.

“Your tickets please,” he said, clutching his franking machine. Jordi passed his ticket over and the man took the rectangle of thick card, glanced at the printed details and pushed it into a slot on the machine's face. He turned the handle and it vanished, drawn inside by the mechanism. There was a squeak from the gearing. The ticket re-emerged, its face stamped in red letters *Inspected*. The ink had smudged on the rollers, Jordi noted. He started to speculate; surely the design could be improved to prevent that.

“And yours please, madam,” he requested. Millicent reached into her bag and pulled out a small booklet. She handed it to the man, who read the cover, his lips moving.

He straightened and touched his forelock. “Thank you, Madam Minister,” he said, handing the booklet back. He backed out of the compartment and closed the sliding door.

Jordi was in awe, his thoughts on the franking machine forgotten. “You are a minister?” he said in a hushed tone. “Not just an employee but a minister.”

“A junior one, yes,” Millicent laughed. “And I’m proud to say that I’m the only female one.”

Jordi was shocked by the vignette. His fears of the woman’s intentions were unfounded; she was an important lady, a minister, clearly, he had misunderstood her actions. Since she had retreated she had stopped making him feel quite so uncomfortable. Suddenly he wanted to tell her about his invention. He moved to open the box but she stopped him with a wave of a gloved hand. The movement brought the smell of wild roses to his nose again.

“Not here,” she said. “Have you made an appointment at the Ministry?”

“No,” replied Jordi. “I was going to arrive and ask to see the minister.”

She shook her head at his naivety. "Well you would never get past the door," she informed him. "No matter how clever your invention might be. Now, I will arrange to see you on the morrow at, shall we say ten in the morning? Come to the ministry and show them this," she produced a business card from her bag.

Jordi took it and nodded. "Thank you," he said. He examined the card, 'Millicent Wasperton' it read, in bold type. 'Under Minister of Science'. The address of the Ministry was underneath. The card also smelt of roses. Millicent opened a small book and wrote down a few words. "There," she said, "that will remind me. Now, tell me a little of your device, so that I may know which of my colleagues to bring with me."

"Certainly," said Jordi. "As you know, we derive all our power from coal. We use it to heat water, producing steam to drive machinery. In the cities, we pipe steam to houses, through underground pipes a yard across. Or we use the steam to wind springs that can drive clockworks where we cannot provide steam directly."

"Yes, yes," said Millicent impatiently. "I know all this, I asked you not what is, but what your marvellous invention could do."

"Well," Jordi replied, "I said that to show that I am not an ignorant country boy. My invention uses the steam to produce power that is easier to transport. With this," and he held up the box. "There are no pipes to explode, no water to drip and no limits on its range."

"It sounds too good to be true." Millicent was disbelieving of Jordi's claim, there had been many others like it and all had failed to produce anything. "And where does your system get this power from? How does it turn steam into energy that needs no pipe or spring?"

"It uses the properties of the magnet," Jordi announced. "In fact a new property of the magnet that I have discovered."

Millicent shook her head. "Magnets point the way for ships," she said. "They cannot do much more, why even a clockwork compass using a spinning top can replace a magnet. There is no power in a magnet; it merely aligns to the planet, itself a bigger magnet. Your idea is just another waste of time." She tossed her head in dismissal and averted her eyes from Jordi, gazing instead at the vista as they crossed the huge brick bridge over the rushing waters of the Capita.

Millicent felt deflated, all that anticipation and now this. Scientists had dismissed magnets a generation ago; they had no power compared to that produced by boiling water. She was very tempted to change her mind and refuse the boy entry on the morrow. And because of her hopes, she had let slip the chance for a diversion. Irritated, she decided to think that it would not have been pleasurable anyway.

Jordi felt stung by her words and her actions. She had given him no chance to explain, assumed that everyone else but him was right. He was annoyed with her but even more determined to prove himself. Yet he felt unable to speak up for his idea.

She watched his face crumple, perhaps she was being unfair. After all, she had not seen a demonstration. But she had her own reputation to consider and would not back down too quickly. Let him stew a while, she thought.

They sat in hostile silence for some time and then Jordi felt the carriage slow. Looking out, he could see that they were arriving in the city. The smoke from a hundred chimneys filled the skies; grimy, soot laden buildings had replaced the green fields that only a moment ago they had been traversing. Huge factories and streets of cramped terraced houses passed by. More buildings than he would have imagined possible. He knew that here was the centre of science and innovation; he felt that he had come to where he belonged.

Millicent spoke as they slowed to a crawl, the carriage rocked from side to side as they passed over points. More tracks appeared on either side, some had lines of carriages on them, all ready to travel to the four corners of the country. "Where will you be spending the night, Jordi?" she asked. It was the first thing she had said since dismissing his idea.

A porter entered the compartment. "Your bags are attended to, Madam," he announced.

Millicent passed him a coin. "Thank you," she said. "Have them taken to my residence." The porter touched his forehead and withdrew.

"With my uncle Fustus," Jordi replied. "He lives near the terminus. He has been told of my arrival by letter. He has a mobile with a chauffeur and will meet me when we arrive." He said it to impress, even though he was sure that Millicent had those things as well; he wanted her to see that he was not just a country boy. She smiled at him, her irritation forgotten at the thought of home, a bath, and food. Yet she recognised the name he had given.

“Do you mean Fustus Byler, the advocate?” she asked, she had met the man on several occasions and was surprised. If this boy was his cousin then he was indeed no mere countryman. Fustus was celebrated in society for his acumen and connections. Surely he would not ally himself with a wastrel, even if it were a family member. Perhaps she had been too hasty to dismiss him. She should change her mind.

“Yes, that’s him.” Jordi nodded. “He visits my father regularly, and has taken an interest in my work.”

“Forgive my rudeness about your device,” she said. “Of course you should come to the ministry tomorrow. No doubt when you have demonstrated your machine all will be different.”

A glass roof, supported by a mass of metal appeared overhead and they came to a halt. Jordi stood and picked up his case. Politely he stepped aside and allowed Millicent to alight before him.

“Thank you, sir,” she bobbed a small; neat curtsy; showing him a last glimpse of her thighs as she did so. “I will see you on the morrow.” She held his shoulder in her lace-gloved hand and pecked him on the cheek. Walking briskly away, her bag swinging, the porter and his barrow in tow, she passed Jordi’s uncle at the barrier and nodded to him.

Jordi let out a long breath; she had unnerved him with her brazen display of flesh. Looking around as he walked towards his uncle he realised that it was he, not her, who was out of place here. Most of the women he could see, and there were many, were considerably less restrained in their dress than Millicent had been. Clearly Millicent’s attire was not as wanton as he had imagined. Here it was normal. It was a shame; he thought wistfully, that the fashion had not reached Omnipa yet. His thoughts turned to some of the young ladies he had grown up with, imagining them so attired.

“Hail, Jordi,” his uncle Fustus greeted him, clasping his hand firmly. “It is good to see you, boy. Was your journey pleasant?”

What could he say? “Yes, thank you, Uncle,” he replied, tearing his thoughts back to the present.

“Good,” said the old man. “Wasn’t that Millicent Wasperton with you? It looked like her and she nodded to me at the barrier; surely it could not have been. And she pecked your

cheek, your father would be proud,” the old man continued, not waiting for an answer. “Have you all your things?”

Jordi had his case and the box with his invention. “I do,” he said, realising that he was saying little. The last time he had seen his uncle, back in Omnipa, they had talked without ceasing. What was the matter with him? He was fond of the old man, he had encouraged him in his invention and suggested Jordi bring it to the capital.

“We met on the journey,” he explained, “and talked of my invention. I’m to ask for her at the ministry tomorrow.” He did not add, ‘and I thought that she was about to seduce me’. He thought it unwise to mention that part.

“What luck,” said Fustus. “Although she has a reputation as a man-eater, I suspect it’s just gossip or jealousy. She has risen quickly in the ministry and that upsets some.” He laughed. “They say women are the lesser but I think not, they merely have different methods. She will be a useful person to have on your side.”

Jordi was confused; did Fustus mean that Millicent was good or bad? He had no time to consider that, his uncle was still talking.

“No doubt you are tired and hungry,” said Fustus. “Come, let us to my abode, my cook has made us a fine pie and there will be a glass or two of ale, I presume that you do drink ale?”

“When my father permits,” said Jordi. He knew that he was not supposed to but this was a special occasion.

“Oh well, my brother is not here now, you’re a guest in my house so that will be fine.” Fustus led the way toward his mobile. Jordi found it hard to believe his senses as they crossed the marble paved concourse. There were things here that he had never seen or even dreamt of. A large mechanical signboard had rotating letters that stopped every few seconds, spelling out the name of a destination and a platform number. No doubt its steam driven, he thought, my device could do that. And the clockwork barriers at every entrance, manned by armed soldiers were strangely threatening, although meant to reassure. They had no need of them in Omnipa.

Then he saw the line of machines selling various items, they had them in Omnipa, smaller and older certainly but still working by the same means. Jordi had taken one to pieces and rebuilt it when just a lad; he knew its innards as well as anything. A coin inserted released a lever which allowed access to your purchase.

The main thing that impressed him was the sheer number of people. There seemed to be more in the terminus than the whole population of Omnipa. And they were all rushing. There were men in suiting and uniforms of all colours, ladies in fine gowns and hats, while other females wore little more than underthings. Boys pushed barrows of fruits, fish, and meats; shouting out to attract buyers, men in overalls painted and swept; everywhere was bustle. It felt overpowering.

“Here is my mobile,” said Fustus. They were stood by a gleaming object shaped like a carriage but with no traces for an equine. Jordi had seen steam-mobiles before, but none this grand, or highly polished. Mounted on six wheels it had a compartment for passengers and a seat at the rear for the chauffeur. He stood by the open door, dressed in heavy leather. Once they were inside and the luggage was stowed, the boiler, situated under their feet, was fired and they proceeded down the road. Their progress was made all the more interesting by the soft seats and springing, giving the ride the feel of a small boat in a rough sea. The journey to Fustus’ house was, fortunately, short and Jordi spent it gazing out of the window and marvelling in the sights of the city.

He had never seen the like before; Fustus had always come to his brother’s house in Omnipa. He said that he preferred the quiet of the country and Jordi could understand that. He was wearied by the relentless feel of the city already. They passed shops with all manner of things in them and crowds pushing for the omnibus. The ebb and flow of vehicles was controlled by clockwork signal arms, mounted on wrought-iron posts at the road junctions. In Omnipa, uniformed men with whistles directed what traffic there was.

Fustus was a successful advocate, clearly a wealthy one from the appointment of his house, with a man to open the clockwork gates, and another to take Jordi’s bag. He refused the offer of help with the box, keeping it close.

“Is that it?” asked his uncle, glancing at the box. “I have read all your letters and explanations, but would dearly love to see the thing in action before you take it to the ministry.”

“I can demonstrate it to you after we have eaten,” said Jordi, “if you have a steam supply with a small connector.”

Later, they relaxed in Fustus’ drawing room. Sitting in deep red leather armchairs with glasses of spirit they were relaxed and full of pie and ale. The gas lighting flickered, casting shadows as Jordi opened the box and took out a small mechanism of iron and

brass. It had a connection for a steam hose on one end, a bulbous middle portion of metal and a glass tube, filled with some material at the other end. He placed it on a low table.

Fustus peered at the device. It looked so small and incongruous for any purpose. "Is that it?" he asked

"It is a small version, that's true," replied Jordi. He felt somewhat offended at the suggestion that the size could be a guide to its usefulness. "It is easier to carry; the components are heavy enough as it is."

"Excuse me; I understand," replied Fustus. "Then no doubt the effect will also be reduced."

Jordi smiled. "That may be," he said. Fustus could soon judge that for himself.

Jordi connected the house's steam supply to the device and turned a small brass lever on the wall. The steam flowed through the device; inside there was a whirring, as if from a clockwork. Water dripped from the drain into a small tray under the device.

"Look at the tube," suggested Jordi. It started to glow, deep red at first, but in a short time the colour changed to yellow, then orange and finally a bright blue-white. The room, previously shadowed and intimate was now starkly lit. Fustus was shocked; he touched the tube and yelped with surprise at the heat that was coming from it.

"How does it work?" he asked, in between sucking on his burnt fingers.

"How much detail do you wish for?" enquired Jordi.

"Put simply," replied Fustus.

"It involves magnetic metal and copper wires. The steam pressure spins a ball of the wires between several magnets and there is a force produced. This heats the material in the tube, causing it to glow and then to shine brightly."

Jordi shut off the steam and the light died, the room returned to its warmth and cosiness.

Fustus was impressed. "Well, Jordi, my lad," he said, "if a device that small can light this room, what could a larger one do?"

"I have many plans for that, Uncle," said Jordi, his eyes shining. "The tube can be separated from the creator of the force, using more copper wires. The distance seems to depend on the strength of the force amongst other things. If I can persuade the ministry to support me I believe that I could find out so much more. I think that if I replaced the

glowing wire with the same mechanism as I use to make the force, it will have the opposite effect.”

“What do you mean?” said the old man; the world he knew had been turned upside down in an instant by the device. And he suspected that if tomorrow’s demonstration went well, a lot of others would think the same.

“The force should turn the ball of wires, as the steam does now, only in the opposite direction. We will then have a rotating shaft that can be put to use in many ways.”

Jordi sat back in his chair, feeling triumphant. He took a sip of spirit; he felt that he deserved it.

“Did you explain anything of its function to Miss Wasperton?” asked Fustus.

“Only that magnets were involved,” replied Jordi.

“And what did Miss Wasperton have to say?” pressed Fustus.

“She was sceptical; she said magnets were weak and useless.”

Fustus smiled. “She is not known for her grasp of principles,” he said, “but of course, in her defence, she probably would not have seen a magnet used like this. I think once she has seen it she might change her mind. And she has the...ear of the senior minister. And now it’s late, I think a good night’s sleep would be in order.” Fustus pulled a cord that hung by his chair. “Clarence will show you to your room.”

Jordi replaced all the components in the box and secured it again. “Goodnight, Uncle,” he said as the door opened.

Promptly, the next morning at ten, the mobile deposited Jordi and his box at the ministry. He had slept well, dreaming of the things he had seen and how his invention might improve them. A huge fast-breaker had been prepared for him; now he was replete and ready for anything.

He mounted the steps but before he could enter, a large man blocked his way. “And where might you be going, boy?” he asked. He was military in his bearing, he had an arm missing, the sleeve of his jacket pinned up.

Jordi offered the card. “I’m to meet this lady at ten,” he replied.

The eyebrows of the man made an arch across his face. "Oh, another one of Millicent's young gentlemen," he said enigmatically.

Jordi didn't understand his meaning, he mumbled, "Yes, sir," and the man allowed him to pass into the sanctum of the Ministry of Science.

It was a grand old building with marble columns and a polished wooden floor. Smartly dressed officials scuttled about, carrying papers and strange objects. Jordi had to dodge between them to reach the reception desk. Again he showed the card, again there was the raised eyebrow, everyone assumed his purpose yet none questioned it.

He was directed to a laboratory where he found Millicent and two men. They were all dressed in brown coats and looked ready to investigate the mysteries of the universe. He was glad to see that Millicent's coat covered her body; he did not wish to be distracted by the sight of her flesh whilst he presented his device.

Millicent herself was relieved that Jordi had not been put off by her behaviour. She hoped that whatever his invention was, she would be able to use it to her advantage. She was also ready to dismiss it should she consider it useless.

"Begin, Mr Byler," she said, her tone formal. "These two gentlemen are scientists and will ask you questions after you have completed your demonstration." Her colleagues held notebooks, ready to write their thoughts as he spoke.

"Madam, Sirs," he started, giving the speech he had rehearsed in front of his giggling siblings, back in Omnipa. "Our country is great and its science is advanced. But I believe that it is flawed."

There was a gasp from one of the men, "Treason," he muttered.

"Oh no," said Jordi, suddenly concerned, this was not what he had imagined. "Never treason; I mean that it has developed in a flawed manner. We have relied on steam to power our civilisation directly, with all its problems."

"But how else can we wind the clockworks and turn the machines?" asked the other. "No doubt you have some grand idea; some fanciful device to try and impress us."

"Gentlemen," said Jordi, "I don't mean we should replace the steam, just that I have found a better way to transfer the power of the steam to houses, better than at present. There will be no constant water dripping, no leaks, and no exploding pipes."

“Ridiculous!” said the first. “It can’t be done, we cannot move the power except by steam pipe or stored on a spring.”

Jordi opened the box and lifted out his device. The two laughed when they saw its size and apparent insignificance. “That toy will not replace our steam generators,” one scoffed.

All the while Millicent had remained silent, she appeared to be gauging the turn of the conversation before speaking. However, she smiled at Jordi in encouragement as she spoke.

Mr Keat,” she said, “I rather think that this device is only a small demonstration model.”

Keat coloured. “Of course, Madam Minister,” he said. “Pardon me, please continue.”

Jordi connected the steam pipe to his device. “You are correct, both of you,” he said. “This device, although small, is a perfect working model, easy to transport. In theory, it could be constructed in any size and would sit alongside the steam plant.”

“What is contained inside the sphere?” asked the other scientist.

“A fan to harness the power from the steam,” Jordi replied. “This fan is on the same shaft as a ball of copper wires suspended between an annulus of magnets.”

“Never heard of the like before,” muttered the first man, Keat.

“The spinning wires draw a force from the magnets,” continued Jordi. “And it is carried along other wires to this tube, where it heats the materials within, causing them to... well, you will see. Now I’m ready to commence my demonstration; if you could draw the blinds.”

Millicent herself went to oblige. The room was dark as Jordi turned the valve. He could hear the two men muttering but could not make out their words.

Less than a minute later, there was silence, save the scratching of the scientists writing. Millicent’s features were brought into sharp relief by the harsh blue light from the tube. Inside she was exultant and relieved; her hunch had been correct. This was her ticket to the heights of government. With Jordi by her side, there would be little that could not be achieved. He could come with her or failing that, once she had what she needed from him, it would be time to move on again.