

Benedice Te by Jay Lake

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Galvezton, Texian Republic, May 10th, 1961

Algernon Black-Smith glanced back at the hissing scream of a pressure relief valve to see a great steam ram out of control. Eighteen feet high, twelve feet wide, with burnished copper eagles in relief across the steel airstreamed prow, the vehicle smashed across the electro-guide barrier in the center of the street and rolled toward him with the inevitability of Manifest Destiny.

Scattering wogs like ninepins, Algernon dashed for an open door. He looked behind him as he ran to see the steering bogies of the steam ram twist toward him—someone was trying to kill him!—but the mechanism's momentum was too great. Spewing sparks off the cobbles of Mechanic Street, the ram toppled onto its right side as it swung toward him, accompanied by the screams of terrified pedestrians and the stench of burning brakes. Algernon stopped in the doorway, horrified yet fascinated, as the huge machine surrendered to Sir Isaac's immutable laws and rolled over the Galvezton foot traffic. Two Papist nuns were caught for a moment, their red faces shrieking within their white wimples, before the careening ram ground them to sludge between the cobbles.

The ram continued to roll, its back end describing an arc with a radius as long as the engine's forty or so feet. Horses, mules, men and women, all fell before the mighty wall of metal. White gas lamps lining the electro-way exploded as the sliding ram snapped their poles and gutted their plumbing. It came to rest, frame out, against the block of buildings in which Algernon sheltered. A cloud of damp, heavy dust settled over the entire scene.

Appalled at the carnage, and what was intended to be his starring role therein, Algernon reached up to touch the fresnel lens of the steam ram's vast headlamp, a cyclopean orb vacant of reason.

The warm glass stung his fingertips, bringing Algernon back to himself. Simple prudence and good tradecraft alike dictated a swift retreat from a ruptured boiler of that size. As Algernon pushed his way through screaming wogs toward the back of a ragged, stinking little chop house, he wondered which of his friends or enemies wanted to kill him in such a messy, public way. Behind him, escaping steam screeched in a steadily rising wail.

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"Mr. Black-Smith, the Consul-General will see you now." The butler, an Iberian almost as well comported as an honest Englishman, bowed. The man smelled of barley water.

Algernon followed him along marble-tiled halls to a large set of doors, gilded with an inlaid hagiography of precious gems. Her Imperial Majesty's Consulate-General in Galvezton was located in the Bishop's Palace, that worthy having been summarily invited some years earlier by the Royal Marines to remove himself to other quarters. The business was a continuing minor scandal in Mexico City and Rome, but the dignity of the British Empire had been at stake, Galvezton being the largest port in the eastern Americas. It apparently pleased the current Consul-General to retain much of the Papist décor of the place. The hushed quiet and elaborate artwork was a startling contrast to the chaos of yesterday's events.

The butler swung open one door and announced Algernon. "Mr. Algernon Black-Smith, British subject, a gentleman, bachelor of arts of Balliol College, Oxford, master of laws of the Sorbonne, in Her Imperial Majesty's service without portfolio, paying a courtesy call."

"Eh," grunted the Consul-General. "Come in."

Algernon stepped into the office. The sun glowed through tall stained glass windows in all the colors Spanish art could produce. The thick walls of the Bishop's Palace showed in the depth of the window wells. The room had that strangely gentle scent of paper rot that one seemed to find only in old mansions.

The Consul-General, Lord Quinnipiac, was a rough-featured man with blue marbled eyes set in a classically aristocratic horsey face. The man had every advantage of breeding and position Algernon so painfully lacked, and so Algernon regarded Quinnipiac with an automatic resentment.

Quinnipiac sat at a scarred worktable, a small mechanism spread before him in pieces. "Ironman," the Consul-General said, renewing his examination of the pieces on the tabletop. Algernon hated that nickname with a passion, but it had followed him from Public School through university and into the Queen's service.

"Sir, the world is broad and wide." It was the opening line of the most ordinary secret recognition phrase used by his branch of Her Imperial Majesty's service.

"One should have stout men by one's side," replied Lord Quinnipiac. That was the most common response. He looked back up from his mechanology project with a toothy smile. "Welcome to my humble abode here in the cloaca of the Texian Republic."

"Sir." Algernon stood at respectful attention. He was newly assigned to Galvezton as Facilitator-in-place for the Confidential Office. The Consul-General was not within Algernon's chain of command, but in every other way that counted, the man stood above Algernon in Her Imperial Majesty's service, and probably

always would. If nothing else, he had a claim on Algernon's time and attention by virtue of his office.

Lord Quinnipiac waved the valve cap of a hydraulic pressure line at a copy of the *Galvezton Daily News* resting on one end of his worktable. "Some damned fool destroyed a valuable steam ram downtown yesterday. Fennian scum, I'll wager, stirring up trouble for the old sod once again. No respect for property. Fecking white wogs, those Irish."

"What sort of ram?" asked Algernon, avoiding the Irish Question. What was Lord Quinnipiac telling him, summoning him to the Bishop's Palace just to bring this up? In Algernon's imagination burnished copper eagles screamed with the sound of escaping steam.

Lord Quinnipiac put down the pressure line and picked up the newspaper, shaking it out to study the article. "Ah. No great loss. Colonial make. Olds-Edison Carg-O-Master VI, it would seem." He laughed. "Our Texian friends never seem to tire of buying inferior mechanology for political reasons. If I ruled only three hundred sea miles from the homeport of the French Caribbean Fleet, I would damned well ensure *I* had the best British manufacture in every essential application."

Algernon wanted to leave the subject of the steam ram, but his attempted murder had the fascination of an old bruise. Why the deuce was Quinnipiac going on about it? "How was the engine destroyed? Surely not by happenstance."

Without referring to the paper, Quinnipiac looked Algernon in the eye. "The ram jumped the electro-guide, rolled over and slid across Mechanic Street. Shoved up against a building, then the main boiler blew."

He does know, thought Algernon. *He had something to do with it, somehow. But why?* "Anyone hurt?"

"No sign of the engineer. Some wogs died, but no one of significance."

So we are pretending it wasn't about me. "I presume the newspaper gives a cause for this accident."

The Consul-General's marbled blue eyes peered out of his long, wind-reddened face as he studied Algernon. "No, Mr. Black-Smith, it offers no explanation. Do *you* have a theory?"

"No, sir." He didn't dare express his personal interest in the problem. *Let Quinnipiac think him a fool.*

"Very well then." Lord Quinnipiac shrugged, tossing the paper to the floor. "As it happens, I would like you to go to San Antonio de Bexar."

San Antonio de Bexar was the capital of the Texian Republic and seat of the Roman Catholic Church in the Americas. An uneasy relationship at best, Algernon knew. And perfectly well staffed with his colleagues from the Confidential Office. “Sir?”

“The Arch-Bishop and the Mexican throne have conspired to steal certain of Her Imperial Majesty’s privy secrets. They have concealed it in Texian territory in hopes of throwing us off the scent. This is being handled through my office for reasons of, ah ... confidentiality.” Quinnipiac actually winked at him.

Algernon nodded slowly. The Consul-General was playing an odd game, verbal orders outside the chain of command, no briefing books, no *bona fides* from Algernon’s own superiors in the Confidential Office. This stank of high politics.

Quinnipiac continued. “The problems in Boston and London have been dealt with, and we are looking into diplomatic leaks in Her Imperial Majesty’s High Commission in San Antonio de Bexar, but I need someone trustworthy to recover what he can of the documentation.”

“I see,” said Algernon, who didn’t. The steam ram’s “accident” had to be connected with this affair. The Consul-General didn’t have the right to order Algernon on this wild goose chase, but the other man certainly had the right to *ask* him to pursue it. And it would give Algernon a chance to find out why he’d been so publicly attacked. “Very well, sir, I shall depart forthwith.”

“Excellent. I will send a pneumat-o-graph informing your superiors that you have graciously taken the assignment at my request. You may draw whatever funds you require from my bursar.”

The Consul-General returned his attention to the project on the table. Algernon watched him slide cylinders and valves together for a few moments before speaking again. “Sir?”

Lord Quinnipiac looked up, annoyance flashing in his marbled eyes. “You have your orders.”

“What have they stolen? For what am I looking?”

“That’s an Official Secret, my boy. Afraid I can’t tell you. But you’ll know it when you see it. There can’t be too many of Her Imperial Majesty’s Crown Privy Report binders laying about in San Antonio de Bexar.”

“Thank you, sir.” Algernon bowed, turned to leave. As he approached the double doors, there was a sharp crackle from behind him, then a whoosh as something whined past his shoulder to shatter against the upper panel of the left hand

door. Chips of wood and shards of gem inlay burst into the air. Algernon shielded his eyes with a forearm, then turned back to the Consul-General.

Lord Quinnipiac held the smallest pistol Algernon had ever seen, the hydraulic pressure line clipped to the butt of its grip. The room now reeked of machine oil. “Watch yourself, boy.” The Consul-General’s expression was flat, devoid of the humor in his voice. “Texas is a dangerous place.”

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The express train from Galvezton to San Antonio de Bexar passed without stopping through a few small towns, some Anglo-Texian, some Mexican wog, some native wog. Mostly it passed through countless miles of Texas coastal swamp that eventually transitioned to blackland prairie. To Algernon’s eye, the landscape had merely exchanged one sullen, grassy aspect for another.

The Texians had not yet constructed the latest generation of ordinator-controlled pneumatic-vacuum underground railroads that were now common in Europe, so the express only went about eighty miles per hour on surface rails. A zeppelin would have been far more comfortable, but the schedule was inconvenient. Algernon used the hours in his private compartment to wonder who had tried to kill him, and what role Quinnipiac might have played. *By God*, thought Algernon, *nobody would play him the patsy.*

It had to be someone connected with the missing Crown Privy Report binder in San Antonio de Bexar. Even if Quinnipiac wasn’t playing him straight, it was unlikely the Consul-General would have arranged such a public death. In any case, Quinnipiac certainly knew all about the steam ram “accident.” Algernon wondered how accidental Quinnipiac’s hydraulic pistol discharge had been. A warning, certainly, not an attempt on his life.

Algernon would never be free of highborn idiots like Quinnipiac interfering with his career. Algernon was the first and only son of a bourgeois family in Baltimore, that self-contradictory capital-in-exile of British Papism. His parents’ aspirations had sent him to Public School in New England and on to Oxford, while sending them—eventually—to the poorhouse, much to his great disgrace. Algernon would never live down his middle birth no matter how far he moved upward along the fringes of power.

And move up he had. His first mission as one of Her Imperial Majesty’s Confidential Office Facilitators had been a virtual death sentence, but Algernon had succeeded against long odds. On his own in the protectorate Buddhist Kingdom of Mongolia he had recovered the Crown of the Bogd Khan from Chinese-backed Kazakh insurgents and single-handedly negotiated the capitulation of Urga to the besieging Royal Marines.

That early and spectacular success had only led him to equally daunting assignments, first in Russian Aleskaya, then in German East Africa, until some higher-up in the Confidential Office realized he was doing too well too early in his career for one of his undistinguished birth. Since the fall of '59, Algernon had been shunted aside from serious work, relegated to messaging diplomatic bags via steam packet or zeppelin to obscure ports such as Windhoek, Goa and Vancouver. Being sent to Galvezton as Facilitator-in-place had, relatively speaking, seemed a plum job.

However shaky its legitimacy, this new assignment to San Antonio de Bexar would enable Algernon to create a success that could not be ignored. He could put paid to his anonymous enemy and count coup against the nobly-titled twits who ran his life.

Smiling, Algernon leaned his head against the window glass to feel the vibration of the train in the bones of his skull. The endless South Texas prairie outside his window offered no further counsel.

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San Antonio de Bexar, Texian Republic, May 13th, 1961

The Texian capital straddled the San Antonio River. On the north bank stretched the vast complex of the Alamo, old ramified adobe parapets surrounded by soaring glass edifices. The Alamo complex held both the seat of Papist authority in the Western Hemisphere as well as the government of the secular Republic, an uneasy mixed use. The south bank was the secular city, great merchant banks and insurance companies, their twenty-storey granite skytowers connected by a Swiss funicular, the very latest in transportation mechanology. The Mexican High Commission dominated the south bank, facing off the Alamo with a frighteningly-misplaced gothic architecture in an echo of old conflicts, complete with an heroic statue of Santa Anna cast from the bronze of captured Texian cannons. Connecting pneumatic and funicular lines raveled all the buildings, as they did in many frontier cities. *London at least had the grace to conceal hers beneath the street*, thought Algernon.

Passing through the city center, the Galvezton Express rolled into the enclosed *Estación de Alamo* with a scream of brakes and shrieking steam. Algernon disembarked into the close, musky air of the platform, amid wogs shouting at one another in Spanish, French, Indio tongues and some few in English. Texian, Mexican and Church couriers stood by the sealed cars at the back of the train, dashing away one after another with their black-and-red confidential bags. Nowhere amid the chaos did Algernon see anyone from Her Imperial Majesty's government. Unsurprising, if Lord Quinnipiac truly feared leaks in the High Commission here. The Consul-General would scarcely have notified anyone of Algernon's arrival. The implication was clear—Algernon should not try to contact the local facilitator from the Confidential Office, not until he had learned more.

Which was fine. Algernon had always preferred to work on his own, without close supervision. Furthermore, in this case, he had a personal concern—finding his would-be murderer—that was better kept to himself.

He stood on the platform, considering his next move. Algernon had never been to San Antonio de Bexar. After a moment's thought Algernon tipped a waiting wog to take his steamer trunk to the Menger Hotel, just east of the Alamo complex. Valise in hand, he set out to find his counterparts in the Texian government.

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“I need to speak to Mr. Browning, please.”

Algernon faced a female secretary seated at a large desk beneath a Texian seal with the added motto “*Cave Custodem.*” The otherwise-empty antechamber smelled of dust and furniture oil. The outer door had proclaimed this the “Bureau of Antiquities”. “Antiquities” was the not-very-secret code name the Texians used for their external intelligence service. Every Texian High Commission in the world had an antiquities attaché. Doors to each side of the desk were labeled “Exports” and “Imports.”

“¿Como?”

God help me, thought Algernon, *it was a white wog*. He could have sworn the woman was European.

“*Señor Browning, por favor.*” His Spanish didn't go very far.

The woman shook her head.

“Really?” Algernon set his valise on her desk, opened the snaps. The female wog watched with interest.

There were good reasons women were generally not considered employable within the Empire, Algernon fumed. With the exception of Her Imperial Majesty, of course. Asking for Mr. Browning was supposed to gain admittance to the offices of friendly intelligence services, assuming one knew how to find them. Leaving again was another matter entirely.

Algernon removed a miniature daguerreograph from his bag. It was of the latest mechanology from the Lucas Works in England, quite small at perhaps six inches long with a narrow barrel. Holding the pistol grip, he sighted the daguerreograph at the secretary.

“¡No!” she yelled, diving under the desk.

The daguerreograph clicked as it impressed a daguerreotype of her empty chair. Algernon pulled out the plate and quickly inserted another. He aimed it at the seal this time, centering on the star in the middle.

A door hidden in the paneled wall behind the desk opened. “Come in, Mr. Black-Smith,” said a tall, dapper man with broad shoulders. Algernon was quite startled to see Istvan Szagy. Szagy was from a cadet branch of an important Austro-Hungarian noble family. He had been a year ahead of Algernon at Choate, and prefect in his house, as well as a role model for Algernon—between canings, buggeries and other assorted Public School torments. Algernon vaguely recalled that Szagy had planned to go into the import-export business. Szagy’s English was, as always, flawless. “Mr. Browning will see you now.”

Algernon impressed a daguerreotype of Istvan Szagy in the doorway before he lowered the miniature daguerreograph and followed him through.

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“Was it necessary to threaten to shoot Carmella?”

“Was it necessary to have a wog at the front door who can’t speak a Christian tongue?”

Istvan sat at a small desk topped with files, binders and a film reader. “Spanish *is* a Christian tongue, Algernon. I should make an effort not to forget that if I were spending time here.”

Algernon studied Istvan Szagy. Ten years out of Choate Szagy still had his upperclassman’s body, slim-waisted and pale. The familiar shock of blond hair showed no gray yet, but there were lines around the man’s verdigris eyes. “What are you doing in Texian service, Istvan?”

“Roughly the same thing you are doing in Her Imperial Majesty’s, I imagine.” Istvan’s smile was tight-lipped. “And what brings you to the lovely San Antonio de Bexar?”

They were deep within the bowels of the Alamo, in a windowless office chilly from the thick inner walls of the fortress. Algernon was acutely aware that if he never walked out of the Bureau of Antiquities the world would be no wiser. “I’ve an errand to run for Lord Quinnipiac.”

There. He had established his high-level sponsorship. A flimsy form of insurance, but stronger than none.

“One of Mr. Browning’s errands?”

“Yes.” Algernon paused, then added, “As well as a little business of my own.”

“Interesting. Well, you’d hardly start roaching on the Republic by walking in here first. And I can scarcely imagine you stirring up trouble for us on your own account.”

“No. Assuming it wasn’t you that stirred up trouble for me in the first place.”

In the strained silence that followed, Algernon scanned Istvan’s desk. It was the desk of a man tasked with too many objectives, overflowing with maps, messages and files, with rings of tea stains across entire archaeologies of paper. The initials “I.S.” appeared on so many of them that it obviously wasn’t an office borrowed just to interview him. Furthermore, a bottle of Istvan’s favorite brandy, well remembered by Algernon from their Public School days, rested on a sideboyy.

“The Texian Republic has had no interest in you ... up to now,” Szagy finally said. “In the meantime, kindly stop reading my correspondence or I shall be forced to have you shot.”

“Why don’t you use an ordinator?” Algernon looked up to meet his host’s eyes with a small smile. It was like being back at Choate all over again—the camaraderie, the threats. “All this filing, all this reading.”

“Don’t like having the damned things around. Besides, something that costly is beyond the scope of our legislative appropriation. Her Imperial Majesty may have all the money in the Bank of England, but us Texians live and die by cotton, cattle and crude oil. Most of which we sell to you.”

“Perhaps I can help.” Algernon knew that two Mark VII Lovelace units were gathering dust in the cellars of the Bishop’s Palace in Galvezton, having been replaced by newer devices straight out of the boffin works at Bletchley Park.

“And why would you do that?”

“The Mexican Throne has something belonging to Her Imperial Majesty. Lord Quinnipiac believes it to be concealed here in San Antonio de Bexar. *Quid pro quo.*”

“And what would that ‘something’ be?”

“A Privy Report binder.”

“Lord Quinnipiac wouldn’t tell you what was in it, eh?” Istvan laughed. He pulled a sheet of type-impressed foolscap from under a smashed Krupp machine pistol cast in bronze. “Got a pneu directly from H.I.M.’s Consulate-General in

Galvezton a few hours before you came. I decided to hold it back from my superiors to see what might turn up. You, in this case.”

Istvan handed the pneumat-o-graph to Algernon, who read the hand transcription from a presumably cryptogrammed original.

::: HIM-CG-GALVZ TO REPTEX-ANTIQ-SADBXR ::: STOP :
ALGERNON BLACK-SMITH A-K-A IRONMAN IN TRANS TO SADBXR :
STOP : ARMED-DANGEROUS : STOP : APPREHEND IN STRICTEST
SECREC Y HOLD FOR H-I-M GOVT : STOP : ALL REQUIRED FORCE
AUTHIZED : STOP : REPLY ONLY THIS OFC : STOP ::: LORD QUINN :
HIM-CG-GALVZ :::

“Ridiculous,” said Algernon. “I am not armed.” His chest felt cold and tight. Clearly, it was Quinnipiac who had tried to have him killed. *Why?* Was the binder real, or some other plot afoot? “I see,” he muttered.

“No you don’t, unless you’re a damn sight smarter than I am, which I know from Choate that you aren’t.” Istvan smiled, broader now, and produced a derringer from his desk drawer. “Oh, and, by the way, I place you under arrest in the name of the Republic of Texas.”

Algernon carefully laid both hands flat on the front edge of Istvan’s desk. “Very well. Now what?”

“Now we go for a short walk.”

Algernon had taken more than a few people for “short walks” in his career. He knew what that usually meant. Algernon could smell the sudden, sharp odor of his own fear.

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The Swiss-built funicular car lurched away from the Dillardo’s building, home to the largest group of shops in the Republic. Algernon sat gripping his valise, staring out at the skytowers. The car was roughly the shape of a bullet, windowed all around with glass except for the automated mechanology enclosed within the roof-spine. It hung from cables strung in tandem with the pneumatic lines that drove the car. Despite the modernity of the design, the interior had the familiar public transit smell of old shoes and hydraulic fluid.

Istvan had cleared the car by the simple expedient of showing a fare inspector’s badge. Now they were alone high above the ground, lurching from tower to tower on the long haul from Dillardo’s to the Zoological Gardens east of the city. The derringer was no longer in evidence. Algernon wondered if Istvan planned to drop him onto the railroad tracks as they crossed.

“Even our best sound recorders do not work well up here,” said Istvan. “That was a treasonous statement I just made, by the way.”

This was it, then. Algernon imagined the plunge from the funicular car, the scream he would be unable to bottle in, the wind whipping across his ears like the slaps of his childhood governess. “So what are we doing here?”

“Speaking in the most secrecy I can manage on the spur of the moment.” Istvan smiled, his natural bully’s smile Algernon remembered so well from Choate. “Far away from unfriendly ears both Texian and Papist in that damned Alamo rat palace. There’s a question I want to ask in privacy. Consider this, Ironman: why would Lord Quinnipiac send a pneu directly to the Bureau of Antiquities and not go through H.I.M.’s High Commission here in San Antonio de Bexar? Especially a pneu as sensitive as what appears to be a termination order for one of Her Imperial’s more successful field agents?”

“Because the bastard wants to kill me!” Algernon shouted, pounding his fist against the glass wall of the car. This would be a stupid way to die, at Istvan’s hands. He whirled, stalking down the length of the car, his frustration having finally gotten the better of him. “And I don’t even know why. Quinnipiac told me he suspects corruption here, complicity in the matter of the missing Privy Report. But someone tried to kill me in Galvezton two days ago. Quinnipiac made it clear he knew all about it before sending me on this snipe hunt. A steam ram jumped the electro-guides and nearly ran me down.”

“No harm done, eh?” asked Istvan. “Maybe a few wogs got squashed?”

Leaning against two of the iron ribs of the car, Algernon stared down at a landscape of cottonwoods and pecans as the funicular lurched closer to the zoological gardens. It could have been him ground to paste between the cobbles, like the screaming nuns. But it hadn’t been. “No, no harm, I suppose.”

“No harm. They’re just wogs,” said Istvan. “*That’s* why I work here. Wogs are people too. Texas is a far cry from Budapest, London or Boston, but wogs *are* people here. Her Imperial Majesty has them snuffed out like candles at the first inconvenience. Suddenly, you’re Quinnipiac’s candle. How does it feel to be a white wog, Ironman?”

The car lurched past another cable tower. Algernon began whispering to the glass. “I’ve used a Thompson gun to force askaris forward against German armor in Tanganyika. In 1955, I threw Kazakh women over the walls of Urga. I once drove an entire Inupiat village to overrun Russian artillery. We do what we must, Istvan, to maintain order in the world, and the supremacy of the British Crown. You may be right about the wogs, but regardless of that I have my sworn duty.” He stopped, gathering his words. *Duty*, thought Algernon. *Duty*, even in the face of attack by his

superiors. Was this what he continued to struggle for? An early death for someone else's political convenience?

Algernon turned away from the window to face Istvan again. "I don't understand something. Lord Quinnipiac could have had me killed in Galvezton without difficulty. Why send me to you?"

Istvan nodded, as if he had been following the same line of thought. "I have reason to believe the stolen Privy Report is real, not a cover story. Perhaps he wants your death to contribute to whatever is momentous about that document. You would make excellent cover for a plot—a man of proven ability and ambition, resentfully believing he'd been denied advancement due to his station of birth."

"I *have* been denied advancement. I will overcome that handicap in time. That's the price I pay for being an Englishman." He smiled toothsomely at Istvan. "There is no finer fate on God's earth. Now, let me ask you a treasonous question of my own. Do you know what is in the report?"

"With luck, we both will soon." Istvan stood and opened the door of the funicular to the ringing of a safety bell. "We exit here."

They were still high above the ground.

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Algernon was not afraid of falling, in the usual sense. He swam for sport, and had jumped from some stern cliffs while on seaside holidays. Istvan, though, had grabbed Algernon's arms and simply shoved him from the car, valise and all. As Algernon fell, he was pleased to realize he was not screaming. He was surprised to see Istvan leave the car to fall above him, pacing Algernon in his descent.

Istvan called out to Algernon, but his words were lost in the wind. Somehow, Istvan looked less alarmed than Algernon felt. Algernon twisted his body to see a quarry lake approaching very rapidly. He released his valise and tucked into a dive just before striking the water.

It was like being beaten with hammers. The flat slap of the water tore at every joint in his body even as he cleaved the surface. Algernon twisted, arcing out of his sharp drop to avoid what was doubtless a rocky bottom. His lungs felt collapsed by the impact, and all he could see was a murky green. Algernon had no idea where the surface was. His head ached from the impact with the water and he could not find his balance. His nose stung with the itch of water forced into his sinuses.

Algernon began to kick, just to establish direction and get himself out of the cloud of bubbles that had followed him into the water. He still couldn't tell where the surface was. His lungs stung while his mouth threatened to swell open and breathe in

the entire lake. Red flashes of panic overwhelmed his murky vision of the world.

Something grabbed his ankle. Algernon tried to scream, caught himself in time, and kicked with his free foot. He was being pulled down, pulled under. His red flashes were going to black. Algernon knew he was about to drown as a hand caught his collar and pulled him to the surface.

“Good God, man!” Treading water, Istvan shook Algernon’s collar. “You lettered in aquatics at Choate. Keep your head next time!”

Algernon coughed, then spat, choking on lake water and gratitude. Following Istvan’s lead, he swam toward one of the bounding cliffs.

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They shook off the worst of the lake water inside a pocket cave at the waterline of one of the quarry walls. Somehow Istvan had also saved Algernon’s valise, though it was soaked. His papers were certainly ruined. Perhaps the daguerreograph could be salvaged.

“What was the purpose of that?” Algernon asked. The plunge and his subsequent soaking had driven the temper right out of him, restoring Algernon to his rightful analytical perspective.

Istvan took off one shoe, dumping water and sludge. “I don’t do it very often, for reasons that should be clear. Not to mention it would eventually be noticed. But you have disappeared.”

“From whom? Certainly not you.”

“Mexicans. Papists. British. Perhaps even elements of my own government.” Istvan took off his other shoe. “Whoever wants you dead. I fear what may happen if the Republic is implicated in this growing British scandal.”

“You’re going to a lot of trouble for me.”

“I’m going to a lot of trouble for Texas. That it benefits a fellow Choate alum and a British gentleman is mere lagniappe.”

“Thank you, nonetheless.”

“Think nothing of it.”

They rose, Algernon now holding his dripping valise. Istvan led him to the back of the cave where he opened a hidden door. A narrow corridor lit by a few white gas lamps trailed into a dim distance.

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The Bureau of Antiquities had a large complex in the cave system just east of San Antonio de Bexar. Algernon was impressed at the effort to which the colonials had gone, although it was more understandable with European nobility such as Istvan on their staff.

As they walked along, Istvan explained that the cave complex had its own electrical dynamos and hydraulic pumps. Water was drawn from the quarry lake, while fuel and hydraulic pressure were brought in from city mains. What surprised Algernon was the degree and sophistication of the miniaturized mechanology all around him.

“Look,” said Istvan, leading them to an equipment room. He handed Algernon a sealed wooden box about the size of a loaf of bread. “It’s a self-contained Stirling engine. It drives an electromagnetic emitter. A man could carry this inside a common valise or dispatch case and report his whereabouts and activities by wireless, from a distance of perhaps several hundred yards. This will bring our tradecraft into the twentieth century!”

“I’ve never see the like,” said Algernon.

“Of course not.” Istvan’s smile was tight again. “It was designed and built by wog boffins on staff here.”

“Wog boffins.” Algernon shook his head. *What was the world coming to?*

“And here...” Istvan picked up a pistol about the size of the one Lord Quinnipiac had fired at Algernon, but lacking a hose clipped to the butt of the grip. “We’ve been working on miniature high-pressure vessels for steam efficiency. That’s produced some side benefits.” He chambered a round. “Super-compressed air. Not as efficient as ordinary gunpowder, but portable, unlike hydraulics, and much quieter. Perfectly fine for short work and doesn’t show up to gunpowder-sniffing dogs.”

Istvan fired the gun into the wooden cladding at the far wall of the underground room. There was a sharp thump as the splinters flew, but no echoing report whatsoever.

“I suppose you’ve got ordinator down here too,” said Algernon.

Istvan smiled his big smile again. “L’Argent Internationale, the best Paris will export. Two metric tons of fine-tuned Continental mechanology.”

Algernon thought again of the Lovelaces stored down in Galvezton. They

were a fraction of the capability of the Texians' froggie L.A.I., but at a fraction of the size and cost as well. Her Imperial Majesty's ordinator boffins, whom the jobs called "stackers," were combining small, cheap units to do the work of a bigloom like Istvan's L.A.I. "I thought you didn't have the budget for ordinators."

"In the office, on the congressional budget, no. Down here, on the President's privy budget, it's a different tale entirely. Furthermore, no prying eyes and ears here except our own." Istvan laid the gas pistol back down on the table. "Enough. I believe I've made my point."

"The Texian Bureau of Antiquities is the equal of anything I've seen outside of England," admitted Algernon, though it pained him to say it. *And I am safe here*, he thought.

Coward.

They left the equipment room.

* * * *

In the briefing room where their walk ended, Algernon found his steamer trunk atop a conference table. The gaslights were wicked up to a brightness that rendered the brasswork on his trunk difficult to look at. The room was hot and close despite being enclosed in damp stone. A small, dark wog in a passable imitation of a Savile Row suit stood behind the trunk.

"Mr. Black-Smith," said Istvan, "allow me to present Señor Browning of the Imperial Mexican Security Directorate."

"Call me Oswaldo," said Señor Browning in a perfect Boston accent. He nodded his head slightly at Algernon. "Harvard, sir. Forgive me if I do not mention the year."

Istvan had gone on to Harvard as well. The old boy network would explain this unlikely cooperation between rivals. Almost as unlikely as Istvan's cooperation with him.

"My trunk," said Algernon. "How did it get here?"

"Señor Browning and I often cooperate on matters of mutual interest," replied Istvan. "He received a tip about your property and had it diverted by his agents in the railway baggage service."

Thus keeping Istvan's hands clean, Algernon thought. Istvan really was keeping a low profile on this affair.

“Would you care to open it?” asked Oswaldo. “Slowly, please.”

Algernon found the keys inside his soaked valise. He inspected the trunk carefully. His hand-signs were missing—the small hairs he routinely trapped in the hinges, the aligning scratches on the brightwork where the locking tongue folded up. Algernon checked along the bottom edge for a small nick the trunk had acquired from shrapnel in Russian Aleskaya. The scars on his thigh twinged in sympathy at the thought, while the trunk’s brass binding was smooth.

“This is not my trunk, gentlemen,” he said. “An excellent copy, but not mine.”

Istvan folded his arms and leaned against the doorway. “Are you sure? It appears to have your tag on it, and the appropriate shipping labels.”

“Wouldn’t you know *your* own?” Algernon asked. “However, I will open it.” He inserted the key and turned it slowly. The lock clicked open, then the locking tongue popped out. Algernon flipped up the clasps. “Ready?”

Istvan and Oswaldo nodded.

He raised the lid. Inside was the small tray he used, with his shaving kit, shoe kit, and various personal possessions. Algernon inspected the tray with care. It appeared to be the tray from his original trunk. He lifted it out to reveal folded clothes.

After fully unpacking the trunk and laying the contents out on the conference table, Algernon did a quick inventory. “Curious. I am missing a pair of wool suit pants, two shirts and an excellent pair of bespoke shoes.”

“The trunk,” said Oswaldo. “May I?”

Algernon looked at Istvan, who shrugged.

Oswaldo began to examine the trunk with painstaking care. He patted the lid, the sides, the bottom, then shifted the trunk in place so it rested on its back. “Do you routinely have a false bottom on your trunk, Mister Black-Smith?”

“No.”

“You do now. Perhaps that is why some of your clothing is missing.” Oswaldo produced a bowie knife, at which Istvan seemed startled. “¿*Con su permiso?*” he asked, then immediately began to cut at the lining.

A Crown Privy Report binder tumbled out of the bottom of Algernon’s trunk, the gold-tooled ‘E.R.’ plainly visible on the red leather cover.

Oswaldo smiled. “Someone is quite the humorist. Your Lord Quinnipiac, I assume.”

As Algernon stared horrified at this evidence of his apparent treason, Istvan picked up the binder and opened it.

“It’s blank,” the Texian agent said. He riffed through. “All the pages are blank.”

* * * *

The three of them sat for hours in the same briefing room, having long since exhausted small talk as their tea cooled. The trunk and all its contents had been removed for forensic analysis, while another Texian team worked on the Crown Privy Report binder itself. Istvan had refused to leave until they verified more details about the book. Oswaldo Browning remained as well, for the same reasons. The scent of the quarry lake intensified as Algernon’s legs chafed in his damp trousers. *Answers*, he thought. *We are approaching some answers.*

Gröning, the lead forensic analyst, finally came in with a set of onionskin charts rolled up beneath his arms. The analyst was a classic Junker Prussian—riding boots, tight uniform jacket, arrogant expression. His rumpled white lab coat did little to soften his demeanor.

“Here is what we have found,” Gröning said, a Mitteleuropian accent harsh on his voice. He set the charts on the table. “Nothing in the trunk, nothing on the trunk, nothing in or on the clothes. The book, however, his pages are odd.”

“How?” Algernon asked as all eyes in the room turned toward him.

“He consists of two hundred and fifty six pages of high-rag paper. This is a very fine grade of handmade paper, as one might expect for use by the Queen. However, the grain of the pages varies. Some are cut and bound long grain, some cross grain, and a few at odd angles. This is very unusual, largely for esthetic reasons, but also printing and manufacturing inefficiencies. Further, each page has differing and somewhat random watermarks covering an unusually large area of the paper.”

“What does that mean?” asked Istvan.

“We have no idea.” Gröning patted the charts. “Here is a detail showing the grain orientation on each page. I have also included diagrams of the watermarks on the first ten pages.”

After Gröning left, the three of them pored over the analyst’s diagrams. “Could the differing grain be a cryptogram?” asked Algernon. He was a field man,

this was boffin work, but *someone* had placed his life at stake against this mystery.

Quinnipiac, no doubt.

Oswaldo shook his head. “No. There are only two hundred fifty six examples of perhaps six distinct paper types—long grain, short grain and several angled grain variations. It would be dramatically inefficient to have produced this entire book for such small a cryptogrammatic base. Not enough information could be embedded.”

The chart copies of the binder page watermarks were no more revealing. They were a collection of erratic squiggles that wandered across the pages. On any given page they had an apparent baseline, but the baselines varied their angle on each of the first ten pages.

“Look,” said Algernon. “Some of them have distinct boundaries. Page seven, for example. You could lay a straight edge across here and none of the squiggles would extend past it.”

The copies of the watermarks were on the same onionskin as the charts of the book layout. Oswaldo tore page seven off, about the size of a calling card, and held it up to the light. “Here,” he said handing it to Algernon, “see what you make of it.”

Algernon held it up to the light, turned it back and forth. The squiggles looked familiar. He picked up the chart with the other pages, and laid the squiggles over each page one by one, holding the combined papers up to the bright gaslights.

“Aha...” Algernon tore out page one, a long grain page, and held it up to the light against page four, the next long grain page. He twisted them together. “If you take two succeeding pages with the same grain and align the watermarks along *their* respective baselines instead of the page’s baseline, you get ... Greek. There is a message, written in the Greek alphabet, broken up in the watermarks.” He peered at the words. “I can’t make sense of it, but this is a hasty hand copy. If we did this same thing to the original pages, we’d get the Greek letters copied down correctly.”

“Thank you, Algernon,” said Istvan. “I have a perfectly competent cryptogrammatic section. I’ll pull them onto this.”

* * * *

Once the Greek letters were deciphered, they turned out to be in cryptogrammatic groups that corresponded to a standard Imperial British series. Algernon spent his time in the Texian caverns bothering the cryptogrammatians at their work and playing with what toys the Texians would allow him to touch in the equipment rooms, always shadowed by one of several large, sulking minders. His minders were wogs of various sorts, a none-too-subtle message from Istvan that Algernon couldn’t quite bring himself to resent. He disliked the forced inaction, but

consoled himself with the thought that they were making progress in the mystery of the binder and, therefore, the attempt on his life.

Istvan came back three days later, finding Algernon at lunch in the refectory. He dismissed Algernon's current minder. Algernon knew something had happened with the binders—there was excitement in the caves that morning, whispered conversations that broke off at his approach—but he had no idea what it meant yet.

“They've cracked it,” said Istvan, sitting down across the table.

Algernon picked at some stewed beef tips that smelled much better than they looked. That the Texians could crack an Imperial code was not actually good news, but he was still glad to learn something. “What have the boffins found?”

“Engineering data, apparently.”

“Engineering data?”

Istvan had a lab report in his hand. He offered it to Algernon. “Here, what do you make of this?”

Algernon looked at the report, flipping through the pages. “It appears to be an abstract describing the theory and practice of finely-wrought mechanology, smaller than the eye can see. Miniature steam engines, other machines using fluidic and mechanic principles, that might perform work in microscale. My God...” He put the report down. This *was* the sort of thing people were killed for, without a second thought. “How did this ever leave London?”

“And wind up in a colonial town like San Antonio de Bexar?” Istvan had his tight smile again. “We were hoping you might know.”

“*I* didn't bring it!”

“One of our theories is that you and Lord Quinnipiac set us up to crack the secret of the book for you, along with the codes, so you could exploit the information to your own mutual ends. As traitors to the Crown, presumably. I don't happen to believe that, but the President favors the idea.”

“The President?”

“We could go to war with the British Empire over your little red book, Algernon. This is the greatest invention since the steam engine, perhaps since gunpowder. Why would Lord Quinnipiac have set you up with it?”

“He couldn't have wanted me to break the cryptogram,” said Algernon. “Especially not with your help, begging your pardon. That doesn't make sense. My

guess is that he had previously misappropriated the Crown Privy Report binder and wanted it to come back in his hands legitimately.”

“If we had picked you up as asked and returned you, he could have ‘discovered’ it in your trunk,” Istvan pointed out. “Dead or alive.”

Algernon’s chest felt cold and tight again. “What have you said to him about me?”

“That we’re holding you pending an internal investigation.”

“True enough.” Algernon shook his head. “Miniaturized mechanology. Think of the implications for our tradecraft.”

“Medicine,” replied Istvan promptly. “Ordinational science. Communications. All of it. The betterment of the human condition.”

“Whoever owns this will own the world,” whispered Algernon. Right now, that was Istvan.

“Who do you suppose it was that did the original research?”

Algernon considered that. “Last year there was a firebombing at a research consortium in Geneva. They were said to be building long-range rockets. It’s no great secret that the Confidential Office has committed attacks like that before—preventative scientific intelligence.”

“So some of your lads may have destroyed the lab where this miniature mechanology was being developed.”

Algernon nodded, drumming his fingers on the lab binder. “Otherwise, why wouldn’t they already be out with this? If it already exists, it couldn’t be hidden for long. These notes are only summary of a well-researched mechanology. Enough to reproduce the basic work, but the supporting detail is certainly not all here. Good God, the patents alone would fill shelves.”

“So you believe Lord Quinnipiac wants this for his own?”

Algernon thought back to the small hydraulic pistol in the Consul-General’s hand, and the fascination with mechanology that hobby bespoke. “Yes. It has to be him. No one else could have arranged everything that has happened. He set up the steam ram accident in Galvezton—had it been successful, he could have ‘discovered’ the binder in my personal effects, and returned it with no one the wiser as to whether he had already copied the research.

“Two accidents in succession would have been too obvious, so he sent me

off to you on a wild goose chase. If I had somehow succeeded in recovering the book on my own, he would have gotten it back from me. If I failed, he would have gotten the book from you, simply from your efforts to avoid an international incident. My arrest as a traitor, or even my death, would have caused little comment in Boston or London. Then, set up his own boffin works and..." Algernon trailed off. *What if Quinnipiac had already set up his works?* "It must have seemed failure-proof to him."

What if I set up my own works?

"I will try to convince our President of your version of the story. In the meantime, think of a way you and I can deal with Lord Quinnipiac without creating a *casus belli* between our nations."

* * * *

San Luis Pass, Texian Republic, May 17th, 1961

The zeppelin *RTS Mirabeau Lamar* cruised eastward from San Antonio de Bexar toward Galvezton. Algernon looked down at the scrubby South Texas landscape, an echo of his train trip the previous week.

They were using the Presidential zeppelin, a top-of-the-line luxury cruiser from Zeppelin Werk GmbH in Greater Germany, and it was appointed accordingly. Texian cedar paneled the walls, giving the cabins inside the gondola a frontier look, along with a gentle tang dissonant with the high-mechanology transport. Puma and wolf skin rugs dominated the lounge, topped by huge chairs made from cattle and deer horns. The galley seemed capable of producing only inedible fried foods or a terrifying chili. The entire airship stank of refried beans, a food for which Algernon had never cared.

He longed for a good boiled English dinner.

Istvan was dressed as a papist cleric, pretending to be on the staff of the Papal Nuncio to the Texian Republic. Lord Quinnipiac expected to meet them at San Luis Pass, the channel on the southwestern end of Galvezton Island. A lighthouse sat on the lonely windswept point, marking this distant entrance to Galvezton Bay. Istvan had sent pneus explaining the Nuncio's alleged offer to broker the handoff of the English traitor.

Algernon smiled. He would have vengeance on Quinnipiac for his assaults, and put paid to the problem of the stolen Privy Report at the same time.

As the open water of Galvezton Bay began to slide past below the belly of the zeppelin, Istvan patted Algernon on the shoulder. "We are almost here."

“And you believe that Lord Quinnipiac will allow himself to be separated from his Royal Marines?”

“We must try,” said Istvan. “His greed will work for us.”

Algernon watched the red brick lighthouse come into view. San Luis Pass was a narrow neck of water between two sand spits. The lighthouse stood on the Galvezton Island side of the pass, presiding over little more than chopping waves and wheeling gulls. Algernon spotted a roseate spoonbill following the surf line, pink plumage visible against the greenish white roil of the Gulf of Mexico.

At the base of the lighthouse a sand-wheeled steam ram was parked, puffing desultory smoke from its stacks. It had two sand-wheeled cars hitched behind it, and a squad of Royal Marines was deployed around it in their green battledress. *Lord Quinnipiac has come expecting a fight*, thought Algernon. *We shall give it to him, but not what he planned for.*

The zeppelin came about to beat against the sea breeze toward the lighthouse. Algernon heard the great engines straining. Shouted commands accompanied the release of the field mooring line from its nose cowling. The marines on the ground below scrambled to retrieve the line, then worked to secure it to the bulk of the steam ram. The zeppelin’s captain kept the engines running at open throttle to fight the wind and keep strain off the mooring line.

“There’s Quinnipiac,” said Istvan, pointing to a figure in black tails that climbed out of the second car. “I’ll go wave him up.”

The captain drove the zeppelin, shuddering in the wind, downward toward the lighthouse until their altitude was perhaps a hundred feet. Algernon could hear Istvan at the hatch, shouting. He could no longer see the Royal Marines or Lord Quinnipiac directly below him. The zeppelin bobbed in the wind. The chuffing click of a winch below decks was surely the crew winding Lord Quinnipiac up in a bosun’s chair.

* * * *

“So...” Lord Quinnipiac paced the deck, heedless of the animal skins beneath his feet. “Mr. Black-Smith, you are being returned to us.”

Istvan kept his head down, hands folded. Algernon noticed Istvan was working his rosary. Keeping his own hands behind his back as if bound, Algernon said nothing.

Lord Quinnipiac addressed Istvan. “I understand Her Imperial Majesty’s, ah, item, is being returned with the traitor?”

Istvan nodded, opening the door behind him and stepping backward.

Algernon shifted his hands behind his back, making sure his finger was on the trigger.

Istvan walked back in the room with the Crown Privy Report binder. As he moved to hand it to Lord Quinnipiac, Istvan slipped and dropped the binder on the floor between them.

“Gods, man, have a care,” said Quinnipiac as he knelt to pick up the red leather book. Istvan bent from the waist to reach down and grabbed the book at the same time. Algernon brought the miniature daguerreograph up from behind his back and pressed a daguerreotype of Lord Quinnipiac, kneeling in front of a Papist official in full regalia, transferring control of a Crown Privy Report binder.

At the sound of the daguerreograph’s click, Quinnipiac looked up at Algernon. “Damn your eyes!” the Consul-General swore as he dropped the book again to lunge for Algernon. Istvan tackled him from behind in best Choate rugby fashion.

Algernon kicked Quinnipiac in the side of the head in order to accelerate their discussion. He got down on the floor and stared into Quinnipiac’s marbled blue eyes. “Listen, sir. We’ve got a daguerreotype of you kneeling to a Papist with Crown secrets in your hand. I’ll make sure that image is never released if you’ll drop this business about me stealing the Crown Privy Report binder. I’ll courier it to the Viceroy in Boston, give you the credit for recovery, and we’ll all look good.

“Or you can try to ruin me while I succeed in ruining you.” He and Istvan were banking on Quinnipiac’s self-interest.

Quinnipiac strained against Istvan’s hold on him. “And let you have what’s in that thing? Are you mad?”

“The damned thing is a blank book and you know it,” snapped Algernon, hoping the Consul-General would take that bait in the distraction of the moment. “I’ll never know why you made such a fuss, but by God sir you shan’t murder me for empty pages.”

Quinnipiac suddenly relaxed, a small smile stealing across his face before he began to chuckle. “Well, lad, you know just looking at one of those books is treason, to which you’ve now admitted.”

With an immense sense of relief, Algernon removed the plate from the daguerreograph. He placed it in the inside pocket of his morning coat. “You have admitted the same, sir. We can both fall or prosper on your word here.”

“The game is done, then.” Quinnipiac glared up at Istvan. “Let me up, man. You’re no more a Papist than I am.”

“*Benedice te,*” said Istvan, pulling Quinnipiac to his feet with an armlock.

Algernon retreated to the galley to avoid further tempting the Consul-General as Istvan continued to whisper quiet threats. Honor had been satisfied, and the problem of the binder solved, with his skin still whole. Algernon knew he should be pleased.

* * * *

“Naturally you have a copy of everything,” said Algernon later.

Istvan smiled his broad smile. “Naturally I can’t tell you that.”

“They’ll know the book’s been tampered with.”

Istvan shrugged. “You recovered it, you’re a hero. We’ve sent official commendations for you via pneu to the High Commissioner in San Antonio de Bexar and to your Viceroy in Boston. That should cause some confusion if Quinnipiac gets snarky clever in his reporting.”

What if Quinnipiac has a secret boffin works already set up, Algernon wanted to ask, *working on this miniature mechanology.* He didn’t dare say that—he knew Istvan had the same thought, Istvan knew Algernon did, but if they kept silent about it, they could part friends.

Algernon watched the Texas countryside fall away. The zeppelin headed for Nouveau Orleans, capital of French America. He would report to the Consulate-General there, fairly safe from Quinnipiac’s interference, and be sent on to Boston, and maybe even London, as a hero.

“We could keep it for ourselves,” he whispered. *Set up our own works.*

“No,” said Istvan. “Duty to the Crown, old friend. If you ran off empire-building with that stuff, you’d just be another white wog.”

Algernon patted the red leather book. “Then it’s a damned good thing God made me an Englishman.”

Istvan made the sign of the cross. “*Benedice te,*” he said.

I will be back, Algernon thought, *hunting Quinnipiac’s secrets, and maybe Istvan’s as well. I will be back.* “Thank you, Istvan. I may need your blessings.”

* * * *

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon, US with his family and their books. In 2004 his fiction appears in numerous markets including *Asimov's*, *Leviathan 4* and *Realms of Fantasy*. His collection *Greetings From Lake Wu* is a *Locus* Recommended book for 2003. Jay can be reached via his Web site at www.jlake.com/.