

SIMPLY STORIES – Steamwork Hearts

Craft Area in Focus: Narrative Voice as Character

Read the story below to see this craft element in action

POV & Narrative Voice Working Together

A story's narrator can serve the plot, or the narrator can be the story. When voice crosses from delivery mechanism to fully inhabited character, the reader doesn't simply follow events — the reader spends time inside a particular mind, with particular habits, blind spots, pleasures, and defenses. In this story, watch how the narrator's voice does not merely describe what happens. It reveals, with every sentence, exactly who Simon Smythe is. The plot could have been told in a dozen ways. Only one of those ways could be told by Simon.

Genre	Steampunk
Subgenre	Adventure / Romance
Narrative Tone	Witty, arch, conspiratorial
POV	First person
Story Length	Approximately 5,200 words
Why This Piece	The narrator's voice is so fully inhabited that Simon Smythe's personality, values, and habits of mind are conveyed entirely through how he tells the story, not through what happens in it.

SteamWork Hearts

A Simon Smythe Adventure

Simon's Sanctuary

A friend in need and similar platitudes invaded my morning as I read the telegram my man Benson presented me. Seems my old collegiate chum, Mason Marlborough is in the brine. Yes, that Marlborough, seventeenth in line to the Crown currently worn by Victoria, our beloved monarch. Scanning the post, I puzzled over the peculiar sentences:

HH absconded with JJ.
Hasten Brighton.
Urgent.

"What ho, Benson?" Eyeing the sparse trail of words on the onion skin parchment, I asked, "Have you perused this?"

Ever the stoic, his sonorous baritone replied, "Certainly not, sir."

"When did this arrive?" Perhaps Mason's plea had aged to the point subsequent events render it moot.

"Just now. By velocipede messenger, sir. The boy indicated it had been sent express this morning."

Express. Quite costly, I thought. I read the posting aloud to bring Benson up to date. "What do you make of that? Really, a man of his means and position could toss over a shilling for twenty more words. Don't you agree?"

"As you say, sir."

I noted a modest rise of Benson's right eyebrow, an unusually heady outburst. Statues on the Piccadilly change expression more often than he.

Narrative Voice as Character — First Signal

Three sentences into the story, the voice has already made several decisions that have nothing to do with plot. It calls a friend's trouble "platitudes" before expressing any concern. It notes the cost of the telegram before the crisis it contains. It describes Benson's eyebrow as "an unusually heady outburst." These are not a narrator reporting events. They are a man revealing himself through every observation he makes.

The Piccadilly line is the clearest early example. Simon could have written: "Benson showed no reaction." Instead the voice reaches for a comic image that tells us about Simon's habits of mind — the slight detachment, the eye for absurdity, the pleasure in a well-turned comparison. A narrator who thinks in those terms at a moment of mild tension will think in them throughout the story. That consistency is what the reader comes to depend on. Voice is not tone. Tone can change scene to scene. Voice is the governing personality behind the telling — and this one has just introduced itself.

"It appears the gentleman desires your presence in Brighton, sir. Perhaps with some urgency."

"Well deduced," I said. "But who is HH, and what is a JJ? I won't travel willy-nilly halfway across the kingdom on such a flimsy missive lacking necessary detail."

Benson swooshed open the draperies of my laboratory as if unveiling the Mona Lisa for the first time while it still held its original allure. I had spent the entire night working on a problematic mechanism sent over from the Gear Grinders Guild. It proved a devilishly complex apparatus belonging to the Archbishop, now scattered in pieces on my worktable. The device, not the clergyman.

Silhouetted in a fog-nozzle stream of abusive light, Benson offered, "Sir, I surmise JJ is Jocelyn Jameson, Sir Marlborough's betrothed."

"Betrothed?" This nugget cried for unwrapping, so I gave out with, "And . . . ?" My man chooses the most urgent occasions to be miserly with details, using a teaspoon when a shovel is better suited.

Behind heavy-lidded eyes, Benson provided, "Miss Jameson, a comely young heiress, if I may say so, recently arrived from the American colonies. An engagement announcement appeared Thursday last in the London Times. A photo of the happy couple accompanied, sir."

As I remember, old Mason never exhibited much skill in sustaining affairs of the heart. And since the message concerned a young female of age, it became simple to intuit HH referenced Henry Harrison. Without promise or posy, the bounder can snatch the tastiest biscuit from a basket faster than any rogue I have encountered in my thirty years. Throughout Greater London, no gentleman's mistress is safe who enters that scallywag Henry's satyric orbit.

Staring at my unfinished breakfast of jam toast, kippers, and coffee, I permitted time for the scales to settle. Though

Mason is an Eaton and Oxford classmate, I had not heard from him in two years, as our social circles held only slight overlap. Facing the scrap pile, I checked my mental calendar, finding nothing of greater import or intrigue. I arrived at a decision.

"Joining Mason at the seaside might prove a refreshing change. Benson, make preparations. On the evening train, if you will."

"As you say, sir. Shall I draw your bath?"

"Please."

"Very good, sir."

Purposefully, I neglected to read aloud the last two words of the telegram to my man.

Bring BB

Bring Bertram Benson, indeed. What right-minded gentleman travels without his valet?

As my man took to his assignments, I considered the pile of gears, pinions, springs, sliders, and levers, having mind to sweep the entire collection into the dustbin. After a leisurely soak in my steaming, sandalwood-scented, claw-footed cauldron. After a well-earned nap, I dressed in proper travel garments chosen and laid out by Benson. Returning to the laboratory for my implement valise, I found the object of my night's confoundment assembled and in full function. Damn that man, Benson. Worth his weight and all that.

London Lanes

Having achieved eight blocks toward the railway station in a hired steamer cab, an unsettling thought rudely bruised my consciousness. "We must turn back. I have forgotten to shut off the gas."

Benson's flat reply mingled with the piston clatter and valve hiss of the carriage motor. "Allay your concern, sir. I took measures to ensure your laboratory does not explode. Again."

My man has the uncanny ability to induce cringeworthy embarrassment at my minor missteps without seeming to pass judgment one might lay a finger on.

When our conveyance halted at a lane crossing to await a coal wagon's passage, Benson and I turned to find the sources of boisterous shouting and footfalls approaching our position.

By way of prudence, my loyal Sancho Panza drew his waistcoat pistol. The choke of swells, dollymops, and street urchins parted for a gang of Billy Boys overtaking a genteel lady, one not of the common stamp. Her right hand high-gathered her skirts, exposing the tops of her nine-buckle boots to every Dandy taking his leisure. In her other, she clutched a carpet bag, unwilling to discard it in favor of a faster stride.

A tap of my cane opened the side door, inviting the young lady to enter our sanctum. On her approach, I extended a hand. When she hoisted aboard, Benson slapped the partition between the driver and passenger seating,

giving a hearty command, "Coachman, drive on. Make haste," which the fellow acted on with full-throttle vigor.

Our raven-haired guest took the seat across from me. Without hesitation or introduction, she snapped open her satchel and withdrew a silver-netted, purple glass globe. Exhibiting the aim of a champion cricket bowler, she tossed the valuable out the window toward the pursuing pack. Upon impacting cobblestones twenty yards distant, a cloud of smoke erupted, which, judging by the mob's reaction, contained powerful and noxious elements. Settling back, she remarked, "Thank you, sirs, for your kind rescue. I apologize for my disheveled state."

I sank into the most striking cerulean eyes punctuating an alluring face. Not seeing a ring of wedded condition, I supplied an opening. "I believe you've misplaced your parasol, Miss . . ."

In rare occurrence, Benson interrupted with a gentle cough. "Sir, allow me to introduce Miss Drucilla Duncan, apothecary and amateur artificer." Nodding towards me, he added, "Miss Duncan, your paladin is my employer, Sir Simon Smythe, Master Technomancer."

Surprises multiplied. "You know this lady, Benson?"

As if this were an everyday occurrence while engaged in a morning stroll, he replied, "Quite so, sir."

"Master Technomancer?" she inquired, chin lowered, eyes leveled at me.

With a head bow, I informed, "More of an honorary title, I assure you, Miss Duncan." A schoolboy's flush rose in the presence of this charmer's gaze.

"Dear sir, please call me Drucilla."

Those piercing blues handcuffed me, yet I found the wherewithal to say, "And do me the pleasure of calling me Simon."

While I continued inventory of this prime ambassador of the fairer sex, Benson settled his revolver on his lap and reached into her open bag. With a gentle touch, he withdrew a midnight-black feline, holding it eye to eye as if in silent conversation.

"Another introduction is in order," Drucilla said. Her voice flowed as warm honey water for a parched throat, her eyes dancing with smoldering intrigue. "Meet my pussycat, Pyewacket." The cat's head swiveled 180 degrees in my direction, blinking in languorous fashion, obviously bored by the state of the world. I reached forward to stroke the mouser, noticing its peepers were the same glowing hue as its mistress.

"Careful, dear sir," she warned. "Kitty has claws."

Mee-oww. I bet she does, came to mind as I immodestly studied our passenger from hairpin to heel. Her warning did not extend to Benson as the fierce thing affectionately stroked its tail under my man's chin. Spell broken, I pointed to Drucilla's open bag, giving question to the several stacks of large denomination banknotes.

Noticing my interest, she provided, "I withdrew these funds from an illegal financial institution."

That set me back in my seat. "You robbed the Exchequer?"

Benson remained, as always, unmoved.

"Unlatched from criminal elements," she corrected. "Profits an enforcer gang gained through larceny, extortion, and other nefarious employment, dear sir. My half-brother's profits, to be specific. Roland Reeves."

"Your profession seems most lucrative," I ventured. The name Roland Reeves struck my ears with some discomfort. Even gentlemen of my station knew the name of that Gang Master who controlled half the docklands and a quarter of Westminster besides.

Glancing port and starboard out the carriage windows, Drucilla enlightened me. "What I recover is disbursed to the needful throughout Lower London."

Bold as well as beautiful, this one. My bachelor's conviction wavered in this fetching heroine's presence. I belatedly offered, "May we drop you at a place of your convenience?"

Fingers better suited to the pianoforte than burglary withdrew a portfolio from the depths of her bag. I wouldn't have been surprised if she pulled an elephant from that cornucopia. Tapping the corner of the folded leather pouch to her bottom lip — ah, those ruby lips — she seemed to consider whether to cross the Rubicon. Having chosen, Drucilla handed me the dispatch case, saying, "I take the

chance your association with Bertie means you're an honorable man."

Bertie? I never heard anyone sufficiently brave to use that diminutive when addressing Bertram Benedict Benson. Especially a Miss twenty years his junior. An ear twitch revealed Benson's surprise on hearing his name truncated in such a manner.

While we held opposite ends of the mystery, she continued, "During my skulking, I discovered this in the Roland's safe. There's a grand conspiracy afloat, one to shake the pillars of the Empire. It's unknown who can be trusted." On her last word, she released her light grip.

I lifted the flap to look inside. It held dozens of quarter-size papers and one larger document. After fifteen seconds of perusing the latter, which appeared to be a criminal enterprise compact, I handed it to Benson while I took inventory of the remaining contents. I fanned out the assortment of slips, finding scatterings of non-sensical words and geometric drawings. Coded, no doubt.

Benson, a more studious sort, reviewed the large document for two minutes before declaring, "Miss Duncan, this is quite volatile information. If certain elements are aware this is in your possession, might I suggest we repair to Sir Simon's domicile for your safety?"

I swallowed that impertinent invitation before seeing the wisdom and perhaps heady possibilities.

Drucilla's eyes widened. "Why, Bertie, I haven't a thing to wear." Her giggle and his raised eyebrows fumigated the

carriage. When the outburst settled, I asked, "Have you another location in mind?"

"Yes. I need to shed this corset and crinoline costume so I might breathe freely again."

Voice Under Pressure — The Unhurried Narrator in a Fast Scene

The London Lanes section opens with a chase, escalates to a smoke grenade, and delivers a full character introduction — all within a few pages of rapid action. The plot is moving quickly. The narrator is not.

Simon's voice stays arch and observational throughout. He notes cerulean eyes before he processes the danger just survived. He catalogs Drucilla from "hairpin to heel" while Benson is still settling his revolver. He pauses on "Mee-oww" — an interior aside delivered with the timing of a man who has all afternoon. The gap between what is happening in the scene and how the narrator chooses to respond to it is a pure voice-as-character signal. Simon's refusal to hurry, even inside urgency, tells the reader exactly who he is.

Notice also what the voice withholds. We are told Benson knows Drucilla — "Surprises multiplied" — but Simon does not press the point immediately, because the voice belongs to a man who appreciates a good mystery more than its quick resolution. The narrator's pacing is his character. A different narrator, equally honest, would have delivered the same events in half the words and none of the pleasure.

Drucilla's Domain

In the evening dusk, as lamplighters were about their employment, our carriage wheeled into a patrician avenue lined with stately poplars. We halted in front of an iron-

gated, three-story brownstone where Benson fairly leapt out to ease Drucilla's exit.

"Your father's London house?" Benson said, more in statement than question.

I detected hints of melancholy bitters when she replied, "Of my poppa's holdings, the only part that came to me in his will. All else fell to my half-brother, though I am the eldest."

Another layer exposed. A most pleasant thought, that unpeeling. I followed Benson and Drucilla through the gated portico and up the steps to windowless double doors. Without need for a knock, the right-hand door swung open, exposing a matronly plumpness akin to many a grandmother I have encountered.

"Chocolate Pie," said Drucilla to the guardian.

It seems a bit early in the evening for such a heavy confection. I then observed the mum swing up a shortened scatter gun, passing it to Drucilla in exchange for the money bag. Ah, a byword. Layers. Yes, delicious, chocolate layers.

By way of introduction, nodding to the plump oldster, Drucilla said, "Mattie Manningtree, my housekeeper."

A silent young maid stepped from behind the door to accept our outer coats, gloves, and hats.

"Thank you, Hilda. If you please, make night accommodations for these gentlemen."

Drucilla escorted us to the library, promising to return shortly. Once the doors were drawn closed, I turned to Benson. "What, ho? Fill in the blanks, my good man."

Standing rigid as Lot's wife, he held forth. "Sir, some years ago, I served Miss Duncan's uncle until his earned rest. In that service, I became acquainted with the entire cousin brood. As a child, Miss Duncan was noted for her tree-climbing parties and, shall I say, other untraditional escapades about the estates. While accompanying her father on archaeological expeditions, she received her education from a Cambridge tutor. I believe she was schooled in the apothecary arts while in Egypt. I also understand she studied certain mystical practices from a Coptic wise woman during her time in that country."

"Cambridge, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

I mused, "Well, if you can't have an Oxford man, Cambridge will do in a pinch, I should think. But mystical practices? Surely you don't credit such superstitions."

Benson's gaze drifted to where Pyewacket sat on the mantelpiece, its eyes glowing like twin sapphires in the gaslight. "Sir, I have learned that the line between science and mysticism is considerably thinner than current philosophy might suggest."

Voice in Counterpoint — What Simon Reveals by Reacting

The Benson biography of Drucilla is delivered in measured, precise sentences — the voice of a man who regards information as a trust to be dispensed carefully. Simon's reactions to it are the opposite: the Oxford jab, the dismissal of mystical practices, the preening certainty of a man who has not yet been genuinely unsettled.

Then Benson delivers his last line. "The line between science and mysticism is considerably thinner than current philosophy might suggest." Simon does not respond. The narrator, who has had a ready remark for everything up to this point, goes quiet. That silence is itself a voice signal — we learn that underneath the wit is a man capable of being genuinely stopped.

This is one of narrative voice's most powerful techniques: the character revealed not by what the narrator says but by the precise moment the narrator stops talking. Readers feel the weight of that gap. They have already learned enough about Simon to understand what it means when his voice pauses.

Before I could pursue this unsettling notion, Drucilla reappeared. All thoughts of mysticism fled when she entered, hair loosely gathered by a scarlet ribbon, wearing a white silk blouse, tan jodhpurs, and burgundy velvet boots. Her proximity sent a pleasant jolt through my chest. It took some seconds to compose myself lest I melt like jamboree jelly in July. When the thundering in my heart settled to a less raucous state, I absorbed her words.

"Your trunk is in my laboratory. The remainder of your luggage awaits in rooms prepared for the night." Most casually, she mentioned, "Simon, your room is next to mine."

By Jove, how could any man concentrate with that scratching at his brain?

Settling into a leather chair with Pyewacket materializing in her lap, she allowed, "Please know that Roland isn't simply a gang master anymore. He's assembled a profit coalition of three Lords, two Members of Parliament,

an Admiral, and half a dozen industrialists. Their compact is in that portfolio."

I used the library's reading table to spread out the papers from Drucilla's messenger pouch, attempting to bring some measure of order to it all. "Look here, Benson. Most of this pile is cryptic code and unannotated diagrams."

"Surely a puzzle, sir." Picking up a scrap, he glanced briefly, then stated, "I believe this may be a list of names or perhaps a dinner menu, though I propose the former. Each line has three words, the middle being a single letter. An initial, I surmise, sir."

It was that moment I jumped out of my boots when Pyewacket leapt into the center of the gathered papers. That panther circled, seeming to study the collection before pawing at a pair of diagram pieces as if to find a fit-up. Satisfied, it bounded away.

The main document proved more damning than I'd imagined. "This is not simply a criminal agreement. Reading between the lines, it's a blueprint for treason."

Illuminating my pronouncement, Drucilla said, "They mean to start a continental conflict."

Benson cleared his throat. "Miss Duncan, forgive my indelicacy, but how did you come upon this information?"

A ghost of a smile played at her lips. "I've been watching Roland for three years, Bertie. Building evidence. Tonight's burglary was meant to gather proof for Scotland Yard. Instead, I found something far worse. Roland will soon know I have these documents."

"Then time is short," I said, feeling a weight settle on my shoulders. The afternoon train to Brighton suddenly seemed very far away. "Benson, send a telegram to Mason. Hum, what should I tell him? Perhaps, sorry old fellow, previously engaged. Unable to attend."

"Engaged, sir?"

"Right. Probably not the best word considering his plight. Say employed. Yes, that's it." I nodded, turning back to the coded slips. "Then it's settled. We crack this cipher, determine when they mean to strike, and alert the proper authorities."

"Assuming," Drucilla said quietly, "we can determine which authorities aren't already in Roland's pocket."

That sobering hung like a noose as we began our work.

Midnight Mullings

After hours of informed guesswork and Benson's liberal use of the library's reference books, I felt ready to put the coded messages through my computational clacker for decryption. I held no illusion it would prove a fast solution when I connected the unit's hose to the steam piping in Drucilla's workroom. It might clatter all night, searching for the key to unlock the code.

At midnight, we halted, having exhausted our brain power and Benson's considerable knowledge. Hilda showed my man to his room while Drucilla escorted me upstairs with honor guard Pyewacket in attendance.

She swept her hand at the suite's bathroom door as if exposing an ancient wonder. Donning a fetching smile, she said, "Don't fall asleep in there. The tub is spacious enough for two. One might easily drown in a warm, watery slumber."

Unbidden, a remembered image of Botticelli's Birth of Venus formed behind my eyes. I realized her innocent entendres were of practiced design, intended to jostle the male's naturally superior position. Both could play that game. I peered past her into the tile and polished brass facility. "Ahh," I mused, stroking my chin, "perhaps three if the two maidens are sufficiently petite."

Unabashed, she sashayed to her boudoir through a connecting door with, "Sleep well, sir," tossed over her shoulder. I wasn't so tired I didn't admire the pluck of her testing, feeling I had leveled the playing field. After sipping the whisky and soda Benson delivered to my night table, slumber came with a measure of satisfaction.

No person need rise startled from the depths of dreams by a pair of illuminated eyes floating inches from one's face. Though the same brilliant color as Drucilla's, the pupils were the devil's own slitted orbs. That ghost of a C-A-T can walk through walls. I sat bolt upright when a welling awareness descended with the obvious solution. A three-letter replacement cypher. In half a jiffy, I woke Benson, then raced downstairs. The gears and levers of my clacker churned away no closer to a conclusion than on the first turn of the wheel.

Adjusting the key settings for a Caesar cipher, I set it running. The gears spun, clicked, and within thirty seconds, began spitting out decoded text.

"Benson! Paper!"

My man was already there, catching the emerging strips as the machine produced them. We spread them on the table, and the conspiracy revealed itself in chilling detail:

FIRST BOARDING THURSDAY NOON THE TWENTY
SEVENTH
ADMIRALTY GUARD CHANGE 2200 HOURS
PEMBERTON SUPPLIES WEAPONS CREW
AT MIDNIGHT WEATHERBY PROVIDES ACCESS FOR
CREW REMAINDER
TWO AM LIFT FROM DOCKYARDS
FOUR AM TARGET PARIS CITY CENTER
ASHWORTH EVACUATES COMPATRIOTS

Tonight.

I felt my blood run hot as I swallowed cold spit. They mean to take Britannia tonight.

Voice Under Weight — When the Register Drops

The narrator who jokes about teaspoons and shovel delivery, who sizes up women from hairpin to heel, who finds time for an aside about the cost of a telegram during a crisis — that narrator has just spent three pages being himself under moderate pressure. Then the decoded message arrives. Seven lines of cold operational language. Then a single word paragraph.

Tonight.

The voice does not comment. It does not reach for a witty observation. It does not protect Simon with irony. The full weight of what is happening lands in plain Anglo-Saxon and stops. "I felt my blood run hot as I swallowed cold spit" is the closest this narrator has come to unguarded physical sensation in the entire story. It is a deliberate shift in register — the emotional frequency at which the prose is operating — and it works precisely because the voice has been so consistently armored up to this point.

This is the technique writers call register modulation. Voice does not mean a fixed tone. It means a character with a full range, who knows when to deploy each register and why. Simon's wit is not abandoned here. It is deliberately set down. The reader feels the difference in their chest.

I sent the night maid to rouse Drucilla.

While not widely experienced in the matter of suddenly awakened women, I highly approved if this lady's presentation prove a standard. Mentally groping, the word I landed on was stunning, simply stunning. Tugging my robe further closed, I felt as a stubble-faced, bare-footed gutter bum in comparison.

"Sleep well?" she inquired.

I was tempted to remark on finding Pyewacket as a bedfellow mewing in my face when Hilda rolled in the breakfast trolley. "Quite well," I allowed. "And you?"

"Yes, many an energetic dream."

Pleasantries over, we turned to business. Having our solutions and revelation of a short fuse fizzling, Benson employed himself by climbing the library's ladders, examining this book and that.

The diagrams were another conundrum altogether. Drucilla and I moved the various pieces with no apparent reveal until Benson leaned in. "Sir, I believe those half triangles on the document edges are registration marks. If you—"

"Just so, old man!" I exclaimed. The pieces joined to perfection. But what the devil was it? While I took vantage from one side of the table, Drucilla took the opposite perspective. Craning my neck this way and that, all I achieved was a gathering soreness in my upper vertebrae.

"This may be of some value, sir." A considerable tome with gilded edges and leather bindings was firmly tucked under his arm as if held by a rugby wingman. "I remember seeing similar etchings in the Admiralty Museum, sir."

I masked my stumble when he laid the weighty volume in my hands.

"Page two-forty-seven, I believe, sir."

When I cracked open the book, Drucilla announced, "Benson, you're a national treasure."

Provided a compliment, I sometimes wonder if my man feels like a zookeeper being offered bananas by baboons. "Thank you, Miss. It is my pleasure to serve."

"Yes, however," said I, "we have little time, and I see no means by which to pass the Queen's Guards."

An exchange of glances passed between Benson and Drucilla. Tapping a map of London, the lady said, "There are avenues unseen, known only to certain guilds." She traced a

line from our location to the place of interest to us. With a sigh, she said, "Time being short, we have need for allies."

Ever the muted resource, Benson gave a slight cough. "If I may, sir, some of my patriotic, professional similars might be enlisted to the cause."

The conspirator's decoded names took away my breath and threatened my resolve.

By three in the morning, we had decoded everything. The conspiracy was more extensive than imagined — not merely a plan to steal the Britannia, but a coordinated network of bribed officials, compromised guards, and positioned agents stretching from London to Paris. The attack would be blamed on Britain, giving France and her allies cause for war. In the chaos, Roland and his partners would multiply their fortunes while thousands died.

We couldn't go to Scotland Yard — Admiral Weatherby's influence ran too deep. We couldn't appeal to Parliament — several members were explicitly named as conspirators. Our only option was direct action: stop the boarding before it happened.

Which meant infiltrating the Admiralty Dockyard and sabotaging the operation ourselves.

"A suicide mission," I observed, looking over the docking plans.

"Quite possibly, sir."

"But necessary."

"Undoubtedly, sir."

London Labyrinth

By ten in the morning, Drucilla and I were costumed in shoulder-slung rucksacks and workmen's rough clothing. We waited in the basement of Old Bailey for our escort de jour. A rustle and small clatter announced his arrival from behind a row of boilers. The smudge-faced chap appeared to have been trawled backwards through a coal scuttle. He gave Drucilla a hi-ho hand sign of recognition and the gimlet eye to me. I suspect he or his had previously been recipient of her charity largess.

As arranged promise for services, I handed over ten quid before we ducked into a tunnel's dank thickness of rust and mildew. It fell to Drucilla and myself to go into these depths if success were to be made while Benson canvased for assistance above.

Trundling ahead, the Tunnel Tommy cleared our way of fairy-laced arachnid gauze. One ropery web we passed snugly held the desiccated remains of a rat sufficiently sized to fill a roasting platter. I kept trust those furry frights were not unionized and would scurry away at our approach.

"Watch yer heads here," Tommy called, leading us under a low archway. "This part's older than St. Paul's. Roman builders, my da said before he was transported."

I lost all sense of direction within fifteen minutes. Only the Tommy seemed confident of our path, occasionally consulting markings on the walls — scratches and symbols that meant nothing to me but clearly formed a navigational system for those who knew the code.

After several twists, turns, and more twists, our guide drew up short. "Locked from the other side, Miss," he said, facing a rusty grate. "We'll 'ave need ta make a long detour."

"Confound it, man," I said. "We can't absorb further delays." Suspecting he'd been paid a considerable sum to waylay us, I located the grip of Benson's pistol.

"Master key," Drucilla said, withdrawing a ropy blue yarn from her satchel, then twisted the material around the hinge pins top and bottom. Slipping on dark-tinted goggles, she directed, "Avert your eyes." I heard a match strike, then the sound of boiling incendiary followed by the hissing drip of molten metal. In seconds, a resounding clank echoed from here to Westminster. Turning back, I saw the gateway open and the hatch plate lying on the deck. "Woven tungsten, sodium, and magnesium dioxide," she informed.

I made note to pursue a serious study of alchemy.

Thirty minutes expired before we came to another halt. "Err ya be then, neat as nelly. Just up this ladder then," said our guide. "You be needin' this ta open the manhole," he said, handing me a T-wrench. "Up ya go now, sir."

Boarding the Behemoth

Sliding the manhole cover aside sufficient to extrude my hand periscope allowed me to survey our path, secure from observation. Once in the docking scaffold, our disguise as stevedores should hold off curiosity unless examined at close quarters. Drucilla's beauty would be evident to the

casual observer, no matter how scruffed and smudged her appearance.

Moving towards the bow, we located an access hatch. I've had many a fine shave at the tonsorial parlor but had no desire for a closer one when we heard two of Roland's minions approaching. I pulled Drucilla around a corner into a darkened alcove. My heart sped. My pistol raised, sure it would come to needful service. The men's steps came closer, then stopped. Whispers and foot shuffles stirred my blood as I gave need to step out with a bluff.

"...port bladders showing point-three degrees off vertical..."

"...starboard compensators should handle the differential..."

I took a steadying breath, then released when the rogues turned, retracing their path.

I made move to step back, giving Drucilla space to breathe. Hands clutched my lapels, and dragged me fully against my companion. On her toes, she pulled herself upward, bringing our faces close. Her fingers traced my jawline, engaging me in a long, too-short kiss. A pleasant, dizzying shock froze me from topsail to keel. Releasing me, she whispered, "It's wonderful to find a man who can rise to the occasion."

We climbed through the ship's interior, navigating passages I would have sworn were designed by a madman. Everything curved, angled, braced, and branched in unexpected directions.

In a manner telling we belonged aboard, we took a stairwell to the next level above at a relaxed pace. Arriving on the main deck, fifty feet from the bridge, a renegade more intelligent than a bent coal bucket called out, "You there. Stop and identify."

He intended to say more when Drucilla tossed one of her green globes in his direction. "Don't breathe," she ordered me. I held mine, but our challenger did not, immediately crumpling after taking in the invisible vapors.

We sprinted to the open bridge hatch. Inside, I stopped long enough to tuck in my revolver, needing two hands to bar it shut and pin the security lever. When I turned, a man in natty plus fours and sporting cap held a weapon pointed at Drucilla. She doing the same to him.

A ruddy flush rose in the man's face. "You," he boomed. "You little guttersnipe thief."

"My dear brother, if you shoot me, you'll never recover your money."

Brother? That set me on my heels a bit.

He spat. "Sister, I won't shoot you, but your partner will certainly lose his meager life. You have lost, and we shall show the world —"

"Oh, bother all," Drucilla said, shooting the wag, truncating his obligatory villainous soliloquy before he'd gotten up steam in his boiler. "Tranquilizer dart," she said for my edification. Then, smiling, she added, "Half-brother."

I gave Roland's slumbering form a nudge with my boot. "Not so formidable now."

With time to acclimate myself, the bridge took my breath away. Windows wrapped the entire forward section, providing a panoramic view of the dockyard and London beyond. Control stations lined the walls. Navigation, ballast, weapons, communication stations festooned with levers, gauges, and brass fittings polished to mirror brilliance. The ship's steel wheel, four feet in diameter, stood in the center.

"Magnificent," I breathed.

We took to disabling the airship controls. I cut cables, removed critical gears, and bent control rods until the navigation panel resembled a scrap pile. Drucilla did the same to communications equipment, ensuring that even if the conspirators seized the ship, they couldn't coordinate with outside forces.

Within minutes, the bridge door reverberated with blows from its other side. In between, we heard loud demands of, "Open up."

"Not likely," I called out. "The latch seems stuck. Come back tomorrow, old boy."

It wouldn't be long before the bounders broke through. I took to the starboard station and Drucilla to the portside controls. Prying up a third panel, I heard Drucilla say, "You can stop now." She looked out the bridge window to something below. Are we too late? Have we failed in our sabotage?

Coming to her side, I took in the scene below, spying my man Benson leading a small army of black-tie, bowler-hatted gentlemen's gentlemen up the boarding ramp. That number carried all manner of cudgel and firearm. Startled screams

and bellows to starboard drew my attention to that quarter. Roland's cadres were abandoning ship and jumping from scaffolds to avoid a swarm of what appeared to be every angry alley cat in London.

"Pyewacket," I murmured. Claws indeed. Yes, claws indeed.

Brighton Beach

The week in Brighton proved sublime. We attended dreadful theatrical productions, walked the pier at sunset, and spent long evenings in discussion that ranged from Egyptian mysticism to steam-powered automation to the proper way to brew coffee.

Drucilla's intoxicating presence had not diminished following our escapade. It glowed deep in my heart, finding a home. I fear I might have need to walk the matrimonial plank. Languishing in our suite's soaking tub at the Brighton Pier Hotel, a pleasant sigh escaped Drucilla's lips as she leaned forward. "Lower, if you please. Just a touch, dear." Her posture before me presented slim tantalizing curves Rubens would reject out of hand.

I applied the soapy sponge to her back, lingering longer than necessary, exercising extreme self-discipline to hold my animal instinct in check, having previously failed this morning — twice.

Pyewacket, that uncanny beast, had claimed the suite's best chair and passed judgment on our activities with indifferent blinks and occasional approving throat sound. I

never did determine the full extent of the creature's capabilities, but I learned to trust its instincts. When the cat seemed content, all was well. When its ears went back and its eyes glowed brighter, trouble approached.

We saved the Empire from an unnecessary war, and the Crown was quite generous in our reward. In her royal intoxication, our Queen desired to bestow a Knighthood on Benson for his defense of the realm. To the Prime Minister's great relief, he declined the honor. Too restrictive and lofty for him, Benson claimed.

I had plans to let my man make his own path, even offering him my share of the royal funds. He turned away my idea, claiming no other employment would yield such vigorous stimulation as could be found pulling me out of the occasional sticky wicket. Not the way he put it, but that was the core of it. Several days ago, I spotted Benson and the housemaid Hilda strolling arm in arm along the boardwalk. Perchance, he may yet shift his rudder.

"This week has been sublime, but what, or rather, where to next? London isn't fit for summering."

She turned to face me, causing soapy waves to crest upon my chest. "Have you ever been to South America? I understand the shamans of High Peru make interesting concoctions. And I've always wanted to see Machu Picchu."

"Peru," I mused. "Vicuñas and vaqueros. Ancient ruins and alchemical expeditions. That sounds—"

"—like exactly the sort of adventure we need," she finished.

"Then it's settled," I said. "Sufficient time to set our business affairs in order and prepare for an extended expedition."

I thought about the future stretching before us. New inventions, exotic locations, mysteries to solve, and this remarkable woman sharing it all. As a Technomancer, one benefits greatly by having an accomplished artificer at his side. In all respects.

"To Peru," I said, raising an imaginary glass.

"To adventure," Drucilla replied.

"To us."

"Especially that." Yes, especially that.

Tilting her head, she inquired, "Whatever became of Sir Mason's plight? You never said."

"Plight? His failed engagement? I surmise the young lady came to her senses and felt a return home in order."

"In what way? Sir Mason is quite a catch."

"Catch? He has some . . . how should I say . . . peculiarities. He may stay uncaught for decades before becoming terminally engaged. It's his sport. I have met several of his fiancées over the years."

A pleasant voyage with vicuñas and vaqueros at the other end flitted through my imagination, including a note to see if Benson was prone to sea illness. A gentleman must always have his valet close at hand.

Voice at Resolution — The Consistency That Confirms Character

The story ends as it began: in pleasure, in observation, in the mildly self-satisfied company of a narrator who finds everything slightly amusing and himself no exception. The Empire has been saved. A war has been prevented. Simon Smythe is in a bathtub in Brighton, sponging someone's back, noting Benson's courtship of a housemaid, dismissing a friend's romantic catastrophe with the phrase "terminally engaged," and planning a voyage to Peru.

This is voice as character working at its most complete. The resolution does not change Simon — it confirms him. Every adventure, every near-death, every genuine moment of emotional weight has been filtered through the same governing sensibility. The reader has spent a full story inside one man's way of seeing the world, and the final image — valets, vicuñas, and the mildest possible concern about sea illness — carries emotional satisfaction precisely because it is so entirely, unrepentantly Simon.

The craft lesson: a fully inhabited narrative voice creates its own form of story arc. The plot moves from problem to resolution. The voice moves from introduction to confirmation. By the final line, the reader does not simply know what happened. The reader knows who told it to them — and would recognize that person anywhere.