

# Yellow Submarine

## Steampunk

### Chapter 1

Robert Harker turned up the gas and the chandelier roared into brightness. The greenish light drove back the darkness of the London fog swirling outside the windows. He shuddered. There was something unnatural about the way shapeless shadows drifted through the pea-green murk.

One of the shadows detached itself from the gloom and opened the front door.

“Good morning, Lady Melville.”

“Good morning, Robert. How lovely your shop seems after this dismal weather.”

Robert smiled. She had time for a chat then. Lady Melville, or Jane, as he privately dreamt of calling her, was so busy with the affairs of Barnet airfield, she seldom had idle time. “They say it is all the fault of the Computorium at London Bank,” he said. “So many steam engines to count our money.”

“Perhaps Robert, but where would we be without progress? Now, do you have the paper?”

Robert stepped into the back room. The demon steam press clattered in the corner. He hated it. How clever for words to flow along copper pipes from Fleet Street only to be spat out by this foul thing. It was faster than the old way, but he missed the raggedy-skint paper boys running fresh paper to his door.

A neat bundle of folded broadsheets lay waiting. He took one and took it out to Lady Melville.

“Oh Father in Heaven, have mercy on us.” Her Ladyship dropped the paper to the floor.

Robert retrieved the paper and read the headlines. “The Kaiser has raised a fleet of dirigibles to bomb London.”

Lady Melville composed herself. Fine lines creased the corners of her china-blue eyes. "I must go, there is much to do."

She dashed out the door leaving Robert alone to polish the glass of his spotless counter-top.

Lady Melville returned a moment later. "Can you drive a steam carriage?"

"Why yes My Lady, I have a venerable Bentley-Farthing at home."

"My driver has disappeared into one of the teahouses and I can't find him. Would you mind?"

"It would be my pleasure."

The Rolls Phantom waited on the corner, a sleek, black behemoth belching cherry-red sparks from twin boilers. Glowing brass lines reflected two gas burners that cut white lines through the fog. Robert hid his nerves behind a confident mask. The Phantom was as much like his dicky Bentley-Farthing as a spoon was to a sword.

Lady Melville shut the door to the cab behind her. Richard clambered onto the driver's perch and studied the controls. Not so different to his carriage then after all. He pulled the chute lever and fine-ground coal rustled into the burners. Coal smoke tinged the air with a sulphur tang, and the carriage set up a gentle thrum. The unblemished ivory handle of the twined throttles felt alive in his hand. He eased it up, and the carriage surged forward. My word! It was powerful. How fast would it be at full throttle?

It was far too soon before Robert saw the first grey leviathan straining against the sky. Jane liked to speak of the dirigibles, but had never told him how big they were. He drove onto the field where a forest of ropes rose into the sky, restraining rank after rank of dirigibles.

It was the flames that made him stop.

*(Carleton Chinner)*

## Chapter 2

“Quickly Robert – I have need of you. I know your secret, for I too am an Elementalist. If we work together I am sure that our combined power will be enough to kill the fire”.

Robert was momentarily stunned – he had been so careful all these years, the words of his father remembered, cautioning him to hide his gift from those who would seek to use it for nefarious purpose. He drew from under his cloak a winged clock piece, a highly ornate copper and silver creation and linked it to the similar, though larger timepiece held by Lady Melville.

Looking into his eyes, Jane sensed a kindred spirit for she also had led a secretive life, her outward appearance at odds with her inner self. With immense concentration and synchronized brainwaves, as one they drew forth water from the air directing it through the timepiece and on to the wall of fire.

The flames hissed and sizzled, vaporized by the water and as the billows cleared, exposed the row of unfettered dirigibles now starting to drift in the evening breeze. Only one dirigible was now useable. Her Ladyship directed Robert to reinforce the guy ropes on the remaining airship while she directed aloft grappling hooks to secure the others using a steam powered gun – one of her own inventions. Ten airships were retrieved in this way and well secured.

“I fear foul play has rendered my fleet virtually useless. I was warned of a spy in my midst but paid no heed as these are my people – I know them all. Some are tenant farmers from our Estate helping to build our defences. Others are village folk – good hearted all. What am I to do?”

“My Lady, with your permission I will make some discreet enquiries. I have connections in certain quarters and am owed favours. Perhaps setting up a night vision telescope of the kind used by the Prince Regent when he hunts deer in The Highlands would set your mind at rest. “

Jane glanced at him. How was it that a simple printer knew his way around such instruments, and from whence came his steam time piece? She knew it to be the work of the Royal Jeweller but was puzzled by the unusual coat of arms worked into the surface of the watch. She felt a tingle of recognition. It was the sign of The Watchers - a silhouette of a man looking outwards through a spyglass. She had heard of this secret organization from her father who let slip one night when in his cups, that The Watchers were recruiting the best and the brightest young men as spies - a preparation for war he said.

Lady Jane drew her cloak about her, straightened her shoulders and in imperious tones demanded: "Mr Harker pray tell me of The Watchers".

Robert inwardly cursed! Turning towards her Ladyship he raised his eyebrows in enquiry. "Watchers m'lady? You have the advantage of me."

"Fiddlesticks Robert! You know exactly what I am asking. My father, Lord Melville has told me everything!"

"In that case my ladyship we have no need of discussion. I urge you to leave well alone."

(Mary Wyatt)

### Chapter 3

Robert turned away from Jane and busied himself with the ropes. He needed to find some way to divert her attention from The Watchers; it was far too dangerous to involve a woman in these affairs – even more so, one as beautiful as her ladyship. The truth remained though – she was an Elementalist! How so! As far as his teachings had lead him to believe no woman had ever been a watcher and especially not an Elementalist, but here she was, joining timepieces with him to extract enough water from the air to douse a substantial fire.

“I wonder if she has command of the other elements?” he enquired of himself.

With intention and a decision made, he spun on his heel to face Jane. Damn she was beautiful. “Lets not get sidetracked old chap,” he chastised himself

“Jane, I need to be sure that your father has indeed told you everything. Give me your hand”. She removed her soft leather glove and gripped his hand with surprising strength. Robert tried not to pass out with delight as he realized two things – he had called her Jane and she didn’t flinch, and he was holding the hand of the woman he thinks he may be in love with.

“If you know everything Jane, you will know what your next action should be”.

She nodded and half closed her eyes, her gorgeous lips parted slightly, a tingling sensation started in their held hands and in an instant he saw everything she knew. So it was partially true! She was a Watchers daughter and true also, was the fact that she was an Elementalist – but she was a natural.

As a natural Elementalist he reckoned that her connection to The Watchers was insubstantial and that all her knowledge, what little and speculative she held, was derived from her gin loving father.

Further compounding his belief that she was not a Watcher was the ingrained belief that the gentlemanly structure of The Watchers would never put a woman into a theatre of war; regardless of how Elementally she was skilled.

Robert reluctantly released Jane’s hand, and looking into her blue eyes, saw not only beauty, but also an immensely powerful woman. How could he have missed this all along?

“Robert, we need to talk”

“Of course Jane, here help me secure this last craft and we shall get to planning – I have something that may help with your security problem while we try to find out

how this event came to be”.

They drove in silence back to his shop, both wondering what sort of alliance theirs was to become – purely elemental? Heroic? Perhaps romantic?

Whatever way the wheels turned, Robert knew that his latest invention, that was able to capture true to life images and set them permanently onto specially treated timber, could be suspended from any of Jane’s dirigibles and provide surveillance throughout the day. Possibly, and this had just occurred to him, he could incorporate the night vision devices used by the Prince Regent to extend that coverage into the dark and smoggy nights of the coming days.

(Andy Smerdon)

## Chapter 4

John Harker and Lady Jane Melville drove back in silence from the Barnet Airfield toward the Fleet Street printery. They waited while the Rolls Phantom's engine cooled and turned toward the store. John sat down and listened to the whir and splutter of the infernal print machine. He watched as people walked in like automatons and paid for their print and left without any acknowledgement to the next person in line. The newspaper was filled with frippery and innuendo. An unintelligent sausage factory produced on masse to appease the ignorant. He sighed.

A rustle of Victorian fabric woke him from his reverie, Lady Jane stood there with a petulant teenage look of distain on her face. Out of exhaustion, John had forgotten her entirely. Short term memory loss after using the elemental discharge device was a well-documented medical condition. He stood up and was about to stammer out an apology for his behaviour but she stopped him with her hand. She mouthed the word "Quiet". She pushed him slowly back into his seat.

Someone was here. He now heard the footsteps above him, the distinct light thumping of someone trying to sneak with boots on. Lady Jane grabbed a poker from the printery steamer. She took off her shoes and in one movement, her dress as well. She stood there in a black cat suit. John gasped audibly and put his hand over his mouth. A suffragist. Jane Melville was a suffragist! She looked over her shoulder and scowled.

She pointed to the radio and signalled for him to turn it on. He shook his head. Taking orders from a suffragist, even under duress, meant life imprisonment. Jane looked exasperated. She went to the radio herself and turned it on. The radio was hummed into life and began to play "Yellow Submarine" by The Coleopteras. She threw a paper at John and put the kettle on to boil.

John sat there dazed. She took a quick look over her shoulder, looked at the citizens through the one way glass and made cautious steps up towards the John's living quarters. She peered side on into the room. The room wasn't spacious by any stretch of the imagination, but it was clean and tidy. For a bachelor, John certainly did well with what he had. The problem with the space was not its size, but the ability to hide in plain sight. She detected a faint elemental presence. At least she knew what she was up against. Another natural it seemed, or a very well disguised Watcher.

She could still hear the radio, the kettle started to whistle, there was a rustle of the newspaper. The kettle stopped whistling. The elemental stopped walking. A flicker of electrons and Jane knew she had them in her sights. The elemental was

listening intently for signs of movement, back towards the door. She slipped stealthily into the room. Jane raised the poker but it stopped mid-flight. She felt a familiar presence near her.

“I can’t let you do this Jane,” whispered John as he held onto the poker and with a strike to her face, she fell to the floor.

(P.M. Culverhouse)



## Chapter 5

Robert took a firm grip on the poker. "Show yourself, fiend," he said in the commanding voice of a Watcher.

A shadow detached itself from the wall and coalesced into a trim male form. A face decorated with a most outrageous waxed moustache appeared.

"You ... you fiend," Robert raised the poker and charged at the intruder.

"Oh, put ze silly thing down before you hurt yourself, Schatzie." The fiend stepped out of the shadows twisting his black feather boa. Robert gaped. The poker clattered to the floor from nerveless fingers. "Did you miss me, Robert?"

Robert worked his mouth, but no words came. Claus von Helsing, technomage, sometime friend and eternal nemesis was alive. "But, the Kaiser killed you."

"No, Schatzie. He offered me a job. As long as no one knew of my, how did he put it? Degenerate desires, I was safe to continue my studies as a Watcher."

"A Watcher?" Robert snorted. "You were never a Watcher. The dark energies you worked were nothing like the purity of elementals."

Claus shrugged. He stepped forward and clasped Robert's hands. "You must know how fondly I think of our time together at the Academy." He glanced at the floor. "Leave ze strumpet and come away with me."

Robert looked down at Jane's form, soft upon the floor. "How dare you speak of Lady Melville like that? No. What we had was a youthful indiscretion. Nothing more."

Claus looked deep in his eyes. Robert saw the gold flecks he remembered so well. "Come with me Robert. Ze Kaiser will burn London to the ground. Nothing can save her now, not even your precious Watchers. We can go to America. You always wanted to study Anansi magic."

"But how? It's impossible. The Kaiser has an ironclad ring of dreadnoughts around our ports and the pride of His Majesty's dirigible fleet lies in ashes."

"Did you not hear my call of the Yellow Submarine on the radio? I have ze Yellow Submarine."

“That’s impossible. There isn’t enough phlogiston in the world to drive a machine of that size.”

“Oh but there is Schatzie, ze Americans have a mine outside Tucson. It produces tonnes.”

Robert gaped. Phlogiston was so rare that an ounce was beyond price. A tonne was beyond imagining.

Claus smiled. “When zey understand the full potential of what zey have, the Kaizer will be ruined.”

Robert glanced at Jane’s supine form.

Claus gave him a wry smile. “I see where your heart is, but think of my offer Schatzie. If you change your mind, meet me next Tuesday. I shall wait in the Bristol Channel, two nautical miles South of Tenby.”

Claus faded back into the shadows until only a moustache and boa remained. His voice came as an ethereal whisper from the shadows, “You can even bring ze strumpet.”

Robert watched the last of the shadows disperse, then turned to where Jane lay. The black cat suit did little to hide her charms. He put the thought aside and picked her up, surprised at how delicate she felt in his arms. She stirred as he settled her on his narrow bed.

He sank into the wicker chair, watching her sleep. Jane, his soft English rose was something so much more. And, Claus, alive after all this time, what did he feel for the enigmatic Prussian? Did he dare go after Anansi magic? Sun and adobe would be a formidable combination with his mastery of the elements.

Was Claus right? Would the Kaiser crush London? He was right about one thing. The old men of the Watchers were no match for what was coming.

Robert sat alone with his thoughts until Jane awoke with a soft groan when the sun was already burning off the morning fog. He brought her the cup of tea he had just made for himself. “How do you feel?”

“My jaw is throbbing.” She looked at him. Robert could see the hurt in her eyes. “You hit me.”

“And, I am deeply sorry about that, but it was necessary.”

“Necessary?”

Robert sat at the foot of the bed. “Jane, if I may call you that. We have much to discuss.”

A small bow wave rose from the iron bows of the dory as the wheezing steam engine pushed it through the oily waters. Robert kept one hand on the tiller and one firmly around Jane’s waist as he scanned the limpid water. This is foolish, he thought. I consort with suffragists and degenerates to get what I want. And, what is that? A chance at greater magic? Fool! Better to turn this tub around and settle in the comfortable mediocrity of my shop.

His thoughts were interrupted by a fine skein of bubbles breaking the surface off the starboard bow.

“Robert, is that...”

A yellow-clad behemoth rose, cascading torrents of water down its sides. The stern glowed eldritch green in the section where phlogiston was being transformed into useful power. The water around the vessel vibrated to a slow pulsation that Robert felt as an ache deep in his bones. He shuddered. The whole thing was stank of technomagik.

A square hatch rose with a visceral sucking sigh and a diamond clad arm waved from inside.

“Come my dahlinks, join Claus on his magical mystery tour.”

Jane skipped across with unseemly haste. The woman was altogether too keen to embrace the freedoms of the New World.

Robert turned and looked back at the green hills of England, his England. He spent one long moment etching the scene in his mind, then stepped through the hatch and into his dreams.

*(Carleton Chinner)*