



# QUEEN VICTORIA'S BALL

A Clockwork Imperium  
Short Story  
J.P. MEDVED

# **Queen Victoria's Ball**

**A Clockwork Imperium Short Story**

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# I

Henry Emerson was dancing when he first learned of the plot to kill Queen Victoria.

Behind him the music from the clockwork quartet had slowed. A workman crossed to the small stage and went about the task of winding the intricate machine with a practiced efficiency; inserting a large key into each life-sized musician and turning it methodically. The waltz picked back up and Henry smiled at his partner, "Shall we?"

Raheem Aranjapour looked at Henry's outstretched hand and scowled. The burly Indian man stood a full head taller than Henry, and even without his Sikh turban and thick, black beard he would have cut an imposing figure. But it was a figure more suited to distant dusty battlefields and exotic army recruitment posters. Here, in the central ballroom of the Crystal Palace in London, the artilleryman was painfully out of his element.

"I do not see why I must learn this abominable dancing. Getting a medal should not require a display of puffery."

The corners of Henry's eyes crinkled with barely contained mirth. Henry was slight compared to his friend, with a brown pilot's mustache and sky blue irises.

"Because, old fellow, the White Queen commands it. Besides, it wouldn't do to display your lack of refinement to the Empress of India herself."

Raheem scowled again, but allowed Henry to lead him once more in a series of dance steps of increasing complexity.

"One two one. One two one. One two one." Henry marked the time, and Raheem stuck out his tongue and screwed up his eyes in concentration. Around the two men the Palace was a bustle of activity. Day laborers in rough overalls and homespun caps carried decorations and tools hither and yon. The sounds of hammers and steam driven saws echoed off the wrought iron and glass dome of the ceiling, as it stretched away into the bright sky above.

The music of the clockwork quartet contributed to the din. The magnificent invention, all gleaming brass and copper, with four ingeniously connected musicians wearing ornamental glass eyes and permanently fixed expressions, had recently arrived from America by airship. The head of the Heroes' Ball Planning Committee, a fastidious little man with a purple cravat and glasses, was insistent that it be tested. The Ball *was* only two days away, after all. He listened long enough to ensure the contraption wasn't going to spring a leak or lose a gear, and then ran off to see to an order of finger cakes.

Evidently the workmen liked the music as they went about their business, for they kept it playing long after Raheem and Henry arrived, on a whim, to see the preparations for the ball being held in their honor. Henry hadn't been able to take another tedious luncheon with another tedious society--this latest was for The Preservation of The British Language--and so had grabbed a protesting Raheem and made off for an exit. They wandered the crowded streets of London before arriving at the sprawling, airy outline of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park where Henry commenced an impromptu dancing lesson.

Their colleague and friend, James Billingsworth, was probably still chatting amicably with the society ladies and their large hats.

Henry smiled. James took naturally to the instant celebrity of being A War Hero; one of the men who rescued General Gordon. Henry was not like James. Not that he shared, on the other extreme, Raheem's intense discomfort with notoriety, but he personally found his fame to be remarkably...boring. State dinners and speeches and invitations from prominent royals and organizations, it was all so dreadfully *dull*. So much talking. Henry craved action.

More importantly, Henry realized what the fawning dignitaries and celebrating society heads did not; their mission had been a failure. The famous General was rescued by Henry's airship, but the city he defended was not. Thousands of men, women and children from doomed Khartoum were massacred or sold into slavery before Wolsely's flying column could reach the desert city.

"Ouch! You bloody oaf, that's my toe! Lead with your left."

But Raheem wasn't paying attention to Henry's angry ejaculations or his bruised foot. He had stopped moving and his eyes were focused on something behind the young airship pilot.

There was a light tap on Henry's shoulder, "May I cut in?" The voice was soft, with an American accent.

Henry turned and his eyes widened to take in the astonishing sight. Before him stood a young woman, almost as tall as himself, her auburn hair escaping from a messy bun, hazel eyes bright and merry, and she was wearing *trousers*!

Caught off guard, Henry searched for words and the woman smiled, "You're shorter than you appear in the newspapers, Captain."

His tongue finally loosened up and he bowed, "I'm terribly sorry, Miss, I don't believe I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"I think it's customary to accept a girl's dance request before getting too personal, Captain Emerson." There was mischief in her eyes.

"I think it's not customary for girls to *make* dance requests, Miss...?"

She nodded as if to concede the point, still smiling, "Abernathy," a pause, "Myra." Emerson took her extended hand briefly, as did Raheem when she offered it to him, though his scowl had returned. He did not approve of this remarkably forward and shockingly attired young woman.

"Well, Miss Abernathy, I would be honored to accept your invitation to dance. Mr. Aranjapour, if you will excuse me?" And, so saying, Henry followed the strange American a ways away from the stage with its musical automata and into a flawless waltz.

As soon as the two were engaged in the dance and, Henry noted, out of earshot of an impatient-looking Raheem, she spoke, and her expression changed to one of grim seriousness, "I've come to warn you, Captain; your life is in grave danger."

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*Something sinister is afoot on the streets of London. Can decorated airship pilot Henry Emerson and his friends James and Raheem uncover a plot that threatens the very fabric of the Empire before it's too late? And is the lovely but mysterious American, Ms. Myra Abernathy, quite what she seems?*

*Queen Victoria's Ball is an 8,800 word (38 pages) steampunk adventure novelette in the spirit of Alan Quatermain, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Tintin.*

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