

The Marvelous Mechanical Man



Rie Sheridan Rose



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*A Conn-Mann
Adventure*

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THE MARVELOUS MECHANICAL MAN

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all my Steampunk acquaintances for their encouragement and support as I trod a new pathway.

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Kate Winslow pulled her hat brim low to shade her eyes. It was always difficult making a shot into the sun, but this time she had no choice. The varmint who was trying to take her ranch was holed up on the other side of the ridge, and she had one chance to rescue Pa and save their range land. If she could shoot a hole in the water tank rising above the stock pen, perhaps she could start a stampede and draw the varmints away from the house long enough to get inside and free Pa.

She had never expected to find herself in this position as a child. Ma and Pa had made sure she learned to read and write and cipher—Ma wanted her to be a schoolmarm when she was old enough; and until she was twelve, she'd expected that was how it would be.

That year Ma caught scarlet fever, and Kate and Pa were left alone to run the homestead. Instead of planning lessons, she'd learned to shoot and ride like a Comanche and swear like a wrangler. Smart as a whip and strong as a horse, Kate earned a reputation for hard living and equally hard loving. She wore men's trousers and had been known to tip a few in the local saloon.

But what she really longed for was a man who could stand at her side, run the ranch, and make her feel like a woman.

— Garrett Goldthwaite
*Calico Kate and the
River of Gold*



Chapter 1

“I did not lie to you, sir! I am Jo Mann. I am here...”

I heard my voice creeping up toward a shout and forced myself to take a deep breath. What would the heroine of one of Garrett Goldthwaite’s dime novels do in a case like this? I had found that question served me well in similar cases where I was at a loss for what to do.

It didn’t take but a moment to decide. She would stand her ground. Of that, I had no doubt.

Straightening my back, I looked down my nose at the odious little toad in the wrinkled shirt who was staring back at me with bulbous eyes.

“I am here to apply for the copy reader position that was advertised in last evening’s paper.”

The toad blinked myopically.

“But you aren’t qualified.”

“The advertisement said the only qualification is an ability to read and write. I assure you, sir, I am most qualified in that area. I have been doing both since I was five.”

“But you are a girl.”

“That has nothing to do with...!” I was beginning to screech again. Deep breaths...deep breaths...

I tried once more.

“I am fully aware of my sex, Mr. Greenstreet. However, it has no bearing on whether or not I am able to read and write. These are the only listed qualifications for the position.”

“But you are a girl. And a little slip of a thing at that. A newspaper is no place for a lady.” I realized he was trying to be kind as he tapped together my papers and handed them back to me, but it did nothing except irritate me further. I knew what he saw when he looked at me—a short female with too many unruly curls and too few pounds on her slight frame.

And not much chance to get any fatter if I didn’t find a job soon. The five one-dollar bills tucked into the sole of my boot were all I had left in the world, and two of those were due the landlady on Monday.

I swallowed any pride I had left and tried a final time.

“Mr. Greenstreet. Sir. I realize I would be an unconventional choice for the position...”

Whatever kindness the gentleman had felt was rapidly deteriorating—I could see it in his eyes. I’ve always been good at reading people.

“Look, Miss, I wish you the best of luck, but there is no work for you here. Why don’t you see if Father Murphy over to the church across the street can suggest something? Maybe one of his parishioners is looking for a governess or some such. Good day.” He handed back my forged letters of recommendation—a girl has to eat—with an air of great finality.

Stifling a sigh I feared would lead to tears, I stuffed the carefully prepared papers into my reticule with no further concern for their well-being. Fat lot of good they’d done.

I spun on my heel, nose in air, and swept out of the room. Unfortunately, on the way out of the door, I slammed into a hard surface and bounced backward; it was sheer luck that I did not fall flat on an unmentionable body part. I opened my mouth to protest—and, for once, found myself at a total loss for words.

The “surface” in question turned out to be a young gentleman dressed in most peculiar clothing—natty tweed trousers and neat brown boots, but a collarless shirt with undone vest in a vile green plaid that clashed with the trousers. Over

the entire ensemble he wore a long white coat with many pockets bulging in interesting ways and bearing several noxious stains in lurid colors. Not bad looking in an academic way, he wore his dark hair a bit longer than was fashionable and had the most brilliant blue eyes I'd ever seen behind round wire spectacles.

I am enough of a typical female that I felt a frisson of pleasure run through me at the sight.

"Oh, excuse me!" the gentleman murmured, reaching out a steadying hand stained with splashes of some chemical. "I didn't see you."

"Obviously not," I said with a sniff of disdain. It would never do to show the man I thought he was rather handsome. It would just encourage him. Men didn't need any encouragement to be obnoxious.

"Are you all right, Miss...?"

"Yes. I'm fine. No thanks to you, I must say."

"I am terribly sorry. If there is anything I can do..."

Mr. Greenstreet stepped from behind his desk.

"The young lady was just leaving, Professor Conn. Have you brought your advertising copy?"

The young man glanced down at a grimy piece of paper clutched in one hand as if he had never seen it before.

"Oh. Yes. Yes, here it is. I would like to run the advertisement for one week in both the early and late editions—unless we have a favorable response, of course." He handed the scrap of paper to Mr. Greenstreet. "I believe you said that would be fifty cents?"

He fumbled in his vest pocket and pulled out a coin. The newspaperman took the coin and read aloud what was scribbled on the paper.

"'Wanted, lab assistant. Hours expected: ten a.m. to four p.m. Occasional night work may be required. Pays twenty dollars a week'—oh, my, Professor Conn. That is a mistake, surely. You mean twenty dollars a *month*, don't you?"

“No...no, I mean twenty a week, Mr. Greenstreet. You feel that is excessive?”

Mr. Greenstreet shrugged. “It’s your money. I’ll just send this down to the typesetters.”

Heart pounding in my chest, I snatched the paper from his hand.

“No need to trouble yourself, Mr. Greenstreet.” I turned to Professor Conn. “Do you have a problem with a female assistant, sir?”

The gentleman in question blinked at me.

“Well, no, I don’t suppose so. As long as she is willing to work.”

“Then there is no need to place the advertisement.” I plucked the coin from Mr. Greenstreet’s hand as well and handed it back to the professor. “I’ll take the job.”

“Oh. Well, I...”

Poor dear, he seemed totally out of his depth. Lacing my arm through his, I turned him back toward the doorway.

“Now, why don’t we go next door to that lovely little café, and you can tell me all about the position over a nice glass of lemonade and a cucumber sandwich?” This was pushing things a bit, but I was ravenous.

The professor looked a bit dazed, but he didn’t protest or hang back, which was a good sign. Mr. Greenstreet glowered at me as he moved back around his desk, but I didn’t care. I gave him a little wave as we stepped out the doorway.

I couldn’t help feeling a bit sorry for Professor Conn as I guided him down the stairs and shepherded him to the café. Marching him to the counter, I ordered two lemonades and a plate of sandwiches. The young man behind the counter looked up at us expectantly, and I nudged the professor in the ribs. He jumped a little but reached into his wallet and paid for the food without protest.

Steering him to one of the little tables, I finally let go of his arm and plopped down on a bentwood chair. As he sank

down across from me, a bemused expression on his face, I stuck out my hand.

“My name is Josephine Mann. I go by Jo. I believe I’m your new assistant.”

He took my hand in his, calluses scraping the bottoms of my fingers, and shook it.

“Alistair Conn. I teach three days a week at the university. The rest of the time I spend in my workshop. I’m a bit of an inventor.”

I waved away the explanation, cramming half a cucumber sandwich in my mouth. I was too hungry to be ladylike. I hadn’t eaten since the previous morning, and it was well after two in the afternoon. Washing down the sandwich with a gulp of lemonade, I made an effort to be nice.

“Just tell me where to be in the morning, and I’ll be there.”

Professor Conn scratched his ear.

“You aren’t precisely what I was expecting in an assistant, Miss Mann—”

“Jo. Please.”

“Jo, then. I require someone to take dictation of my lab notes, to do some minor lifting, perhaps monitor some of the experiments while I was in class...”

“I can do that. Maybe do your laundry, too,” I mumbled around sandwich crumbs, with an eye to his mussed and rumpled clothing.

“I am not looking for a maid,” he replied stiffly. “I need a lab technician.”

“Yes, I know. I can do all that. I write a good hand, I read everything I get my hands on, I’m a good listener and a quick learner. I’m strong as a horse. And I need the money.”

“Well. You are direct, I’ll give you that.”

“What’s the point in beating around the bush? You need an assistant, I have rent to pay—oh, and about that. Today is Wednesday. If you could see your way to pay me for the rest of this week in advance...” I stuck out my hand hopefully. Never hurts to try.

He took out his wallet once more and pulled out ten dollars. He started to hand it to me then pulled it back.

“This just feels a little sudden to me, Miss Mann. I’m not sure—”

“Please, Professor Conn, I really need this position.”

I’m not very good at feminine wiles, but I batted my lashes anyway, hoping he wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of them and wouldn’t notice my lack of finesse.

“I’m down to my last dollar. There aren’t many openings for women in these enlightened times of eighteen-seventy four. England may be ruled by a queen, but here in good old New York City, it’s a man’s world. Unless I want to be a governess or a housemaid, all that’s left for me is settling down as some man’s wife, and I assure you, that’s not the life for me.”

“I see,” Conn said, looking a bit taken aback. “Well, you do raise some very valid considerations. I know something about societal expectations myself. We will give it a week’s trial. Or, shall we say, half a week? If we are both satisfied with the arrangement by Friday evening, we will consider a more permanent arrangement.” He handed me the ten dollars.

Ten dollars for two days? I could live with that. And Mrs. Milligan would be happy to have the rent on time for a change.

I stuck out my hand.

“You’ve got yourself an assistant, Professor.”



Kate had tried being a lady after Ma died, but Fortune was having none of it. She stayed in school as long as she could, but Pa just couldn't run the ranch alone. There wasn't enough money to hire more than one hand—Stretch worked for little more than room and board, at that—so she dropped out of school at thirteen to work the ranch full time.

Ol' Stretch was like a second father to her. He taught her to be a crack shot with both the pistol and a rifle; she could shoot the eye out of a turkey at twenty paces. In fact, she'd taken the marksman medal at the county fair three years running.

By the time she was fifteen, she was acting as ranch foreman.

Now, sixteen had come and gone, leaving her tempered like steel. It was a strenuous life, and a difficult job that had made her grow up hard and fast; and she planned on putting every bit of that experience and training into saving her ranch!

— Garrett Goldthwaite
*Calico Kate and the
River of Gold*



Chapter 2

Precisely on time Thursday morning, I presented myself at the address Professor Conn had given me the previous evening. He rented the entire lower floor of a tall brownstone in the heart of a lovely little neighborhood quite out of my price range; I was directed to his personal access by a large matronly woman who opened the front door of the establishment. The professor's laboratory was down a half-flight of stairs leading to the below-street-level entrance.

Squaring my shoulders, I took a deep breath and rapped firmly upon the panel. From within came a muffled, "It's unlocked." I turned the knob and pushed. The door creaked open into darkness.

I stepped forward with caution, nonplussed by the lack of light. Outside, the sun shone brilliantly in a cloudless sky; behind that door, it might as well have been midnight.

"Hello?" I called.

"Ah, Miss Mann. Right on schedule, I see."

The voice came from somewhere in the depths of the gloom. I heard the hiss of gas, and the light brightened appreciably.

"Sorry for the dim conditions. I was working on a sensitive experiment." Professor Conn waved vaguely around him as he approached. A wide grin split his face—making it even more attractive.

I forced myself to focus on my reason for being there.

“Well, here I am, as promised. Where do you want me to start?” I looked around at the clutter and wondered if there was anything that *could* be done to tame this chaos.

The chamber was long and narrow, with wide countertops on either side of a narrow aisle that ended at a door to the interior of the house—presumably his living quarters, and therefore unimportant to me. This room would be my workplace, so I’d better get acquainted with it.

The counters were covered with bits of machinery—gears and cogs, spindles and wheels, brass, steel, iron; fairytale contraptions that looked ready to spin about the room at the slightest provocation. I reached out to touch one of the delicate structures. They were strangely compelling.

“Don’t touch that!”

I jumped backward, almost colliding with the opposite counter. To be honest, I had rather forgotten the professor was there. The reminder was a bit of a rude awakening.

He hurried over, setting down a welder’s mask and a pair of tongs as he came.

“That’s an extremely fragile machine. It must be handled very carefully.”

Picking up the little machine, he turned a tiny key on the side. It began to whirr then rose from his hand to hover beside him like a bird.

“How exquisite,” I breathed. “You made that?”

He seemed pleased by my reaction.

“Yes. Would you like to see the others?”

“Very much so.”

He scooped the little machine out of the air and turned the key once more. The whirring ceased instantly. Setting it back on the counter, he pointed to a pair of standing poles with several thin copper wires wound around them.

“Watch this.” He flipped a switch, and there was a hum. Little flashes of blue light began to radiate up and down the apparatus. A little round...thing...at the bottom started to rise, as if it were walking up between the two columns.

“How does it do that?”

“The poles have an electrical current passing between them; the process is based on the work of Michael Faraday. His theories have enormous potential, if you will forgive me the wordplay.”

“Ah.” I nodded as if I had some idea what he was talking about. I wasn’t really sure what practical application this little toy of his had, but it was pretty to look at.

“And this is my greatest experiment to date,” he continued, stepping over to the other counter.

I looked down at the object. It was an oblong boxlike item of brass or a similar metal covered with gears and fiddly bits.

“What is it?”

“It doesn’t look like much at the moment,” he replied defensively, “but one day...” He covered it with a bit of silk. “Perhaps later.” He placed his back to the counter, almost as if hiding the little object from my sight. “Now...your duties.”

“Yes. What do you need me to do?”

Heaving a huge sigh, he looked around the room with an expression of despair.

“It *is* a bit of a disaster, isn’t it? I’d love to get a handle on it, but I’ve been so busy...”

“Just let me know what I can and cannot touch.” I pulled out my hatpin and set my boater on the edge of the counter. It was rather warm in the little room, so after a moment’s hesitation, I decided it would be more comfortable in the long run to remove my suit coat as well. It might not be the proper thing to do, but if I was to be doing a lot of lifting and moving, it was far too hot for propriety. “I don’t suppose you have an apron I could use?”

I had on my best shirtwaist and a practically new skirt.

“Uh, sure.” He surveyed the clutter. “I’m sure there is one around here somewhere.”

I spied cabinets set beneath the counters and bent to open one.

“Not that one. You don’t want to open that one.”

He shuffled through the contents of a bookcase mounted on the wall behind the counter on his side of the aisle. Why on earth would anyone keep an apron on a bookcase?

I rolled my eyes and peeked into the next cabinet. Lots of heavy machine parts. No apron.

“Aha!” he cried, reaching over the counter to grab a corner of fabric that protruded from behind it. He then handed me a full-length bib apron almost as filthy as his lab coat.

Wrinkling my nose, I slipped it over my head and tied it neatly.

“Where shall I begin?”

“These stray gears and such could be sorted into these bins. That will take you a bit of time, I’m afraid.”

“Not a problem. I will start at once.”

It seemed a mindless task, but as I began it, I found that the differences between some of the little pieces were extremely subtle. Sometimes it was the number of teeth circling the hub, sometimes it was the number of spokes on the wheel. I had to devote my entire attention to the job.

Lost in the work, I almost forgot where I was. I had a rude awakening, therefore, when there was a sharp rap on the outer door. I started, almost dropping a handful of the tiny gears.

Answering the door probably fell on my list of duties. Setting down the gears, I dusted off my hands, smoothed my apron, stepped over to the door and pulled it open to find myself staring at an embroidered waistcoat beneath a well-tailored cutaway. My eyes were level with the center button.

I looked up...and up. The man filling the doorway wore his blond hair fashionably cut and sported a neat goatee and mustache. His eyes bored into me with such intensity I didn’t even register their color. His clothing was all the highest quality and fashion. I couldn’t help but compare him to Conn, and that gentleman came out the loser.

“May I help you?”

His mouth quirked into a half-smile that struck me as slightly predatory. I fought not to shiver.

“Well, that depends, little lady,” he purred. “Who might you be?”

“Paul—I didn’t expect you until tomorrow,” murmured Professor Conn, appearing from somewhere in the back. He thrust out his hand, and the gentleman shook it with a frown then wiped his hand on a snow-white handkerchief.

“I found myself in the neighborhood and decided to move up the appointment. I hope it won’t be an inconvenience.”

“No, no, of course not.” Conn glanced at me uneasily. “Why don’t you come with me?” He gestured toward the door to his living quarters.

I got the distinct impression Professor Conn had no desire to share the gentleman’s business with me.

“I was just going to step out and get us some lunch, Professor.”

I could see gratitude in his eyes and wondered what he was trying to hide. He looked relieved to be getting rid of me. Was he up to something he shouldn’t be? I wouldn’t have thought him capable—but, then again, we weren’t that well acquainted.

“Can I bring something for your visitor?”

“Uh, no. No, that’s fine. He will not be staying long. There’s a sandwich cart around the corner, just past the houses on the left,” he continued. “That would be lovely. Thank you.”

I noticed he didn’t make a move to introduce us, so I didn’t say anything more. Sweeping up my coat and hat, I left the laboratory, donning them as I went.

It was a fine spring day, and I savored the sunlight on my face. It wasn’t too difficult to find the sandwich cart between the professor’s vague directions and the heavenly smell of roasting meat. The woman behind it had a nice selection of fresh bread with thick slices of beef and mutton. I ordered one of each, not knowing the professor’s preferences and perfectly willing to eat either.

I didn't think it likely the menfolk had concluded their business so quickly; male conversations never seem to be straightforward, in my experience. I would be better off not hurrying back if I wanted to be employed this time next week.

So, I strolled up the street toward the professor's, admiring the neat brownstones with their bright window boxes and lace curtains. This was such a peaceful neighborhood. I thought of the noisy, brash boarding houses of my own street—mostly immigrants working in the factories, or girls like me without families trying to eke out a living on our own.

I seldom let my thoughts wander down that path—to my family, that is. My parents were hard-working immigrants themselves; they'd come from Ireland towards the end of the Potato Famine in the early 1850s. What I remember of them is that they were much in love—with each other and with me—but love didn't save them when the cholera epidemic swept through after the end of the War.

I don't know what saved me, but I lived on to be raised by the good sisters of the Convent of Our Lady the Star of the Sea until I was fifteen. Since then, I've survived by my wits. And I'm not dead yet. So, I have that going for me...

A tower clock chimed one somewhere; that should have been enough time for the professor to conclude his business. Besides, any longer, and the sandwiches would be inedible.

I hurried back to the laboratory and started to throw open the door then realized it might not be the most discreet of entrances. Rapping jauntily on the panel, I opened it with a cheery, "I'm back, Professor. Come and eat your lunch."

He emerged again from the back, glancing over his shoulder as he pulled the door closed. Wondering once more what he had to hide, I laid out the sandwiches on their butcher paper.

"I got one mutton and one roast beef. Which would you prefer?"

"Mutton," he replied absently, picking up the roast beef and taking a huge bite.

Men. Are they really as inattentive as they seem? To be honest, I prefer beef.

With a sigh, I picked up the mutton and began to eat.

“So, what’s on the agenda for this afternoon?”

“I have some errands to run—I’m running low on some of the parts I need. If you could finish the sorting you started this morning, that will be all for today.”

“What if I finish before you return?”

“That’s a good point.” He rummaged in a brass tray on the corner of one of the counters and fished out a key. “This is a key to the front door. Lock up when you leave, and feel free to let yourself in tomorrow morning if I am not here. Thank you for the sandwich.” He dusted crumbs off the front of his vest. “It was delicious.”

“It was fifty cents.” It had actually been twenty-five, but I saw no reason he shouldn’t pay for both.

Conn pulled out his wallet and shuffled through the contents.

“Here is five dollars. Have one of those here for my dinner, and this should cover tomorrow’s luncheon as well.”

With a bit to spare, if I played my cards right. I slipped the money in my reticule.

“Will do, sir.”

“Right. Well, I’m off, then. See you in the morning.” He lifted his hat from a rack near the front door—had I seen that earlier, I wouldn’t have wrinkles in my suit jacket—and hurried out into the sunlight.

I scanned the cluttered room. Where to start? I should go back to my sorting, as ordered, but it would make such a small dent in the whole...

My gaze was drawn to the door to his private rooms. I might never get another chance like this one, and curiosity is the bane of more than cats, I must admit.

I glanced back over my shoulder to make sure the professor was truly gone. I really shouldn’t. He had made it clear he

didn't want to share the contents of those rooms with me. Not yet, at any rate. But their mystery beckoned me like a magnet.

I would be careful. He need never know.

I opened the door.



Up in the arroyo behind the ranch was a cave system that ran for miles under the mesa. Legend had it there was treasure buried in those caves—a full-size golden statue of the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro hid the clue to an entire river of gold. One pan out of that river would buy most of the ranches around the mesa. Or so legend said.

The caves were considered dangerous, and forbidden to the local children, but Kate and her friends hadn't let that stop them. With bits of string and candle ends, they played hide-and-seek throughout the caverns and formed secret societies with long lists of rules to follow.

Kate was one of the most fearless explorers. She knew more about the cavern system than anyone alive...and probably anyone dead. Exploring was one of her greatest pleasures.

— Garrett Goldthwaite
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Chapter 3

I don't know what I expected to discover beyond Alistair Conn's private door, but it wasn't at all what I found. It opened into a short hallway containing three more doors. Feeling a bit like Bluebeard's wife in the old fairy story, I peeked behind the first.

There was a small bedroom, neat as a pin—which came as a complete surprise to me. The single bed was made with a well-worn patchwork quilt. Someone had put a lot of work into its construction. I wondered who it had been.

The second door opened into a small sink room. A matched shaving set was arranged under an oval mirror hung above the basin. The handles looked to be chased silver. Just how lucrative *was* the teaching profession?

The third room held the biggest surprise. It might once have been a storage area, but it was now being used as an extension of the laboratory. There were no tiny machines here, however. Instead, a huge metal statue stood in the center of the cluttered room.

It was some sort of mechanical man—an automaton of amazing proportions. If this afternoon's visitor had seemed taller than any man had a right to be, the construct in the chamber was gigantic. It gleamed like well-oiled brass, head cocked to one side as if listening, joints frozen in a half-step.

He was magnificent. I almost expected to see his chest rise and fall, but he was as still as the statue he must have been. What else could he be?

I wanted to go closer, to examine him from all sides, but decided it was best not to push my luck. Who knew when Professor Conn might return?

I shut the door to the storage room and returned to the front laboratory. Why was the mechanical man hidden away in the back? Surely such a magnificent creature should be shown off, shared with the world. On the other hand, what possible use was the thing? It was a glorious work of art, but it didn't seem to *do* anything as far as I could tell. Unless the professor was also an aspiring artist, what was its importance?

My mind kept returning to that question as I sorted gears and cogs into their respective bins. It wasn't as if the work was at all challenging to the intellect. In fact, it was stultifying. I had to force myself not to take a nap on the counter.

I did manage to get the pieces squared away before I had to resort to such drastic measures. It wasn't easy.

When everything was sorted, I cast about for something else to do. Conn had told me I could go home, but there wasn't anything much to do there, either. I might as well get a head start cleaning the rest of the laboratory.

The little machine Conn had shown me that morning still lay under its silken shroud. I bowed to my curiosity again and lifted the square of fabric. The little brass oblong almost glowed, but it still didn't do anything except look fragile. I would hate to break whatever it was during my cleaning efforts.

Picking it up and setting it on my palm, I turned it this way and that. One of the wires attached to the side gave me a sharp poke for my impertinence. I bit my lip. I couldn't let the professor find out I'd broken it. He might fire me.

I glanced into the brass tray where he had kept the key. Sure enough, I found a tiny screwdriver I thought I remembered noticing as I had pattered about. I wound the end of the wire around a tiny screw that didn't seem to have any other purpose—that struck me as the best way to camouflage my meddling—and tightened the screw holding the wire half a turn at a time until it would tighten no further. On a whim, I picked up a small brass gear and screwed it to the machine as well, connecting two cogs that didn't appear to be attached to anything. The assembly now turned under my finger, and I smiled. Inventing was fun.

But I must get back to work.

I wrapped the little object once more in its piece of silk and tucked it away in the back of a drawer. Then I straightened the various machines, dusted both counters, swept the floor—in short, tidied the entire laboratory. It didn't take more than an hour. It was a small room, after all, and the sorting turned out to have been the majority of the mess.

There was nothing more to be done here. I might as well get home to Priss.

I slipped around the corner and bought Conn another sandwich for dinner, adding a bottle of lemonade at the last minute. I took the food back to the laboratory and arranged it on a square of linen I found in a cabinet under one of the counters. Locking the door behind me, I headed for my boarding house, feeling that the day had been a most productive one.

As I walked through streets that grew ever more crowded and noisy the closer I got to home, I was struck again by the contrast between Conn's neighborhood and my own. Street vendors cried their wares from carts, selling just about everything from laces and ribbons to the newfangled sausages on a bun that were becoming so popular on Coney Island. I bought two of the latter. Miss Priss would enjoy a treat.

Clattering up the stoop, I called out to Mrs. Milligan as I passed her door, "Any messages for me?"

My landlady stepped into the hall, arms folded across her formidable chest. A scowl marred her occasionally amiable features—actually, the scowl was familiar; amiability would have been unusual these days.

"Miss Mann," she said in a voice dripping frost, "I have told you before. I am not your social secretary."

I bowed my head, sensing that contrition was the appropriate reaction in this situation.

"I'm sorry for any inconvenience I might have caused you, Mrs. Milligan. Do I take it there *was* a message, then?"

If anything, her scowl deepened.

"Yes, there was a message." She pulled a slip of paper from the recesses of her impressive décolletage. "This is the last time."

"I promise I will do my best."

I reached for the message. She held the piece of paper out of reach.

"No. You do not understand me. This is the *last* time. I need you to vacate your room by the end of the week. You are a disruptive influence on my establishment. Men coming here at all hours, leaving salacious messages. I've looked the other way as often as I am prepared to do. You and that cat. Out."

"But I paid you for next week already!"

"It will take at least a week to make your room habitable for a respectable young lady," she replied, her tone making it clear any further protest would be futile. "Be grateful I don't ask for cleaning funds." She handed me the paper. "End of the week."

I tried anyway.

"But it's Thursday. How do you expect me to find another place to live in three days?"

"That is not my concern. Be gone by Sunday evening."

So this hadn't turned out to be a great day after all. Trudging up the stairs to my room, I opened the paper and read the message:

Miss Mann,

I find myself detained by my errands beyond my expectations. Please let yourself into the laboratory in the morning and continue your duties as I laid them out for you today.

Professor Alistair Conn

I snorted with derision—"salacious," indeed. What sort of duties did she think I was performing?

A second thought struck me. How did the professor know where I lived? I suppose I could have let it slip in conversation without realizing it. Otherwise, he must have gone to a great deal of trouble to find out.

I opened my door.

"How are you doing, Miss Priss? Did you miss me?"

My answer was a plaintive *mew* I had learned to interpret as "What took you so long bringing me dinner?"

My roommate, Miss Priss, minced out from under the bed, where she had a habit of spending her days. I think the coverlet made for a nice dark den where she could perform her important napping duties.

Miss Priss was no more than a kitten when I found her bedraggled muddy form shivering under the front steps. Back in those days, Mrs. Milligan thought I was a sweet young thing who needed mothering. She billed and cooed over the poor little animal and warmed a pan of milk in her own kitchen. In fact, it was Mrs. Milligan who gave Priss her name.

Once the kitten was warm and dry, the little creature took over the kitchen, poking her pert pink nose into every corner then coming back to us with a demand for attention.

“Look at this little missy,” Mrs. Milligan had murmured, chucking the kitten under her chin. “Isn’t she the prissy little thing?”

The name stuck. Miss Priss she had been for the last two years, as our fondness for each other grew—and Mrs. Milligan’s for me deteriorated. Now she thought I was an opinionated young hellion who needed a strong male hand to tame her down—but not in her boarding house.

“Well, Prissy,” I said with a sigh, scooping up the cat and setting her on the table. “Looks like we’re out on the streets. Got any ideas?” I unwrapped her sausage roll and removed the bread. “I assume you don’t want this bun; I’ll save it for later. It might be breakfast.”

Priss ignored me, neatly devouring the sausage. I gave her head an absent pat. She rewarded me by batting at my hand with barely sheathed claws and a growl. Ingrate.

I ate my own sausage, lingering over each bite as if it were my last meal. The way things were going, it might be.

When I was finished, I dumped my reticule on the table and shuffled through the contents. I still had seven of the ten dollars Professor Conn had given me for the week, and the change from today’s meals. Almost four there. So, a bit over ten dollars, added to the five I had been walking on for the last three weeks. Fifteen dollars between me and the poorhouse.

With luck, the professor would continue to desire my services as an assistant. That would give me a steady income for the foreseeable future, but would I have sufficient time to find new lodgings and still fulfill the duties he required?

Why had life suddenly gotten so complicated?

Pushing up from the table, I pulled out my father’s carpet bag and began to dismantle the room. It wouldn’t take long.

All I had in the world would fit into the carpet bag and a hat box. Not counting Priss, of course.

By the time I had packed my few books—mostly dime novels, plus the Bible and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* my parents had left me—the spare set of bed linens, the tintage of my parents taken just before their deaths, and the handful of kitchen implements I possessed, I was ready to fall into bed. I'm sure it wasn't the stress of packing that had led to the crushing weight of exhaustion that enfolded me. After all, it had taken no more than a quarter of an hour from start to finish, and that included wrapping my few dishes in discarded newspaper. No, it was more the sum total of the life changes that seemed to be piling on top of each other like bricks.

I changed out of my “work clothes” into my nightdress and slipped under the covers. Priss joined me and curled up on the pillow. She always forgave me by bedtime, no matter what our differences might have been during the day.



When I woke the next morning, I had a stiff neck from Priss hogging the pillow. Stifling a yawn, I washed my face in the basin and changed my small clothes. I'd have to wear the same suit as yesterday—nothing else in my wardrobe was entirely suitable for spending time alone with a young man in his rooms.

“Well, Priss,” I said, fastening my skirt, “I'll probably be late tonight. I'll have to search for a room after the professor releases me for the day. I will try to bring you a nice bit of fish for dinner, being as it's Friday.”

I managed to tiptoe out of the house without arousing Mrs. Milligan. At least the morning was starting off better than it could have.

And it was another beautiful spring day. It lifted my heart just to be abroad in it. The bustle on the streets didn't hold my attention as fully as it had on Thursday, however. It was hard

to forget that, by this time on Monday, I might be out on these streets if I didn't find new lodgings.

When I reached the professor's building, his landlady was sweeping her front steps. She smiled at me and nodded a greeting as I went down the stairs to his door. Why couldn't I have a nice landlady like that?

The thought stopped me in my tracks. Well, maybe I could...
I raced back up the steps.

"Ma'am—"

"Call me Ma," she said with a beaming smile. "Most folks do." She stuck out her hand. "Ma Stark. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I really didn't have time to talk yesterday when you were asking about the professor. You must be Miss Mann. He told me he had himself an assistant at last. He certainly can use one! Poor man forgets to eat half the time—"

I stopped the flow of words by the simple expedient of talking over her.

"I just wanted to ask if you might by any chance have a room to let. I was thinking that I could serve the professor much more efficiently if I were closer—if you see my point."

"Aren't you the thoughtful thing! It just so happens I've one small room at the top of the house. It's not much more than a closet, I'm afraid, but it might be suitable for a young lady of quiet demeanor. I assume you're such a young lady?" Her eyes were no longer quite so friendly as she stared down her nose at me.

"Yes, yes, of course!" I hastened to assure her. "I am a model of propriety. Very quiet. You would hardly know I was there."

"It's all yours, then." Her eyes twinkled once more. "Rent's one dollar a week, and you're welcome to take your meals in the kitchen for an extra dollar, or use the kitchen to cook your own, no charge."

I took a deep breath.

"There's one thing though..."

“Oh?”

“I have a cat. She’s very small,” I added quickly. “Very well-behaved. She’ll stay in the room. You won’t even know she’s there.”

She lifted a hand.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head. I won’t mind at all havin’ a wee kitty around the house—and there’ll be no question of lockin’ her up in your room all day. She can have the run of the house. You just bring her along any time.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Stark.”

“Ma, dear—just Ma. Now you run on down to the professor. I’ll air out the room for you.”

I clasped her hand in gratitude and almost skipped down the steps. Slipping my key into the lock, I pushed open the door.

After the professor’s note the night before, I wasn’t surprised to find the sandwich I had left for him sitting untouched on the counter. With a shrug, I re-wrapped it. Priss wouldn’t care if the roast beef was a bit stale, and I could thus save the money I would have spent on fish. Her sense of “Friday” wasn’t that developed.

I slipped into my apron and dusted the room again. I wasn’t sure what else to do; I had thoroughly cleaned just the day before, after all.

I decided there would be no harm in dusting the statue. Besides, I had to admit I very much wanted another look at him.

When I entered the corridor, I found the door to the storage room ajar. That was odd...

“Professor Conn?” I called, hurrying over to it. I pushed it open, a length of wood I had snatched up from the firebox in hand—just in case.

I needn’t have worried. The room was empty.

The automaton was gone.



“What’s that thingamabob?” Kate asked Stretch, looking down at the collection of scrap metal on his workbench. There was a cylinder of copper with wires and knobs on it lying amid the pieces.

“It’s a little something I’ve cobbled together,” replied the foreman with a shrug, adjusting a bolt with his wrench. “If it works like it’s supposed to, it’ll run the pump day and night all by itself. Hopefully, it’ll let us keep all the stock watered without needing to hire another hand.”

“Do you think it’ll save the ranch?”

“I don’t know for sure, Kate, but I think it just might.”

— Garrett Goldthwaite
*Calico Kate and the
River of Gold*

