It was a week before Christmas.

Snow fell through the early darkness, sparkling like diamonds as it passed through the beams of the clockwork lamp illuminating the door of Jenny Wren's Doll and Mechanical Emporium. Inside, a throng of eager customers inspected the merchandise with an eye to surprising a favorite child on Christmas morning. Doll-sized hats and slippers danced out the door at a brisk rate, accompanied by prancing mechanical ponies and singing mechanical mice, while Miss Edwige, the shop assistant, darted here and there, wrapping presents and taking orders for diminutive ball-gowns and walking dresses to be ready by Christmas Eve afternoon at the latest.

Jenny Wren herself sat enthroned behind the counter, round and sharp-faced as the bird whose name she'd taken, a pair of crutches propped near to hand. With her silver hair coiled beneath a neat white widow's cap, she presided over the shop like a cheerful Queen Victoria, cutting out and basting, trimming hats, chatting with her customers and depositing their coins in a patent mechanical till. The crutches were to support her weak legs and back, legacy of her rickety, hungry, unchildlike childhood. So, in another sense, were the good things around her—the shop, the customers, the bright dolls and toys ranged on the shelves—that had been called into being by her clever hands and her powerful determination, not to mention the help of her husband Sloppy, now deceased, her dear friend Miss Edwige, and her adopted daughter Lizzie.

If Mrs. Wren was the heart of the emporium and Miss Edwige its back and legs, then Lizzie was its inventive mind. It was Lizzie who contrived the mechanical animals so greatly superior to those found in other shops. It was Lizzie who made dolls walk or say "Mama." From the moment the Wrens saw her in the Foundling Hospital, kicking in her basket, they knew she was a child unlike any other. Certainly, she was not just in the common mold to look at, having been endowed by her unknown mother with fine black skin, rich black hair, keen dark eyes, and a spangled scarlet cape that led the nurses to speculate that she had been an Ethiopian equestrienne in a traveling circus.

Perhaps she had endowed her daughter with a curious spirit as well, for as Lizzie grew older, she displayed an insatiable hunger for knowledge that could not be gainsaid. Delighted, the Wrens sent her to Mrs. Ruaud's Academy for Working Girls, where she acquired a working knowledge of mechanics and clockwork and a fixed ambition to become an accredited Inventor, with a license from the Academy of Mechanical Arts and Sciences to hang on the wall.

She was to begin the course in the new year.

Closing time approached and still the customers came. Observing that Miss Edwige was run quite off her feet, Mrs. Wren pressed a button under the counter to summon her daughter from the inner room where she worked. The door opened and out came Lizzie in her leather apron, her magnifying spectacles pushed into her cloudy hair, and on her shoulder a small capuchin monkey, such as commonly accompany organ-grinders, wearing a little scarlet vest.

As she passed, a small boy of five or six lifted his gaze from the cabinet of mechanical animals he'd been studying and shrieked with joy.

Lizzie, a kind-hearted girl, smiled and lifted the monkey down for him to see. Close to, it was not a real monkey at all, but an automaton, its inner workings covered in gray felt save for its face and hands, which were of gleaming brass.

The boy tugged vigorously on his mother's sleeve. "Look, Mama! A clockwork monkey!"

The monkey held out a jointed paw and the boy shook it gently, speechless with delight.

His mother examined the creature with a measuring eye. "How much do you want for it?"

Lizzie restored the monkey to its perch. "I'm sorry, Mrs. White, but it's not for sale."

Mrs. White shrugged. "Please yourself," she said and sailed out, nose in the air, with Harry dragging from her hand, his eyes fixed longingly on the brass monkey.

"Hoity-toity," Mrs. Wren remarked as Lizzie approached her throne. "I know her tricks and her manners. Will you wait on Mr. Daltry, my love? He's growing quite agitated. "

Obediently, Lizzie set the brass monkey on a swing, where, steady as the shop clock, it ticked away the minutes to the moment when Miss Edwige locked the Emporium door and switched the mechanical sign from "open" to "closed.'

"That's the last of them, Ma." Lizzie took off her leather work apron and called, "Annabella, come!"

"Annabella, is it?" inquired her mother as the monkey scampered to Lizzie's shoulder. "Is that any name for a mechanical monkey?"

"Annabella is not just any mechanical monkey," said Lizzie. "Do leave those patterns, Miss Edwige. It's time for supper."

Over a dish of bubble and squeak, served up by an old Porter model mechanical modified to serve as a maid, of all work, Lizzie explained her newest invention.

"You know, Ma, how difficult it is to tidy the shop, after a long day."

"We're lucky we have a shop to tidy," her mother said emphatically. "I'd be glad to do it, if my back weren't bad and my legs weren't queer."

Miss Edwige, a mouse-like little woman known, in the bosom of the family, as Wiggy, looked as though she agreed with Lizzie.

"As you say, Ma. At all events, I decided to invent a mechanical to sift and compare and put away. It took, oh, six different assemblies, three springs, and more relays and escapements than you would easily believe, but I've performed tests and I believe—no, I am confident—that Annabella is not only able to sort buttons and gears and such, but match silks and pick up pins."

Miss Edwige cocked her head. She was a woman of few words, which she saved for the customers, but the Wrens contrived to understand her very well without.

"She will not want winding, Wiggy dear," said Lizzie. "I've put counterbalances on her springs so that they tighten as she moves, so long as those movements do not expend more energy than they generate."

"The proof of the pudding—or the monkey—is in the performance," said her mother.

Lizzie stood. "Well, if you have finished your supper, dear Ma, dear Wiggy, we shall go into the shop and you will see."

They finished, and a moment later, Lizzie was setting Annabella on the counter among the stray beads and ribbons. "Annabella, gather!" she said.

Brass feet clicking busily, the little monkey scampered up and down, picking up each object and placing it in rows by kind, size, and color. When all was in order, Lizzie showed her where they were kept and Annabella restored them to their proper cabinets and drawers. Finally, Lizzie opened a shipment of tiny buttons, lately arrived, and Annabella bestowed them in partitioned drawers, finishing the task in less time than anyone could have believed possible.

"The clever darling!" Mrs. Wren exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Do you think she can count the till? It would be a great saving of time, when there are so many orders to be

completed."

"She can do anything," Lizzie said proudly.

The till duly emptied, Annabella began to sort its contents. After watching her for a few moments, Miss Edwige frowned.

"I don't know, Wiggy," said Lizzie, puzzled. "Perhaps I have set her discrimination too fine." She touched the heap of coins the monkey had left to one side. "Annabella, sort!"

Annabella, ignoring her, scampered down the counter, where she retrieved a hitherto unnoticed bead from under the skirts of a doll.

"Annabella!"

Returning to the pile, Annabella picked up a sovereign and scraped it with one brass finger. A streak of dull silver opened across the Queen's golden countenance like a wound.

"Look, Ma! It's counterfeit!" Lizzie gasped.

"Counterfeit?" Mrs. Wren's eyes glittered like needles. "Give it here, my love." She turned the coin in her fingers, held it to the lamp, and shook her head at it reproachfully. "Dear me! I've grown too trusting. There are dragons in the world, Lizzie, my love. We must be vigilant against them."

Miss Edwige glanced towards the inner door.

"Very right, Wiggy." Mrs. Wren turned to her daughter. "Fetch out your box."

Lizzie's box contained Lizzie's own earnings, saved up year by year, mechanical by mechanical, to pay for the course that would lead to her Inventor’s license. With a sinking heart, she retrieved the box and poured it out on the counter. Annabella sorted the coins and notes—the true in neat piles to the right, the false in neat piles to the left.

In the end, the false accounted for nearly a third of the whole.

Miss Edwige hid her face in her hands; Mrs. Wren scowled.

"Of all the stinking, slinking, underhanded, dragonish cheats! And me a widow with a bad back and queer legs, sew, sew, sewing from dawn to midnight since I could hold a needle!" And she nodded a great many times, like a row of exclamation marks.

Lizzie looked grimly at the false coins winking in the lamplight. "We should have checked it."

"I should have checked it," her mother rejoined bitterly. "In future, I will check, oh yes, I will check like winking. But what are we to do in the meantime?"

Lizzie straightened. "I shall go to Scotland Yard. There's no recovering the money, but at least we may help bring the counterfeiters to justice."

"Scotland Yard!" scoffed her mother. "They'll take the coins and give you nothing but cold comfort in return. I know their tricks and their manners."

Next morning, Lizzie put the counterfeit coins in a carpet bag and set out for New Scotland Yard. Knowing very well how a young woman of her station and complexion was likely to be received, she stopped at a telephone exchange to call her mother's friend, Lawyer Wrayburn, who called his friend, Inspector Bradstreet, who sent down word that Lizzie Wren was to be shown up to him without delay. Her path thus smoothed, Lizzie told him her story, omitting, on Miss Edwige's silent advice, all mention of mechanical monkeys. The inspector cast a sad eye over the little collection, examined the coins through a lens, sighed, folded his hands, and explained, as kindly as possible, why he could not help her.

Small-time coiners, he said, were as hard to trap as mice and almost as numerous. A canny operator never passed his coins himself, employing petty criminals to introduce them into the ebb and flow of honest commerce. Most arrests were the result of happenstance and information received. All he could say was that the sovereigns appeared to be the work of a single coiner and that he was very sorry Lizzie had been practiced upon.

"Very sorry, is he?" Mrs. Wren exclaimed when Lizzie made her report over supper. "And what has he to be sorry about, with his mice and his operators? I know his tricks and his manners!"

"Well, he did mention that the Bank of England offers generous rewards for information leading to arrest of a coiner. I mean to earn one, Ma. Fifty pounds, only think! That's as much as we lost and more!"

Mrs. Wren laid her pale, gnarled hand on Lizzie's strong, dark one. "I'm sure you're clever enough to discover any number of coiners, my love."

Over the next days, as her hands busied themselves with assembling cogs and gears, springs and escapements, brass rods and pieces of felt into mechanical animals, Lizzie's mind scurried about like Annabella gathering pins, assembling facts and observations into hypotheses. Gradually, the hypotheses evolved into a plan, which she

presented to her mother and Miss Edwige as they sat sewing by the fire late one night a week before Christmas.

"I think our coiner must be one of our clients," she said. "Only consider, Ma. A zinc coin covered with gold leaf is likely to chip easily, revealing its falsity. Yet our false sovereigns are bright and perfect. Furthermore, there are a great deal too many of them. One or two from the same hand could be chance, but so many looks suspicious."

Mrs. Wren nodded sharply. "Very true, my love. Wiggy, will you fetch the ledger from my drawer? And my pen as well. We must make a list."

An hour's work produced a handful of regular customers who bought lavishly and paid for their purchases in gold.

"Well, we can scratch out Mrs. Guppy," Mrs. Wren said. "She'd never have the gumption to pass false coin."

"Mr. Daltry is a banker," Lizzie said. "True coin is his religion."

"That leaves Mrs. White and Mr. Rouncewell," said Mrs. Wren. "I would prefer it to be Mr. Rouncewell. He's very thin and his cuffs ain't clean."

Miss Edwige registered her judgment of this opinion by striking Mr. Rouncewell off the list. The three women contemplated the one name remaining.

"It's true Mrs. White has expensive tastes," said Lizzie doubtfully.

A decided shake of the widow's cap. "She's too respectable and her husband's shop is too successful for such low tricks. And there's little Harry. No, we're back to where we began, I fear, like a carousel."

"Annabella will keep watch," Lizzie said. "Should she see a false coin, she will raise a red flag."

Her mother picked up her needle again. "And then what shall we do?" she asked, sewing busily. "Knock the coiner down and sit upon 'em? Wiggy won't, I can't, and you shouldn't."

"If it's someone we know, then I shall call the inspector," said Lizzie. "If it isn't, then you and I will hold them in conversation while Wiggy makes the call." And so the plan was made.

On the day before Christmas Eve, Miss Edwige and Lizzie, half-dizzy with having worked all the night, darted to and fro, packing up orders and helping hysterical

customers with last-minute decisions. There was a run upon the singing mice. Mr. Rouncewell came in for his goddaughter's walking doll, Mrs. Guppy collected a ball-gown for her niece's doll, and Mrs. White picked up a dancing dog for Harry. In the confusion, even the sharp-eyed Mrs. Wren could not find time to check Annabella's signal flag. By the end of the day, there were two more counterfeit sovereigns in the till, a great jumble of odds and ends to tidy away, and worst of all, no Annabella anywhere to be found.

From the time she awoke, Annabella had been learning. To her, the world was an endless permutation of things to be compared, judged, and sorted into their proper places as she refined the information that Lizzie had patterned into her. Beads, she knew, were round and hard and needed to be gathered and separated by color and size. Not all round things, however, were beads. Nor did all beads need to be sorted, where many things that were not round or even hard did. Color and size were important, but so were other details. A bead on the floor must be picked up; a bead on a dress must be left alone.

Annabella had seen at once that the lady in the trapezoidal hat belonged in the class of Counterfeiters. The coin she laid on the counter was precisely similar to the false coins Annabella had seen before, down to the slight squint in the Queen's eye and the tiny tilt to the first X in MDCCCLXXXIII. She held up her red flag, as instructed, but the Ma did not look up. Nor did the Wiggy. The Lizzie might have looked, but she was at her workbench, fitting a large doll with a voice-box. Would that she had fitted Annabella with one!

Voiceless, the little brass monkey was left with only one choice. When the lady in the trapezoidal hat left the shop, Annabella swung out after her into the damp gloom of a winter's day in London.

Outside moved faster than Inside and had more and bigger things in it. Annabella learned it as she went: what things she could swing from and what things she could run on; what would hold her weight and what was likely to let her fall. She soon caught the trick of moving unobtrusively, though not before drawing the attention of an elderly ballad-seller sitting under a lamppost, who pointed his finger and shouted "Oy! Monkey!" as she passed. But since he was prone to shouting about things visible only to him, nobody took notice.

Every minute her cogs and gears were adjusting and readjusting their patterns to accommodate the constant stream of new information, Annabella's attention remained fixed on the trapezoidal hat. She followed it through innumerable zigs and zags, until finally it turned down a narrow alley next to a prosperous-looking shop. Annabella glanced at the book hanging over the door and the gold writing on the window, stored their shapes in her memory, and clambered up a brick wall just in time to see her quarry let herself into the back door.

Instantly, Annabella sorted the windows overlooking the yard into shut and open. Of the latter, there was only one, low to the ground and just wide enough to admit a small monkey.

Leaping from the wall, she crossed the yard, her movements slower than they had been, and more disconnected. She did not know, as Lizzie would have, that she was close to running down, but a tiny cog engaged to send her to a shutter-hook, where she swung until her self-winding springs had stored enough energy to slip through the window and perch on a high shelf.

Below her, a bald gentleman performed the mechanical alchemy necessary to transform a zinc blank, glue, and sheets of thin gold leaf into a passable sovereign. As Annabella watched, unblinking, he made four gold coins, scooped them into a soft leather bag, removed the coin stamp from the press frame, and wrapped it in burlap. The coins, along with the gold leaf, he stored in a small safe; the blanks and stamp he concealed under a pile of leather scraps. Having restored his workshop to an appearance of innocence, he closed the open window, latched it, and left, closing the door behind him.

Quick as thinking, Annabella descended upon the pile of leather scraps, exhumed the sack, and tucked a zinc blank in her vest. She then turned her attention to the safe. Having seen the gentleman turn the dial this way and that, it was easy for her to deduce the necessity of a combination. Discovering the combination was harder. In the end, it was the click of the tumblers under her metal fingers, so like the ticking of her own escapements, that did the trick. She extracted two coins, pocketed them, returned the safe to its original state, leapt to the window, and flipped the latch, eager to return to the Lizzie.

Alas! For though Annabella's brass digits were agile, they lacked the strength to manipulate the window latch—which was, to be sure, an uncommonly stiff one. Annabella strove with it until her fingers dented. Clearly, there would be no going out through the window, and the door, which she next tried, was locked.

In the normal course of things, no one would expect an artifact of brass, steel, leather and tiny jewels could feel frustration. Yet Annabella swung herself violently around the workshop, leaping from shelf to press to cupboard to window in an access of what looked very like fury, leaving a chaos of leather, paper, and spools of thread in her wake. At length, her destructive impulse having exhausted itself, she reverted to her original purpose and tidied it all up again. But all this activity exhausted her energy to a dangerous degree. Collapsing where she stood, she lay ticking faintly like a watch in a drawer, conserving what energy yet remained.

When the long winter's night was far advanced, the door opened to admit the small

nightgowned figure of Harry, carrying a bedroom candle. He cast a proprietary glance about the workshop and whatever illicit errand had brought him was utterly forgotten in discovering Annabella, dropped under the stamping press like a stringless puppet. With a squeal of joy, he caught her up and shook her. Her counterbalanced springs tightened; she twitched one arm. Harry giggled and carried on shaking, but Annabella did not stir. His shaking grew more desperate, until, at last, he dropped her.

Annabella, now well-wound, caught herself neatly on the press frame, gave herself a couple of good swings, then leapt over Harry's astonished head and out the open door.

Silent and determined, Harry pelted out the door, leading where he thought he followed, through the shadowy house to the shop, where examples of the bald gentleman's legal labors, beautifully bound and stamped in pure gold leaf, stood in orderly rows, awaiting a buyer who liked matched sets.

Annabella found a shelf whose advanced state of dust proclaimed it a safe hiding spot and waited with mechanical patience until Harry, despairing, left.

Shortly after, Christmas Eve morning dawned, gray and chill. The bald gentleman and the lady—sans trapezoidal hat—opened the shop, allowing customers to pass in and out and Annabella to make good her escape.

On Christmas Eve, Jenny Wren's Doll and Mechanical Emporium was, if possible, even more a-bustle than it had been the day before. Mrs. Wren sewed doll dresses with one hand and made change with the other while Miss Edwige wrapped orders and Lizzie oscillated between workbench and counter like a metronome. They smiled because they must and wished their customers a Happy Christmas because it was the season, but their hearts weren't in it.

Annabella had been missing all night and all morning, and now it was getting to be early afternoon and she was still missing and what were they to do if she never returned?

Mrs. Wren, it must be admitted, was chiefly conscious of the loss of pounds, shillings, and pence the little mechanical represented, and Miss Edwige of a Christmas Eve spent in cleaning and sorting. As for Lizzie, all the while she was wrapping and smiling and saying what was proper to the customers, her heart beat out Annabella! Annabella! like a martial drum and her eyes misted with tears.

Imagine her joy, then, when, glancing up at Annabella’s little swing, she saw the beloved monkey—somewhat dirty as to her face and torn as to her gray felt covering and her vest to be sure, but whole, holding up her little red flag.

Lizzie left the customer she'd been waiting on and darted behind the counter.

"Ma," she cried. "Annabella's back. And she knows!"

Mrs. Wren glanced up at the swing and back at her adoptive daughter, her sharp little face alight. "Happy Christmas indeed!" she exclaimed on a row of nods. "Who is our dragon, then?"

Lizzie bit her lip. "It's hard to say, Ma."

The smile froze on Mrs. Wren's lips as a customer approached. "That'll be thirty shillings, sir." She glanced up at Annabella, who lowered the flag. "Thank you, sir, and Happy Christmas!"

At length, the last order was delivered, the last prancing pony wrapped, the last penny examined and passed as true coin, the last button and pin put away by a brisk and fully-wound Annabella. Over a supper of grilled kidneys, the three women discussed the problem of how to extract the information from Annabella's inner workings.

"Why didn't you teach her to talk?" Mrs. Wren demanded.

"There wasn't room for a voice box," Lizzie said miserably. "And I didn't teach her anything. It's all cogs and escapements."

A moment of depressed silence. Then Miss Edwige rose and fetched a pencil and sheet of foolscap. Annabella, who had been sitting on top of the kitchen dresser in an attitude of dejection, swung down and took them eagerly from her hands. Having observed Mrs. Wren and her ledger, she knew very well to which class these objects belonged and what to do with them. Busily, she began mark the paper. She made left-handed slashes, she made right-handed slashes; she scattered curves and dashes here and there, like raisins in a pudding.

"That's not writing!" Mrs. Wren shook her finger reproachfully. "A hen's tracks would make more sense!"

Lizzie bit her lip speechlessly, as puzzled as her mother.

Miss Edwige then astonished the company by speaking aloud. "It's a name.”

Indeed, as the strokes, curves, and dashes accumulated, they became letters, printed in the kind of block writing commonly found on shop signs, replete with decorated uprights and serifs and fiddly curves of no discernible use. The message, once she'd finished it, was this:

ELIJAH WHITE

Mrs. Wren stated, with many exclamatory nods, that she never. Miss Edwige, who had used up her stock of words, clasped her hands before her bosom and beamed. Lizzie looked from the name to Annabella and back again, too astonished to say a word.

Annabella tapped the paper smartly, as though to say, "Here is the culprit. Now what do you intend to do about it?"

"Call the inspector," said Mrs. Wren, who could read brass gestures as easily as fleshly ones.

"But it's Christmas Eve," objected Lizzie.

"Do you think the criminals all go to church? Where there are criminals, there will be policeman."

Lizzie hesitated. "That's true, Ma. But it seems wrong to bring policemen down upon a family on Christmas Eve."

"It is wrong," said her mother tartly, "to let a pair of greedy, grasping dragons sit down to stolen goose and counterfeited plum pudding. Fifty pounds is fifty pounds. And you must remember, my love, there's no getting your license without it."

Annabella ran up Lizzie's arm and plucked a jeweler's turnscrew from her hair, which, thus freed, enveloped the little monkey in an ebony cloud. She laid the tool by Lizzie's hand and sat beside it, as if to say, "Here is what you stand to lose."

"I know! I know!” Lizzie drove her hands into her hair. “I want the reward—I've earned it, or at least Annabella has. But need it be tonight?"

Miss Edwige rolled her eyes and pursed her lips.

"Wiggy is quite right," Mrs. Wren said. "We must strike while the iron is hot. We can't risk the rascals decamping."

"Very well." Lizzie stood and wrapped her shawl around her. "Give me the false coin and the blank. I'll take them straight to the Yard. Inspector Bradstreet may be working tonight. And if he is not, I'll have him called."

"That's my clever girl," said her mother.

Miss Edwige got up and scurried to the dresser, from which she retrieved a square

parcel tied with a scarlet ribbon. It was a set of drafting tools.

“Happy Christmas,” she said, and kissed Lizzie’s smooth cheek.

It was spring in London, which meant it was raining. A brisk wind rocked the sign above Jenny Wren's Doll and Mechanical Emporium, scented with a green savor of grass and new leaves. Mrs. Guppy was within, earnestly discussing the merits of a pair of dueling mechanical frogs with Miss Edwige. Mrs. Wren was finishing up a trousseau for Mr. Rouncewell's niece's doll, who had got engaged in the ball-gown Jenny had made her at Christmas.

The door to Lizzie's workroom opened, and a small boy burst out. It was Harry White, his hair a little shorter than it had been five months earlier and his legs a little longer. He seemed as familiar with the shop as though he belonged there, which indeed he did. Mrs. Wren had given him a home when his parents had been cast in prison for their crimes, their families having immediately severed all ties with them, and him. What had begun with pity had ended with love, for Harry was an endless fountain of questions and notions, some of them sensible, more of them not. And with Lizzie busy with classes at the Royal Academy of Mechanical Arts and Sciences, and out of the way more days than not, Mrs. Wren and Miss Edwige agreed that it was pleasant to have a child about the place.

“The mouse won’t go!” he announced. “I’ve checked the gears and checked the wheels, and all it does is whirr and rock!”

He looked close to bursting, and Miss Edwige, who was nearest him, ruffled his hair and generally gave him to understand that no mouse could get the better of him. Jenny Wren, looking up from her work, bestowed a series of smiling nods on him. Annabella sprang down from her swing and scrambled up onto his shoulder. What was invention, after all, but sorting and arranging information so that it could be easily used? And Harry was a promising student.