

THE LAST AIRSHIP

Written by
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Based on a True Story

DENSE FOG

...and the BLEAT of sheep grazing on a hill topped with a stone tower. A BEARDED OLD MAN stands in the archway. A scene from the Tarot. This is Glastonbury Tor, in Somerset.

A FLARE of light as the old man lights a pipe. He might be a shepherd. And now we hear a diffuse DRONE getting louder, bouncing off the stone walls of St. Michael's Tower.

The DRONE SPUTTERS to a stop. Now nothing. The sound of nothing.

A HOLLOW VOICE COMES FROM ABOVE

MEGAPHONE VOICE

This is the His Majesty's Airship R
One Hundred and One. We're having
navigational difficulty in this
fog. Can you hear us down there?

The voice echoes and dissolves in the cotton fog. The old man is bewildered and frightened.

EXT. R101 - CONTINUOUS

We can't see the airship as much as we sense its enormity. We only see a silhouette of a man and a megaphone through wisps of clouds. He's leaning out of the control car slung below a massive dirigible.

MEGAPHONE VOICE

Are we over Shepton Mallet? Can
anyone hear us?

EXT./INT. R101 CONTROL CAR - CONTINUOUS

SQUADRON LEADER ERNEST "JOHNNIE" JOHNSTON (39) lowers the megaphone and hoists himself back into the Control Car.

Inside the dark Control Car we find FLIGHT LIEUTENANT CARMICHAEL "BIRD" IRWIN (37), a tall, trim Irishman, pacing nervously. There is also a FIRST OFFICER STEFF at the wheel of the elevator control and a STEERING COXWAIN in silhouette. But it's gray and damp and surreal here in this airship in the clouds.

JOHNSTON.

It's dead quiet, I'm afraid.

Irwin glances at the altitude indicator. 700 Feet. Johnston walks to the large window and wipes the condensation off with his sleeve.

Captain Irwin leans over to speak into a horn.

IRWIN

Binks, start the engines back -

Suddenly, the stone tower looms immediately in front of them.

Irwin lurches for the rudder, shoving the Steering Coxwain aside, and turns hard, as they narrowly avert slamming into St. Michael's Tower.

DISSOLVE TO:

Over the solemn CHIMES OF BIG BEN...

A MOVIE TONE NEWSREEL

NEWSREEL CARD: The Empty Chair

A Union Jack flies at half mast.

NEWSREEL V.O.

While the clubhouse at the
Crowborough golf links lowers its
flag as a token to a former
captain.

The entrance to an estate. Servants unload flowers from a long line of lorries.

NEWSREEL V.O. (CONT'D)

At nearby Windlesham, a fleet of
lorries is needed to deliver the
tributes to the funeral for Sir
Arthur Conan Doyle, who passed
quietly, with his family beside
him, on July 8th.

Cut to the steps of London's Royal Albert Hall.

NEWSREEL V.O. (CONT'D)

Four days later, as many as six
thousand people pay tribute with a
service at Royal Albert Hall, while
hundreds more are turned away.

Men with top hats climb the steps. Photographers jostle for position.

NEWSREEL V.O. (CONT'D)

Here is Prime Minister Ramsay
McDonald, with his close friend,
Lord Thomson, the Labour Party Air
Minister.

Abrupt splice. A tall, old man with a long beard and cane,
chats with two men.

NEWSREEL V.O. (CONT'D)

Many of our realm's foremost
writers, old and young, have
gathered. George Bernard Shaw,
H.G. Wells, and Noel Coward have
all come to pay respects.

Inside the great hall. Doyle's family sit on stage in a line
of chairs. There is an empty chair in the middle.

NEWSREEL V.O. (CONT'D)

Inside the hall, all eyes are
focused on an empty chair on the
stage. Although Doyle was best
known for his beloved creation, the
stories of Sherlock Holmes, it was
in his role as a spiritualist that
most distinguished his final years.
His family believed he would
continue to do his work from beyond
the grave.

CARD: Bedford, England, 1930

INT. VILLIERS HOME/ KITCHEN - DAY

A kettle WHISTLES.

This is a practical brick house in Bedford, where a Major's
pay stretches further than in London.

A mother serves brown toast and marmalade to two children.
Rain beats against the window. This is JUDITH VILLIERS, 42,
with DAVID, 10 and ROSEMARY, 5.

JUDITH

Sit straight, David, your father
will be down straight away.

VILLIERS

I'm just here now, aghast at what
I've just observed.

Daddy's Boy David muffles a smile. Rosemary allows a peck on the cheek. The father is MAJOR OLIVER VILLIERS, 44, in a starched RAF uniform. He pours tea, hovering over the children as he picks up a book.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

(reading)

Milly-Molly-Mandy. How are you finding this, David?

ROSEMARY

It's mine, father. You're a silly. She has short hair. That's what I want.

JUDITH

We'll not be having that any time soon. We're not Bohemians, now are we?

(beat)

David is reading Sherlock Holmes at school. In memory of Doyle's passing.

DAVID

They said he would return from the dead and they kept a chair open at his service, but he -

JUDITH

David, that's rubbish. We've discussed this.

VILLIERS

Hold on, then. I think we can ask the man to speak for himself.

Villiers walks to the telephone in an alcove. It's the only new thing in the house. He picks up the earpiece and leans in.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

(into phone)

Oh, hello, I'd like to speak with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Is he over on your side?

The kids are amused.

JUDITH

Oh, stop that, Oliver.

VILLIERS

(into phone)

Oh, he is? With the angels, you say? Well then, I completely understand. Please tell him we rang.

ROSEMARY

What did they say? What did they say?

JUDITH

Oliver.

VILLIERS

They said he was writing a new adventure, and not disposed to speak at the present.

JUDITH

Are you driving Sefton?

VILLIERS

Yes, you're right. I should go.

Villiers stands and pecks Judith and Rosemary. David walks to the door, and opens a shoeshine box that sits...

IN THE VESTIBULE

Villiers dons his overcoat and plants his foot on the box. David buffs the black shoe front and back.

JUDITH

But it's positively drenching.

They switch feet. Other shoe.

VILLIERS

Don't forget the heels. Last impressions.

He stands and pats David on the shoulder.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

What is it then? I expect you'll want a farthing.

DAVID

I'm saving, Father.

VILLIERS

Another Dickie Regent book?

DAVID
 (grandly)
 Dick Regent - Around the Globe in a
 Fortnight!

He hands David a farthing and opens the door to the pounding rain.

A deep, throaty DRONING SOUND builds.

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ SHEDS - DAY

CARD: Royal Airship Works. Cardington.

A mud-spattered Crossley splashes up in front of two enormous hangars with corrugated iron sheathing. These are, for the moment, the two largest buildings in the industrial world.

Note: The hangars are know as sheds and all of the action will take place in the older, Shed #1.

Shed #1 reverberates with mechanical DRONING inside.

Villiers steps out into pouring rain. The car is parked in a large puddle. He glances at his passenger.

VILLIERS
 Oh, Christ... Sorry Brancks.

SIR SEFTON BRANCKER, 53, adjusts his foggy eyepiece and hop hop hops from the auto to the shed door, all alpha male smug over his dexterity. He's the Director of Civil Aviation, with a self-assured and abrasive presence by day and rakish air by night.

Another man in a London Fog strides over to them from an Administrative Building. He is MAJOR GEORGE HERBERT SCOTT, 42, Assistant Director of Airship Development. He looks nervous. He will always look nervous.

The DRONING sound coming from the shed is deafening. It sounds like a squadron of bombers.

The men hurry to the shed's side door into the Plan Room, while the giant hangar doors pulsate and rattle from the horrific din inside. Scott glances at Villiers shoes.

SCOTT
 SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT YOUR WELLIES!

BRANCKER
 HIS BLOODY ROOF LEAKS LIKE A SIEVE!
 (to Villiers)
 (MORE)

BRANCKER (CONT'D)
YOU NEED TO GET THAT REPLACED, OLD
BOY!

VILLIERS
NOT SOON LIKELY ON A MAJOR'S
SALARY!

Scott opens the side door and they enter...

INT. NUMBER ONE SHED - CONTINUOUS

Shafts of rain-dripping light slant down on the interior of the eight hundred foot long cathedral-like hangar. The shed is consumed by a colossal-sized dirigible, surrounded by a complex system of scaffolds, ladders, and catwalks.

This is the R101 - the world's largest and most advanced rigid frame airship, straining and lurching like a captive leviathan in a submarine tank.

Mechanics, Riggers and Engineers are climbing and working on all parts of the ship as five DIESEL ENGINES ROAR. The twenty foot wooden propellers spin dangerously close to the concrete floor.

Scott hands out ear defenders.

SCOTT
(yelling)
YOU'LL NEED THESE!

As the three men put on the ear defenders, the SOUND MUFFLES to loud, but bearable, two thousand horsepower DRONE.

As Villiers backs up to look, he stumbles on a rope. Brancker steadies him, pointing at the deadly propeller blades.

BRANCKER
EYES OPEN! KEEP YOUR WITS!

Villiers' eyes flash at Brancks - I'm not a child.

A barrel-chested man with a megaphone yells up at the engine cabs that are suspended from the bottom of the ship. This is FLIGHT SERGEANT GEORGE "SKY" HUNT, 41, Chief Coxwain. Beside him, JOE BINKS, 36, Foreman Engineer.

A cable SNAPS on the port side and the giant airship lunges to its right, banging against scaffolding causing riggers to topple. Binks frantically blows a WHISTLE. Sky Hunt screams into his megaphone.

HUNT
SHUT IT DOWN SHUT IT DOWN SHUT HER
BLOODY ENGINES DOWN!

The airship bangs and bucks and finally settles as the engines shut down. Men race to check on the fallen riggers and engineers.

Hunt sags and turns, acknowledging the visitors. They all take off their ear defenders.

BRANCKER
Damage?

HUNT
She's a right bitch, sir. Wanting
out the box is all.

VILLIERS
I thought you were out of the
service by now, Hunt. You've got
full pension.

HUNT
They asked me to help fly this one,
sir. At least to India and back.

BRANCKER
Well, now you've got the extra bay.
Should take care of the lift
problem.

Hunt considers his words now. He looks over at Joe Binks, up on a scaffold.

HUNT
You'd think so, sir.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ DRAWING OFFICE - DAY

An office with drawing tables, desks and a blackboard. A war room feel. There are oil paintings of older British airships on the wall. A tray with tea service waits on the conference table.

Three men are hunched over drawings. They are WING COMMANDER REGINALD COLMORE, 48, Director of Airship Development, looking old for his age. There is an air of decency about him. Johnston is an old hand, acting as Navigator here. Bird Irwin is in crisp but casual clothes.

The door flies open and Scott, Villiers and Brancker dash inside, chased by rain.

SCOTT
Look alive, boys, here's Whitehall
looking over our shoulder.

BRANCKER
That's right, Eyes open. Keep your
wits. We'll go straight to Thomson
if you're not tip top.

They all know each other. Handshakes all around.

VILLIERS
(to Colmore)
You could have arranged for better
weather, old boy.

Brancker dries his eyepiece. Scott pours tea.

Villiers peers at technical drawings of the R101. He looks at
Irwin.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
What do you think, Bird? They've
chopped your ship in half, haven't
they?

IRWIN
I'm hoping if she breaks in two, I
get to fly the front half.

VILLIERS
She'll be fine and you know it.

COLMORE
Come along, then, Villiers.
Richmond is testing now...

CUT TO:

A SMALL WIND TUNNEL

Colmore, Villiers, Brancker, Irwin, and Scott have joined
CHIEF DESIGNER VINCENT RICHMOND (54) who stands with
clipboard and slide rule as he looks through a window at a
scale model of the R101 bouncing in simulated headwind.
Richmond is the thin-skinned patrician who always knows
better than others.

The men have to talk over the FAN MOTOR SOUND.

RICHMOND

Relatively stable at a thirty eight knot headwind. Hello Brancks. Villiers brought you along, I see.

Richmond turns the wind off. The model swings gently. Scott gets the model from the wind tunnel and brings it out.

RICHMOND (CONT'D)

The new gas cell holds half a million cubic feet of hydrogen. We achieved forty two tons of additional disposable lift.

Brancker leans in to Villiers.

BRANCKER

Are you getting these numbers, old boy? Now, you'll be the one explaining them to the press.

VILLIERS

The only number they care about is twenty thousand pounds.

Richmond directs them to the original model airship, which has been cut in half. Brancker lifts one half off the mount and examines it.

BRANCKER

And the airframe? No concerns about the integrity.

SCOTT

They connected the first longitudinals in under forty minutes.

COLMORE

It's not that we don't-

RICHMOND

She should be absolutely fine.

BRANCKER

Ah, that's brilliant, old man. You've got a peerage in your future, I'm sure.

IRWIN

Just a few details left. Like flying the damn thing. Isn't that right, Villiers?

EXT. FLYING BIPLANE - DAY

A single seat de Havilland Moth flies low over English countryside.

BIPLANE POV

Flying over a steam locomotive heading towards Bedford. Cows and sheep graze on patchwork pastures. Looking down on thatched roofs.

In the distance - approaching the sheds and the mooring mast surrounded by the Hydrogen plant and Administration Block of the Royal Airship Works. The sheds are gargantuan.

The roadways are jammed with motor-cars.

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ SHEDS - CONTINUOUS

Almost a hundred REPORTERS are gathered outside the sheds. The breeze ruffles hats and writing pads.

A makeshift riser has been erected. Villiers is at the microphone. The airship officers stand off to the side.

The plane has landed at the aerodrome. The PILOT walks towards the crowd.

VILLIERS

I will shortly introduce Royal Airship officers, and we will be conducting tours on board. But first let me show you what you have really come to see - His Majesty's Royal Airship, the R One Hundred and One.

Twenty men slowly roll back the two-ton doors to the Shed, with LOUD METALLIC GROANS from the industrial-size rollers on steel rails.

And there it is. Looking at the gleaming bow of a seven hundred foot airship. The next evolution of air travel, the crown jewel of British aeronautics.

It is a marvel.

The crowd erupts with APPLAUSE. Even the jaded reporters.
It's a grand time for Britain.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

You will soon see the inaugural
voyage of the largest rigid frame
airship ever built. The R One
Hundred and One is 732 feet long,
140 feet high... a size that would
surpass that of the largest
Atlantic liner afloat. This modern
day airship is, by a wide margin,
the largest vessel in the world.

The Moth pilot reaches the edge of the crowd, listening to
Villiers. He's polishing, then inserting, his ever-present
eyepiece. It is Sefton Brancker.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

Now it's time to meet the men who
have designed and built and will
fly this majestic vessel.

The men behind Villiers step forward.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

Let me first introduce the men we
call the Big Three of Cardington.
Wing Commander Reginald Colmore is
the Director of Airship
Development.

Well-groomed Colmore tips his fedora and nods. His look is
earnest.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

And Colonel Vincent Richmond, the
chief designer of the airship.

Richmond soaks up the credit he feels is so long overdue.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

Major G.H. Scott, Assistant
Director of Airship Development.

Scott sports and jaunty double-breasted suite and puffs on an
ostentatious pipe. He looks like he hits the sauce because he
does.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

And, also we have our ship's
captain, Flight Lieutenant
Carmichael Irvin.

(MORE)

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

Some of you may know, he represented the Crown in middle distance running in the last Olympics.

Irwin steps forward and tips his hat.

NOTE: Royal Airship flight officers wear uniforms for flights or special occasions, like airline pilots or ocean liner captains. They have all retained their RAF or Royal Navy ranks.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

And from the Air Ministry, a distinguished aviator in his own right - I believe that was his Moth that just landed behind us - is that you, Sefton?

Polite APPLAUSE as exuberant Brancker splits the crowd and bounces onto the riser in his flight jacket.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

Yes, I give you Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation. I should also mention, chairman of the Royal Aero Club's racing committee. And cofounder, with Lord Thomson, of the highly successful Light Aeroplane club.

BRANCKER

I'm charged with delivering the abject apologies of Lord Thomson, who could not be here today. But he did send along this...

He reaches into his leather flight jacket and pulls a folded flag. Voila!

BRANCKER (CONT'D)

The ship's ensign.

Villiers orchestrates the unfolding - the large RAF Ensign has a field of sky blue with a Union Jack in the corner and the RAF roundel in the center. The unfurled flag spans four men.

Holding the Ensign at chest height, the men pose for a photograph. Villiers almost lines up with them but catches a glance from Brancker. He steps aside. He's not one of them.

The POP,POP,POP of flashbulbs illuminate the red hair of tall woman standing with the press.

She's handsome and striking, if not beautiful, and she jostles forward to raise her hand - with no timidity from being the only woman in the group. This is the American, JULIA MCCARTHY, 31, poised and almost aristocratic with her auburn hair splayed across a royal blue swing coat.

Villiers smiles and points to her. Ladies first.

MCCARTHY

Julia McCarthy with the Globe. We understand-

BRANCKER

(leaning in)
New York.

Villiers ignores him. He knows where the Globe is from.

MCCARTHY

- the ship's design was faulty.
You've cut her in half to insert an extra gas bag. That seems quite extraordinary. And how did that go?

VILLIERS

(distracted by Brancker)
Sorry?

MCCARTHY

You cut the ship in half.

Richmond nudges Villiers aside as he steps to the microphone.

RICHMOND

The decision to switch to the Beardsmore diesel engines improved safety for tropical air, but we sacrificed in weight. We needed more disposable lift and by extending the midsection, we were able to add one more bay at the largest point of the ship.

MCCARTHY

And will the ship's frame be as strong? Will it be safe?

RICHMOND

The Germans did this with the Zeppelin Bodensee. She handled just as well afterward.

Irwin stands next to Villiers.

IRWIN
(under his breath)
He bloody well stole the idea from
Jerry, is what he means.

Villiers smiles and steps up to the microphone again.

VILLIERS
The R101 is a product of the best
aeronautical engineers in the
world. And now it's time for you to
see for yourselves.

CUT TO:

INT. R101/PROMENADE DECK - A SHORT TIME LATER

Captain Irwin speaks to a group of reporters, including Julia McCarthy. They are inside the airship, in a long corridor with deck chairs and railings in front of downward slanted eight-foot windows.

IRWIN
Our Promenade Decks include a new
technology - the Cellon windows are
a lightweight composite derived
from... derived from serious chaps
in white coats, I'll say, as I've
forgotten the process.

LOOKING THROUGH THE AIRSHIP WINDOWS FROM INSIDE

Blue gray light. Tools CLANGING in the distance. A rigger's lunch pail on a scaffold. Dust-filled shafts of light slanting down within the massive shed.

IRWIN (CONT'D)
The weight-saving measures can be
seen throughout the ship.

TURNING INTO THE LOUNGE

Linen covered card tables and wicker chairs. Drapes and potted plants.

Villiers strolls over to greet them. An IMBECILE REPORTER pulls out a cigarette. He fishes in his pocket and pulls out a lighter. He raises the lighter up...

IRWIN (CONT'D)
The wicker furniture is moveable,
and we have a Victrola, so you'll
be able to foxtrot your way to-

SUDDENLY

Villiers lunges at the reporter and knocks the lighter away. The reporter stumbles. His lighter skitters across the polished floor.

Red faced, Villiers measures himself. McCarthy watches.

VILLIERS

There's five million cubic feet of hydrogen in this ship, COULD YOU NOT READ THE BLOODY SIGNS?!

IMBECILE REPORTER

Sorry, wasn't thinking. I thought I'd heard it was okay on the ship.

Irwin helps the reporter up, dusts him off.

IRWIN

We do have a smoking room in the ship. It's right over here. Perhaps we'll have a sherry to settle our nerves.

McCarthy catches up with Villiers as they leave.

MCCARTHY

I would have thought you'd taken every precaution.

VILLIERS

There's no precaution against the irresponsibility of the press, is there?

EXT. PICADILLY CIRCUS - NIGHT

Darkness falls and the social heart of the city comes alive. Double decker buses, lorries, cabs - all plastered with adverts and jostling in traffic. Bright lights and smartly dressed people everywhere. Horns, music... This is London's Times Square in the Jazz Age.

CAFE ROYAL

The place to go before and after the theatre. A Picadilly institution.

A LONDON CAB PULLS UP

Villiers passes coins to the driver as a CAFE ROYAL DOORMAN opens the cab door.

DOORMAN
Evening, Sir.

VILLIERS
The Brasserie?

DOORMAN
To the left, sir. Follow the
clamour.

Villiers bounces up the steps and a second doorman holds the door as enters.

INT. CAFE ROYAL - CONTINUOUS

We see the high ceilings and chandeliers of the Grill Room, full of evening wear and white linen tables.

Villiers waves off the Maitre d' and enters the smoke-filled Brasserie. Glasses CLINKING, people LAUGHING. Black tie waiters in white aprons slalom around drunken cigar-waving philosophers holding forth with chairs tipped back against wood paneled walls.

IN ONE CORNER

Brancker stands and waves. He is at a table with Scotty, Irwin, Colmore and Johnston. Rosy cheeks and loose collars leaning over half-empty bottles.

BRANCKER
Come on then, Villiers, you're the
man of the match.

Villiers weaves through the tables, passing two men and woman in the midst of animated debate. Villiers double takes, but keeps moving. They look familiar.

Brancks pulls a chair out for him. They slap him on the back as he sits.

SCOTT
You've earned your pint, old man.
(gesturing for waiter)
What is it then?

IRWIN
Earned his pint, I should say. We
owe this man our bloody lives.

BRANCKER
We're currently sampling a
particularly nice German Moselle.

The WAITER appears.

VILLIERS
(to the waiter)
Bordeaux or similar, please.
Whatever seems best.

BRANCKER
Have you had their Veal Kidneys
with Mushrooms?

VILLIERS
I've eaten, but I am tempted.

COLMORE
Bird has been telling us about your
midfield tackle.

BRANCKER
Yes... how merchant service of you.

Villiers feels that pinch. They add up.

VILLIERS
I had no choice, did I?

Scott places an empty wine bottle on its side and turns it
like a compass needle pointing it at a nearby table.

SCOTT
Now then, see who else is here,
Villiers.

ACROSS THE ROOM

It's the table he passed. A fastidious man in evening dress. -
this is NOEL COWARD (31). Next to him, an old man with a
beard and rumpled clothes. This is GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (74).

And in between these very different men, there is a striking
woman with dark hair in an Eton Crop. She has ivory skin,
stylish jewelry, a shapely figure, and wise and penetrating
eyes. She's 37 years old. She would catch your eye in any
room. Her name is EILEEN GARRETT.

Their table shows their history. They started with tea, but
graduated to port and sherry.

BACK TO THE CORNER TABLE

Villiers lights a cigarette.

VILLIERS

Is that Coward with Shaw?

SCOTT

Chalk and cheese, those two. The theatre crowd is always here.

JOHNSTON.

Too many poodlefakers for my taste.

VILLIERS

And the woman?

COLMORE

She's a trance medium. Garrett. Quite popular with the spiritualists.

VILLIERS

Coward wouldn't be having that. Now don't tell me he's a spiritualist.

BRANCKER

There's a story about his mother, Violet... quite legendary. She attended a performance by a psychic woman who divined people's fortunes simply by holding an article of clothing. And she, this fortune teller, held this sock aloft and proclaimed to the assembled "I *must* know who the owner of this sock is". To which, Violet's sister yelled out "right here, it's Mrs. Coward." And the psychic said, "Yes, but who wears the sock?" "my son, Noel". And the psychic said "well, I am getting such a strong vibration from this sock that I am convinced he is going to have an illustrious career."

IRWIN

Quite the sock.

VILLIERS

And Shaw? He believes this Mumbo Jumbo as well?

COLMORE

The old blighter just fancies the birds.

EXT. PALACE OF WESTMINSTER - DAY

Establishing. The Houses of Parliament.

INT. HOUSE OF LORDS - CONTINUOUS

Villiers and Brancker sit in the visitor's gallery looking down on the lavish chamber. The Lords are all men, mostly in black suits. They sit on red velvet benches.

A tall, distinguished man in his 50s is addressing the chamber. This is LORD CHRISTOPHER THOMSON, Secretary of State for Air. He has tremendous presence - even here. Especially here.

LORD THOMSON

The Labour Party envisions a day when the British air transport system will be the equal of the Mercantile Marine. While the future of the fixed wing aircraft holds great potentials, the ability to safely transport passengers and goods across vast expanse is not among them.

INTERCUT BETWEEN GALLERY AND FLOOR

VILLIERS

They'll wake soon enough when he gets round to their wallets.

BRANCKER

The anti-airship brigade is rustling as we speak.

LORD THOMSON

But with the new breed of British airships, gentlemen, we will have... we do have now, the ability to safely and serenely travel to the distant centres of the Commonwealth. In fact, we are on the brink of a regular imperial airship service that brings India to within five days of London.

Now the stirring begins as the Lords lean close and mumble to each other.

LORD #1
(shouting)
But at what cost?

LORD THOMSON
(mock serious)
Churchill, is that you? You no longer hold the purse, sir.

BRANCKER
The cheek of a Fabian.

LORD THOMSON
The question is, rather, what will be the cost to an empire that cannot keep pace with the advanced industry of its time? It is the age of the machine, and we can build the best of them. And so, we are engaged in a great experiment of national importance. What would you have us do... slow down our progress?

The grousing continues in the red seats.

EXT. CARDINGTON/ COUNTRYSIDE - MORNING

Morning mist hangs over a damp pasture. Villiers holds Rosemary's hand, trudging towards us. David runs ahead.

VILLIERS
David, stay close.

David's eyes grow large as he climbs over a fence, gaining pace. Villiers helps Rosemary.

Farm workers come out of barns. Families out of houses. A growing excitement - some running. All eyes looking forward. Several WHISTLES blowing.

DAVID
There it is! It's coming out!

THEIR POV

The R101 is being coaxed and guided out of Shed #1 by a hundred men with ropes. Some of the men are in uniform, others are local workers.

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ SHEDS - CONTINUOUS

Guide lines have been chalked on the tarmac. Sky Hunt lifts his megaphone.

SKY HUNT
Steady now, lads. The wind is
gusting. Stay on the lines.

Lorries and motor coaches are still discharging workmen. Joe Binks WHISTLE and they move forward in groups to take dangling lines as the ship slowly emerges from the shed.

Colmore stands watching in overcoat and fedora.

COLMORE
Good of you to bring more help,
Villiers.

Villiers catches up with David, and turns him around.

VILLIERS
David. This is Wing Commander
Colmore. He needs more volunteers.

The ship is now halfway out of the shed, with a growing gang of handlers, pulling down against the hydrogen lift. Everyone focused upward, walking in concert. Like solemn pallbearers.

DAVID
I could do it, Father.

COLMORE
You look like a stout lad. Come
help me with a starboard line.

Colmore leads David over to the shed to find a loose guide line. He wrestles it into David's hands.

COLMORE (CONT'D)
Hold tight, now. Don't let her
lunge.

DAVID
Yessir.

David is in awe, staring up at the airship. Walking waist-high with the grimy and grunting workers that surround him.

ON VILLIERS

Watching with Rosemary. Eyes full of pride. Feeling the jealous eyes of other children watching his son get a memory of a lifetime.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BRITISH COLLEGE OF PSYCHIC SCIENCE/DRAWING ROOM - NIGHT

Dim electric light flickers in a room heavy with Victorian decor and hanging smoke.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Mrs. Garrett.

EILEEN GARRETT sits slumped in a wing back chair. Her chin wobbles on her beaded necklace.

GARRETT
Nin-e-VAH.

The voice comes from a deep place. It's decidedly non-feminine.

Across from her, PROFESSOR HEWITT MCKENZIE (72), glances up from his notepad. He has a neatly trimmed beard and spectacles.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Mrs. Garrett.

GARRETT
NINEVAH!

Now she begins convulsing.

GARRETT (CONT'D)
They are trying to warn you!

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Eileen. I need to speak to Eileen now.

Eileen's body spasms. Now she sits straight.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE (CONT'D)
Eileen.

NOTE: Eileen Garrett's channeled entities are noted in parentheses. Her face and speech patterns change accordingly.

GARRETT
(Uvani)
It is I. Uvani.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Where is Eileen?

GARRETT
(Uvani)
In the belly of a leviathan.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Thank you, Uvani. Can we speak to
Eileen now.
(beat)
Eileen, we've talked about these
moments. It's time to come forward.

Eileen slumps again, head rolling side to side.

GARRETT
The Atonement awaits.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Eileen, you can do this.

One eye opens briefly - scouting. Then Eileen stirs and sits
up. Long eyelashes flicker as piercing brown eyes open and
awareness returns.

GARRETT
Oh, dear, where did I go this time?

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ MOORING MAST - MORNING

Two STEWARDS in crisp whites carry silver food trays into the
mast lift. They join Sky Hunt, who begins to close the cage
door, when he sees Villiers and Brancker approaching.

BRANCKER
Room for two more?

HUNT
Room for a hundred, sir.

VILLIERS
Thank you, Sky. Gentlemen.

Hunt pulls the SQUEAKY wrought iron cage door closed.

INSIDE THE MAST LIFT

Hunt throws the lever with one arm. His other arm holds his jacket closed. Weights and gears raise the lift.

HUNT

Just an officer's breakfast,
Johnny. No need for silver.

STEWARD #1

It's all that we have, sir.

Pulleys CREAK as the lift slowly rises. We can see the Airship Works buildings below. Sheds. Hydrogen Plant. Administration Block. The dreary houses of Shortstown beyond.

Something rustles inside Hunt's jacket. He winks and opens it slightly.

A KITTEN peaks out.

HUNT

I'm going to need company for the
bloody trip to India. She starts
training today. I'll be round for
cream, I suppose.

The lift SQUEALS to a stop. Hunt pulls the cage door open, as the wind announces itself with the LOUD FLAPPING of canvas over the gangway leading into the bow of the ship.

EXT. CARDINGTON/ FARMLAND - SOON AFTER

A farmer with a horse drawn plow stops to wipe his brow and watch as the gleaming silver airship slips from mast and begins a wide slow turn.

An automobile pulls off the road, joining others. The airship always draws a crowd at mast, but now it's flying.

INT. R101/LOWER CONTROL CAR - CONTINUOUS

The mooring mast recedes against the low morning sun. It's quiet in the crowded control car gondola slung beneath the ship's belly. We're surrounded by gauges, bells, levers and pulleys. If we could smell, we'd smell brass polish and burning money.

Irwin is in Captain's uniform. Scott is equivalent of the fleet Admiral. Sky Hunt is Chief Coxwain, at the rudder with a white roll-neck sweater.

Steff is the First Officer, standing beside the HEIGHT COXWAIN, both attending their spoked wheels.

IRWIN

Nose up. We're clear.
(into Voice Pipe)
All engines half speed astern.

Villiers climbs down the ladder from the Chart Room above.

VILLIERS

All right then, mind if I have a look?

HUNT

Take the wheel. She's trimmed nicely. Better than your Crossley, I daresay.

VILLIERS

You're a Morris Man, I suppose, Hunt?

HUNT

Don't worry, Major. Nothing to bump into up here. She answers the helm and elevators very nicely this morning.

SCOTT

We should drop ballast. One quarter should suffice.

IRWIN

Let's clear this farmer first, Scotty.

HUNT

My wife takes eggs from him. Every Saturday.

SCOTT

They're going to have to get used to us, aren't they?

IRWIN

We'll need to save something for 1500 feet, don't you suppose?

SCOTT

Alright then, two hundred gallons Atherstone. Let's get our nose up nonetheless. We need to make a good impression.

STEFF
Releasing two hundred, sir.

THE GROUND BELOW

The farmer's plow horse jumps as the streams of water cascade down from above.

INT. R101/ GALLERY - A SHORT TIME LATER

White linen and crystal. The officers and coxswains are seated for lunch. Villiers sits with Brancker, Irwin, Scott and Colmore.

BRANCKER
Australian Sherry. South African
Paarl. Australian Muscatel.

SCOTT
(to Villiers)
Empire wines, of course.

The steward serves bowls of soup.

BRANCKER
Ah, here we are. And this is?

STEWARD #1
Oxtail soup. Followed by roast
mutton with onion sauce, Brussels
sprouts, petit fours and coffee or
tea.

COLMORE
We've pinched the menu from the
Aero Club.

VILLIERS
I've heard their kitchen is
excellent.

SCOTT
Oh, I'm sure you've been nominated,
Villiers. It's just a matter of
time for these things, right,
Brancks?

Now the wine is poured.

BRANCKER
How's the digestion if there's
pitch or roll?

Steff appears.

STEFF

You'll all want to see this.

COLMORE

What is it, Atherstone?

STEFF

The Lord's, sir. We're approaching it.

They leave their lunch to go to...

EXT. LORD'S CRICKET GROUND - CONTINUOUS

A batsman in crisp whites crouches at the striker's end. There is growing murmur in the crowd. People are pointing up.

Both teams stop playing and turn to look at the R101 coming in over the Victorian Pavilion. You can HEAR and see the propellers turning in the engine cars slung below the ship.

The match has stopped. The teams, umpires, crowd - all mesmerized. This is the gleaming future of Britain, finally arriving.

INT. AERO CLUB - NIGHT

Old wood and leather. Stuffy men in stuffy chairs. Oil paintings of World War I aviators. Polished spittoons.

Lord Thomson, Brancker and Villiers are sitting together in a dark corner. A WAITER glides up to them. He nods to Thomson and Brancker.

WAITER

Good evening, sirs, are we seating for dinner, tonight?

LORD THOMSON

Just drinks, Henry. We'll be going to the Royal. The usual for me.

WAITER

Sir Brancker?

BRANCKER

Bit of a rut.

The waiter hands a drink menu to Villiers. It says AERO CLUB on the cover.

WAITER

And sir.

VILLIERS

Plymouth and tonic, please.

LORD THOMSON

There's quite the selection of cocktails. They pinch them from the Savoy.

Villiers smiles and hands the menu back. The waiter leaves.

LORD THOMSON (CONT'D)

We're not keeping you from the family are we, Villiers?

VILLIERS

No, of course not. I asked to come.

LORD THOMSON

Brancker tells me you've been handling the press very deftly.

BRANCKER

Especially with this business about the extra airbag. You've got them focused on the useful lift, they forget we had to saw the bloody ship in half and rebuilt it.

VILLIERS

You would never know to look at her.

LORD THOMSON

We've lost credibility this past year. I'm not even sure that MacDonald can keep Labour in without a challenge.

BRANCKER

I think you've got a long run ahead of you, CB.

LORD THOMSON

We need the flight to India, no later than September. I expect to return in time for the Imperial Conference, and I've made plans accordingly.

VILLIERS

And Colmore? Richmond?

LORD THOMSON
They all understand.

VILLIERS
They feel it can be done?

LORD THOMSON
I'll not sacrifice safety you
understand? We've built a fine
ship. It's time we show the flag.

BRANCKER
We don't have the certificate of
airworthiness. There is that.

LORD THOMSON
(bristling)
We'll have it by departure. The
test flights have gone well. We'll
have the certificate in time, won't
we, Villiers?

VILLIERS
Yes. Yes, I'm sure of it.

BRANCKER
The testing regiment was reduced.
The ship hasn't flown in severe
weather. The engine reverse hasn't
been fixed. Don't you think you're
pushing this a bit hard?

LORD THOMSON
Sefton, if you're afraid to go out
with us, just come out and say it.
There are plenty of others who
would jump at the chance.

This burns. Brancker stands, barely under control.

BRANCKER
If you'll excuse me.

Brancker brushes by the Waiter who has returned with the
drinks.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ ADMINISTRATION BLOCK - MORNING

Colmore is tethered to a phone. Scott and Richmond are
pouring over papers. Villiers paces. Everyone unhappy.

COLMORE

(phone)

This isn't what we discussed last week.

SCOTT

Tell him...

COLMORE

(phone)

The bloody ship has to leave tonight if Lord Thomson is to return for the Imperial Conference!

SCOTT

Tell him about the front over France.

COLMORE

(phone)

You've got all the test flight logs, your man signed them, you gave us assurances.

(beat)

No, I bloody well won't settle down, I need to be overseeing the ship supply and gassing. Look, your man from the Ministry is here. Villiers. Talk to him.

Colmore hands the phone.

VILLIERS

(into phone)

Look here, Bairstow, the Air Secretary is on his way, the ship is loading as we speak, the wives and children are blathering about, and the bloody newsreel cameras are rolling. You said the certificate was approved, now why don't we have it?

(beat)

What's highly irregular is your office's resolute refusal to understand the operation here - this is not the latest de Havilland trainer it's an imperial airship scheduled to deliver the Air Secretary to Karachi in five days. If we don't do that...

(MORE)

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
if you don't approve that, than
it's six hundred thousand pounds,
four years work and his Majesty's
good grace that we've all pissed
away. Yes, alright. Yes. I will.
I'll see you tomorrow.

SCOTT
Tomorrow? We can't wait un-

VILLIERS
He said we had a verbal
authorization. The certificate
will be ready tomorrow.

RICHMOND
Why should we believe them?

VILLIERS
Because I'm with the Air Ministry.
I'm telling you.

EXT. BEDFORDSHIRE - NIGHT

Villiers' Crossley bounces down a dark road. The headlamps
illuminate crowds of villagers walking in the same direction.
Searchlights sweep the sky.

INSIDE THE CAR

BRANCKER
I've got a damnable feeling of
dread, Villiers. If you talk to
Johnnie, he'll tell you the crew
doesn't expect to return. Richmond
and Colmore are uncertain.

VILLIERS
The ship is sound, Brancks. We've
got the certificate. You've flown
in far dangerous contraptions.

BRANCKER
I'll need you to look in on Nellie
if I don't return.

VILLIERS
She'll be watching the newsreels of
Karachi. They'll be in the cinema
even before you return.

AT THE AIRWORKS ENTRY GATES

The Crossley enters and motors past the Administrative block. Lorries, motorcycles and autos crawling forward. Crowds of people gathering.

Lit by spotlights, the ship floats patiently above the buzzing crowd. There's a warm glow from the windows with red and green navigation lights on the rear fins. Lights ring the top of the mooring mast, where the gangway meets the ship.

A light English rain begins to fall. Dampness settles in.

AS THE CAR PULLS TO A STOP

Villiers retrieves a travelling bag and topee (pith helmet) from the boot. He stands with Brancker, taking in the scene.

BRANCKER

Nellie's more of a West End girl,
you know. You won't get her into a
cinema.

VILLIERS

I'll stop in every day.

BRANCKER

I meant to send roses to Mother.
She's in a nursing home. Can I ask
you to -

Brancker digs in his pocket.

VILLIERS

We've got plenty of roses in our
garden. I'll see to it.

BRANCKER

White roses if possible. Fragrant.
(beat)
And to Nellie as well. A single
stem.

Brancker polishes his eyepiece. They walk towards the mast.

THE MOORING MAST

This is the center of activity. Filament light bulbs are strung through the ironwork tower. Silhouettes of ground crew CLANK up and down the spiral stairs. Steam HISSES from the winch engine. Pulleys SQUEAL as the lift works overtime taking crew and supplies up to the airship.

ON BRANCKER

Approaching the lift. Ground crew turning up collars against the damp. The future of imperial air travel floats two hundred feet above.

Richmond and Johnston step out of the ground floor office. The each carry small bags. Johnston also has a topee (pith helmet). Richmond has an extra pair of shoes. Brancker approaches, hand out.

BRANCKER

Well, you've done it, Richmond.
Congratulations.

They shake hands as they walk.

RICHMOND

I've lost sight of the achievement,
I'm afraid.

BRANCKER

How's the wind, Johnnie? Were you
expecting the rain?

JOHNSTON

There's a bit of a chop at two
thousand. We can stay below.

A diffident young man in tie and jacket with insignia opens the gate. This is HERBERT MANN, 30s, the Royal Airship Works Lift Operator. He stops them outside where there is a scale.

MANN

Could we have your weight, please,
gentlemen?

Johnston places his bag on the scale.

MANN (CONT'D)

Your topee also, sir.

The scale shows fourteen pounds. Mann scrawls on a clipboard.

JOHNSTON.

Is my one stone alright, Mann?

MANN

Ten pounds for crew. Officers can
have fifteen.

Richmond weighs in, as Mann writes. Sixteen pounds.

JOHNSTON.
I've a pound to spare.

MANN
Of course, sir. That should be fine.

Then Mann opens the cage door. Johnston and Richmond step on.

MANN (CONT'D)
Welcome aboard, sirs. Could you turn out your pockets please.

They pad their pockets. Richmond surrenders a box of matches.

RICHMOND
(to Brancker)
Join us for a smoke once we slip?
I've brought port and Stilton.

Their eyes meet briefly. Brancker steps back as the cage door closes and the lift starts up.

LOOKING DOWN ON THE SCENE FROM THE RISING LIFT

The crowd parts for a black Daimler limo followed by an upright Air Ministry Trojan van. They pull up to the mooring mast and Lord Thomson emerges from the Daimler with his greatcoat, cane, and top hat.

FLASH BULBS POP as he poses. THOMSON'S MAN helps unload trunks.

THE LIFT REACHES THE TOP.

Looking down on Thomson's trunks and luggage being unloaded. The wind is stronger up here.

RICHMOND
Good God.
(to the Lift Operator)
What's the Minister's limit?

MANN
None that I know of, sir.

JOHNSTON
No, of course not.

A beat of silence and averted eyes.

MANN

Back I go, sir.

RICHMOND

Yes... nice knowing you, Herbert.

They shake hands.

AT THE BASE OF THE MAST

Villiers watches as Brancker and Scott join Thomson. Three straining men carry a carpet roll to the returning lift. Cox'n Hunt stands nearby. He kisses his teary wife, SARAH HUNT, and pats his young SON on the shoulder. He moves toward the mast, staring at the carpet and champagne.

HUNT

Fuck us all.

Hunt sees Villiers.

HUNT (CONT'D)

Sorry, sir. It's just the weight, is all.

VILLIERS

No, no, I had the same thought.

ALTERNATE BETWEEN THOMSON'S GROUP AND VILLIERS

Colmore approaches Lord Thomson.

COLMORE

There's a front moving towards northern France. We'll need to be off soon as we can manage.

LORD THOMSON

As soon as we're loaded.

They all stare at the large carpet roll.

LORD THOMSON (CONT'D)

I want this in the lounge for the mast in Egypt. I expect the High Commissioner to come aboard. It's a Persian carpet I received from the RAF Iraq Command.

SCOTT

We've imposed strict restrictions on weight. We didn't factor-

LORD THOMSON

I thought the new gas bag brought
us to 45 tons of disposable lift.
And why is it that you can't
accommodate a small wool rug for
diplomatic purposes?

A PHOTOGRAPHER steps up. Julia McCarthy is with him.

MCCARTHY

One last shake for the public,
Minister?

BRANCKER

(impatient)

Straight away, let's go then.

The four men scrunch together and force smiles for the cameras. Thomson tips his hat and holds his cane. Brancker, Scott and Colmore hold their topees.

FLASH!

MCCARTHY

That's it, thank you. Conquering
heroes, each and every one of you.

Done watching from a distance, Hunt shoulders his bag and brushes past Villiers, handing him a cloth bundle.

HUNT

Look after her, Major.

Hunt walks to the mooring mast, weighs in, looks up, takes a breath, and takes the stairs.

Villiers looks down at the bundle. He is holding the kitten.

INT. R101/CONTROL CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Dim navigation lights contrast with the searchlights sweeping the sky outside. Coxwain Hunt joins Irwin, Atherstone and the Height Coxwain.

The excitement and crowd below can be seen, but now they're focused on the instruments.

FROM THE GROUND

We see a small spotlight swing from the Control Car to the Engine Cars, checking each propeller.

IN THE CONTROL CAR

Irwin sees the starboard engine as the beam of light cuts through the drizzle.

IRWIN

Who's in the starboard egg?

HUNT

Most likely Binks, Sir. We've had problems with that one.

IN THE ENGINE CAR

Sweating, he tries one last...

...the engine CHOKES and BACKFIRES, now starting, the propeller outside turning. Binks ties a kerchief around his mouth as black diesel smoke fills the compartment.

BACK IN THE CONTROL CAR

Irwin see the propeller turning on all five engines.

Irwin climbs up the ladder to the...

CHART ROOM

Scott and Johnston are pouring over maps and meteorological reports.

JOHNSTON

I thought we should head straight to Hastings and cross-

SCOTT

We can't skip London, Johnny.
They've paid the bloody ticket,
haven't they?

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ MOORING MAST - SOON AFTER

Red lights flash on the top of the mooring mast. A signal to nearby aerodrome.

AT THE MAST HEAD

Mann opens the gate. Brancker and Thomson walk to the gangway. Mann hands the Minister his personal bag.

BRANCKER

Well done, Herbert. We're the last.

MANN

Have a brilliant trip, sirs.

BRANCKER

Cheerio then. Meet us here in two weeks.

The wind is whipping. They climb up into the bow of the ship. Mann motions for two crew members to help him pull the gangway.

INSIDE THE R101 NOSE

Two sweaty RIGGERS are balanced on the gangway, looking through a small window at the Mooring Eye on top of the mast.

RIGGER HENRY

Loosen the bow winch! Watch the hawse rope.

They turn cranks, reeling in the mooring eye. Henry leans in to the voicepipe mounted on a girder.

FROM THE VOICEPIPE

IRWIN (O.S.)

STAND BY TO SLIP.

A BELL RINGS TWICE.

IRWIN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

SLIP!

Henry jerks the release pin out.

ON THE GROUND

Everyone looking up, getting wet. The engines PURRING on idle. Mast light blinking. Searchlights sweeping.

Villiers cradles the kitten and looks up at the Promenade window.

He recognizes Brancker by his eyepiece. Thomson is by his side, looking down from the belly of the ship.

THE R101

Releases water ballast from the nose, which rises up above the mast as it backs away slowly.

Passengers and crew line the windows, waving, searching for loved ones as the ship's DRONING engines pick up speed and it moves ahead.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ COMMUNICATIONS ROOM - LATER

Villiers leans over a WIRELESS OPERATOR as he listens to a headset and jots down the message. Beside him is SQUADRON LEADER RALPH "MOULDY" BOOTH, (50s) looking like he belongs. He's also an airship captain.

A map on the shows connects yarn with pins. The line goes from Cardington to London to Hastings.

WIRELESS OPERATOR

Crossed French coast at Point de
St. Quentin. Cruising speed at 33
knots. Moderate rain. After an
excellent supper our distinguished
passengers smoked a final cigar and
have gone to bed, as we are now
over French soil.

Booth opens a cupboard, removes a bottle and glasses. He pours whiskey.

BOOTH

They'll be in pyjamas by now.
Nothing more to be done.

He hands a glass to Villiers.

INT. R101/CLIMBING SHAFT - NIGHT

Inside the dark belly of the ship. Catwalks and girders criss-cross huge hydrogen gas bags as rain penetrates the hull of the storm-buffed airship.

Two sets of legs with flying boots, seen from below, scramble up a climbing shaft dimly lit by a flickering string of tungsten bulbs.

Sky Hunt climbs furiously, then stops to sweep his torch over the gas bags that scrape against the girders like giant lungs against massive ribs. Joe Binks looks up from below, as raindrops pound his face.

HUNT
JESUS, JOE!

BINKS
WE'VE GOT TO GO UP TOP!

Suddenly, the ship pitches. Hunt drops his torch. Binks dodges it as it CLANGS and bounces down the shaft.

EXT. R101/TOP LOOKOUT - CONTINUOUS

Wind-lashed rain slices in as the top hatch lifts. This is the Top Lookout along the beam of the ship. Sky Hunt climbs out, his fur-lined coat pulled up against the elements. Hunt raises a retractable windscreen as Binks' head emerges. The FAINT DRONE of five engines is muffled and blown by wind. Up here it's strangely quiet.

A shaft of moonlight gleams off the glistening silver hull of the ship. There is a large rent in the cover of the airship, getting bigger by the second.

BINKS
(points)
SKY!

HUNT
I SEE IT. BLOODY HELL!

INT. R101/CONTROL CAR - CONTINUOUS

Rain pounds against the dark windows. We have Irwin at the helm with a Height Coxwain in the b.g. Johnston clambers down from the chart room.

JOHNSTON
You better go, Bird. I've got the dog watch.

Irwin rubs his face, takes a sip of tea.

IRWIN
The bags are saturated. I can't get her above 1500 feet. We're hugging the railway. Is there an update on this front?

JOHNSTON

Supposed to break by Beauvais. We
need you back at sunrise.

Irwin nods and starts up the ladder.

IRWIN

Wake me, Johnny. Don't let her drop
any lower.

FOLLOWING IRWIN

Walking through the Chart Room, he opens the fireproof door
to the...

SMOKING LOUNGE

Sleepless Brancker stubs out his last cigarette. He looks up
at Irwin.

IRWIN

We've made it across, Brancks. You
can sleep now.

BRANCKER

I hope Villiers gets round to the
house tomorrow. I wonder if he'll
have -

The ship lurches. Wicker tables and chairs slide. A soda
siphon and ashtray drop off the table.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ COMMUNICATIONS STATION - NIGHT

A NIGHT DUTY TELEPHONE OPERATOR sits reading a book in front
of the large wooden telephone switchboard.

There's a faint BUZZ and the small metal shutter drops in
front of an outgoing telephone jack marked "Irwin". The
Operator glances up from the book, and closes the shutter.
Irwin isn't there, it's a glitch.

Back to the book.

BUZZZZ. The shutter drops again.

EXT. ALLONNE, FRANCE - NIGHT

A Shopkeeper locks his door and pulls his coat up against the
rain.

As he steps into the wet, deserted, cobblestone street, he turns to face a DRONING sound in the dark night sky, and drops his keys.

Descending towards him - RED AND GREEN NAVIGATIONAL LIGHTS and some interior cabin lights. Glimpses of a few doomed and desperate souls. Mostly its a mass of blackness, and it's somehow moving sideways.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ IRWIN'S OFFICE

Light from the hallway ceiling light slants across an empty desk chair. The Operator stands at the open door, with the name "Flight Lieutenant Irwin" on the door.

The office is undisturbed. The phone is on the hook.

THE R101

...nearly takes off the church steeple as it passes over the French village.

A RABBIT TRAPPER

...emerges from the forest with his traps. He sees the R101 lurching and bucking, lights BLINKING as it collapses and crushes into a hillside, with engines SPUTTERING.

The airship bursts into flames, followed by three successive EXPLOSIONS as five and a half million cubic feet of hydrogen burns and takes all of man, machine, and nature, with it.

INT. VILLIERS HOME/ BEDROOM

Darkness. Two people under covers. A RINGING in the b.g.

Stirring. BRRRING BRRRING... BRRRING BRRRING.

JUDITH

Oliver. What -

VILLIERS

The telephone. It's the telephone.

He leaps out of bed, running to the door.

CAREENING DOWN THE STAIRS.

Villiers turns a corner. BRRRING BRRRING. The light is on. BRRRING BRRRING.

INTO THE KITCHEN

David and Rosemary stand transfixed - staring at the ringing phone.

DAVID
It's Sir Arthur!

VILLIERS
No, David-

ROSEMARY
You said he'd ring back. He's with
the angels!

She reaches for the phone. Villiers takes it from her.

VILLIERS
(into phone)
Villiers here.

Villiers listens, face draining. He sags, his back against the wall. He looks down at the kitten in the basket.

A HORN SOUNDS. Brakes SQUEAL, engines RACE, automobile doors SLAM.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ ADMINISTRATION BLOCK - DAY

Chaos emerging. Motor-cars, bicycles, RAF, Ministry, and Cardington staff all converging on the headquarters in the early morning hours.

Grim-faced, head down, Villiers climbs the steps, with the weight of grief and duty on his shoulders.

Sarah Hunt is huddled on the steps. She stands.

VILLIERS
Sarah?

SARAH HUNT
Something happened, didn't it?

Villiers touches her shoulder.

VILLIERS
We don't know anything. I'm just
arriving.

SARAH HUNT

Sky had such a feeling. He didn't have to go, you know, his Commission was expiring. He had such a feeling.

VILLIERS

I'm sure he's alright. I'll send a man around later this morning.

Villiers pushes into the building.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ ADMINISTRATION BLOCK - CONTINUOUS

Meeting haggard-looking Booth in the hall. Up the stairs.

BOOTH

You'll need to speak to the press.

VILLIERS

Not until we know something.

Still in shock. They enter the...

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ COMMUNICATIONS ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ghost-faced men answering telephones and questions. A map on the table. An RAF OFFICER in b.g. speaks tortured French on a telephone.

RAF OFFICER

Se trouve présent un aérodome a proximité? Un aérodome! Air-field? Does anyone there speak bloody English!

VILLIERS

Have they told MacDonald? His Majesty?

BOOTH

Who is they? They are all dead, Villiers. It's us now.

INT. BRITISH COLLEGE OF PSYCHIC SCIENCE/DRAWING ROOM - DAY

Eileen slumps in trance before two figures. Professor McKenzie watches as the reporter Julia McCarthy scribbles notes.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Sir Arthur. Are you there?

GARRETT
(Uvani)
There are men here. They are quite distraught.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Is Doyle among them? We have an American reporter here - wanting contact with Doyle.

MCCARTHY
We can provide international coverage if Arthur Conan Doyle can send us a definitive proof of survival.

GARRETT
(Uvani)
The men are quite anxious to speak.

Eileen's head rolls from side to side.
I see I-R...Irv-ing. Irwin. He speaks of Doris.

MCCARTHY
We are reaching out to Sir Arthur -

GARRETT
(Irwin)
WE... were scraping the roofs at Allonne.

MCCARTHY
This seems a waste. It's not our night, I suppose.

She puts her pad into her handbag.

PROFESSOR MCKENZIE
Thank you, Mrs. Garrett. This session doesn't seem to be accomplishing-

McCarthy thinks again. She turns and leans in to Garrett.

MCCARTHY
Who are you?

GARRETT
(Irwin)
THE SHIP SHOULD NOT HAVE FLOWN! WE
FEEL LIKE BLOODY MURDERERS!

EXT. LONDON / WHITEHALL ROAD - DAY

A London taxi carrying Villiers pulls to the curb. A crowd of reporters are converging on the Air Ministry.

REACHING GWYDYR HOUSE

A staff deputy, GROUP CAPTAIN GOSSAGE, is waiting. He pushes his way through the crowd.

INSIDE THE TAXI

Gossage leans in.

GOSSAGE
Good luck getting through this lot.
I don't know how they spread the
word so fast.
(beat)
They've appointed Lord Amulree.
He's expecting you.

Villiers looks at him.

GOSSAGE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, old boy. It's all so
dreadful.

VILLIERS
Quite.

Villiers steps out of the cab. REPORTER #3 spots him and approaches. More reporters follow.

REPORTER #3
Major Villiers. Can you confirm the
details of the disaster? Were there
any survivors?

VILLIERS
Please. Let me pass. The Ministry
will be issuing a statement as soon
as we know anything for certain.

REPORTER #3

Was the flight premature? Was the ship not ready?

VILLIERS

(growing angry)

Don't be absurd! The ship passed all of its test flights with high marks.

INT. GWYDYR HOUSE/CIVIL AVIATION DEPARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

The smoked glass door reads: Directorate of Civil Aviation

Villiers enters the general office area. A small, stern, gray-haired woman stops typing and rises to face Villiers. This is EVELYN RUSSELL-SMITH, 62, office manager and personal secretary to Brancker.

Villiers walks straight to her and embraces her. He's a foot taller.

VILLIERS

Evelyn.

RUSSELL-SMITH

They barely made the channel.

VILLIERS

The weather turned.

RUSSELL-SMITH

He had a damnable feeling about this.

INT. GWYDYR HOUSE/AIR MINISTER'S CHAMBERS- MOMENTS LATER

The Right Honourable LORD AMULREE, 70, sits uncomfortably behind the desk of a dead man. He distractedly pokes around at the contents as he speaks to a standing Villiers.

LORD AMULREE

We're dispatching a team to Beavais. We've got a Vulcan leaving within the hour. Can you be on it?

VILLIERS

Yes, of course.

LORD AMULREE

The Destroyers Tempest and Tribune
will receive the remains at
Boulogne. They'll bring them to
Dover. We're working on the trains
from there.

VILLIERS

I'll see to it.

Villiers turns to leave.

LORD AMULREE

Look here, Villiers, I know you
were close to the lads, but the
Prime Minister has asked the
Ministry to keep the hoardes off
his stoop. I need you back within a
day - we need you here.

EXT. BEAUVAIS, FRANCE/HILLSIDE - DAY

A drab green Model T French Army lorry bounces through mud
and mist. FRENCH SOLDIERS carry bodies, if you can call them
that, on covered stretchers to a grove of trees. PEASANT
WOMEN in black shawls place posies and light candles at the
feet of the dead. Light rain falls.

The lorry slows. Villiers swings his feet out and jumps out.

VILLIERS POV:

The entire frame of the R101 lies with its nose crushed
against a hillside. It's a 700-foot skeleton, looking like
aluminum bones of a beached whale. With the exception of a
few gilded pillars from the lounge, everything is gone,
burned. The ground around the ship flickers and burns in
puddles of burning diesel fuel.

VILLIERS STAGGERS

...in shock, stepping around embers and pockets of burning
diesel. He approaches the ship. The staircase, water tanks,
and metal guages and fittings are there. He sees the gas back
harness wires, like fine metal filaments. The bodies are
gone. Everyone he was close to is gone.

AND THEN HE SEES

a small flash of blue and red at the tailfin, a few hundred feet away. Not believing his eyes, Villiers runs and stumbles through the twisted metal and comes to a stop looking up.

And here at the end of the collapsed dreams of empire we see the scorched and tattered RAF ensign, with a Union Jack in the upper corner, still hanging from the remains of the tailfin.

INT. EUSTON STATION - DAY

A vast Victorian train station. A train at the platform. Workers unload coffins draped with the flag of St. George.

Villiers strides along the platform to meet the somber SERGEANT MAJOR supervising the process.

VILLIERS

They've closed the station for one hour. After that, you'll have photograpers and reporters. More than you would think possible.

SERGEANT MAJOR

We had them in Dover. Where are we on to?

VILLIERS

Westminster City mortuary. On Horseferry Road. They lie in state tomorrow.

They watch as workers lift the coffins off the train.

SERGEANT MAJOR

What happened to her, sir? The airship, I mean.

VILLIERS

It crashed. I thought you knew that.

The Sergeant looks hard at Villiers. He softens.

SERGEANT MAJOR

Sorry, sir. I didn't know they were your mates.

Light streams diagonally from the cathedral-like train station windows as the coffins stack up.

INT. VILLIERS HOME/STUDY - NIGHT

A cigarette smolders in an ashtray beside a glass of Sherry. Villiers stares at blank paper, massaging his temples.

Rosemary appears in the doorway, breathless.

ROSEMARY

Father, they're talking about you
on the wireless.

INT. VILLIERS HOME/ FRONT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Villiers enters and strides to the radiogram sideboard. David and Judith are listening.

BBC BROADCAST

... the farmers and villagers heard
the unforgettable rattle of French
gun carriages, only on this day
they carried the bodies of the
victims to the port of Boulougne.

VILLIERS

Enough of that.

BBC BROADCAST

According to Ministry Spokesman
Villiers, the Destroyers Tempest
and Tribune will transport the
remains across the channel-

Villiers turns off the wireless.

JUDITH

Oliver!

DAVID

We were listening-

VILLIERS

Not tonight, David.

DAVID

But they said it was your-

VILLIERS

DID YOU NOT HEAR ME?

Rosemary bursts into tears. Villiers kneels beside her.

DAVID

Mother said the airship crashed.

VILLIERS
(to Rosemary)
Shouldn't we rather listen to
music, dear?

DAVID
Father, did they die?

Villiers looks out from under the weight on his shoulders.

A BELL RINGS. It's the front door.

JUDITH
Were you expecting someone?

BELL RINGS again.

AT THE FRONT DOOR

Villiers opens it a crack. There's a heavy mist and reporter
Julia McCarthy is huddled with collar up. We see her breath.

MCCARTHY
Major Villiers? Julia McCarthy
again, sir. With The Globe and
Daily Express.

VILLIERS
This is my home, Ms. McCarthy.

MCCARTHY
I'm so very sorry to bother you.

VILLIERS
This is my home. How did you find
me? Is this what you do in New York
or Chicago, or wherever you're
from?

MCCARTHY
Do you know Mrs. Eileen Garrett,
the spiritualist medium?

VILLIERS
Of course I don't.

MCCARTHY
We were doing a story, you see.
Trying to bring through Conan
Doyle. We hadn't heard about the
airship. Captain Irwin came through
in the session. He wants to talk to
you. He said they all do.

VILLIERS

Is this a trick to get information
on the R101? Is that not enough
sensation for you?

MCCARTHY

We weren't aware of the crash when
we did the session. Captain Irwin
was desperate to speak with you. If
you let me join you, I can hold
back on my story.

Villiers starts to close the door, but thinks twice.

VILLIERS

The ministry has its hands full at
the moment. I'd advise you to
reconsider your tactics.

As he closes the door...

MCCARTHY

He said Sky Hunt asked after the
cat, whatever that means.

ANGELIC VOICES take us into

INT. ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL - MORNING

A CHILDREN'S CHOIR sings. These are the London services for
the fallen.

The camera takes us up the aisle as the choir sings, every
pew is full. People in mourning dress and uniform. London
society, commoners, peerage, Parliament, royalty. The R101's
tattered ensign is draped over the altar.

In the front we see the Prime Minister, Ramsay McDonald. He
whispers to Lord Amulree. The Prince of Wales whispers to the
Lord Mayor of London.

And on the other side, rows of weeping widows, all slumped
and heaving. Except for the erect head and shoulders of
Villiers. He stares straight ahead, with Judith at one side,
and Nellie Brancker on the other.

FURTHER BACK, a small gray head...

Also erect with dignity, but equally devastated - Mrs.
Russell-Smith stares straight ahead.

The ANGELIC VOICES fade into the SAD AND HOLLOW BRASS of a small military band playing a hymn.

EXT. CARDINGTON/ CHURCHYARD CEMETARY - DAY

Autumn leaves fall onto a row of gun carriages lining the roadway in front of St. Mary's Church. A thick crowd of mourners surround a mass grave. RAF and Royal Navy pallbearers solemnly lower the final coffins in the grave. The band plays slowly. They have to pace themselves over forty eight coffins.

Villiers stands next to an inconsolable Sarah Hunt. The Cardington mooring mast is visible in the b.g.

The familiar SOUND OF ENGINES gains volume. It's not the drone of an airship, it's a squadron of Bristol Bulldog biplanes flying over the ceremony as the solitary CHURCH BELL TOLLS.

And now it is quiet, except for some noisy starlings.

Villiers looks across the crowd. He sees MARION COLMORE and other crying wives.

The robed VICAR OF CARDINGTON steps to the podium.

VICAR

I am the resurrection and the life.
He who believes in me will live.

INT. GWYDYR HOUSE/AIR MINISTER'S OFFICE - DAY

Lord Amulree spreads marmalade on toast as he pokes listlessly at a stack of morning papers. He has a full tray with tea and breakfast on his desk. As he talks we pull back to see Villiers sitting in an armchair across the room.

AMULREE

They've settled on a date for the Inquiry. It shouldn't take more than a week. There's no mood for dwelling on the unpleasantness. Have some tea, Villiers. And a biscuit.

VILLIERS

Should I prepare a statement?

AMULREE

That'll come from Downing Street.
We're to hold tight.

(MORE)

AMULREE (CONT'D)

I'll need you to help sort this mess here. After all, you were in the thick of it weren't you?

Villiers rises to leave.

VILLIERS

I'm afraid we've just buried all the men who were in the thick of it, haven't we?

AMULREE

If you need me later, I'll be having lunch at the Aero Club... in Picadilly.

VILLIERS

Yes, I know it, of course.

Amulree thumbs through stack of morning papers and slides one out of the stack.

AMULREE

Have you seen this?

ON THE NEWSPAPER: DAILY EXPRESS

The headline shows pictures of Eileen Garrett and the R101 beneath the headline: DEAD AIRMEN REACH OUT FROM THE GRAVE.

Villiers takes the paper, stunned.

AMULREE (CONT'D)

I don't need to tell you what this means to the Crown. We've only now put the war behind us. This can't be perceived as a circus sideshow.

VILLIERS

We all see it the same way, Sir.
(opens the door)
Oh, and John Simon, the lead investigator.

AMULREE

Do we know him?

VILLIERS

I served with him. He's a good man. If there's an engineering failure, he'll find it.

AMULREE

We're not expecting such a
conclusion, now are we?

INT. CAFE ROYAL/ BRASSERIE - NIGHT

Every table taken, smoky, loud, and animated. Villiers weaves through the room and spots Garrett with George Bernard Shaw and another man with slicked-back hair, mustache and round horn-rimmed glasses. This is JAMES JOYCE.

JOYCE

(to Garrett)

Jung intends to seek you out, you know. He says that Lodge holds you in high regard. I told him you're not likely to go Zurich.

GARRETT

(flattered)

Not this year, no.

Villiers approaches the table. Garrett and Joyce look up, but crusty Shaw pokes his food.

SHAW

Can you see that we're dining?

VILLIERS

Mrs. Garrett?

GARRETT

Yes?

(to Shaw and Joyce)

I'll just be a moment.

She pushes back from the table and follows him to the bar. They find a space, but the Brasserie is busy and loud.

VILLIERS

Sorry for the interruption. I've come to ask you to leave the R101 airmen in peace.

GARRETT

I'm afraid I don't understand.

VILLIERS

I'm Major Villiers.

GARRETT

I suspected that, yes. This must be a difficult time for -

VILLIERS

(interrupting)

It's a difficult time made all the more difficult by these otherworldly pronouncements that you make, that the R101 officers are speaking from the other side - it's ghoulish and sensational and quite inappropriate.

GARRETT

The morning headline shocked me. She didn't have my permission.

VILLIERS

But you profit nonetheless.

GARRETT

I do no such thing.

VILLIERS

These statements are promiscuous and hurtful. Surely you know this?

GARRETT

It's not me speaking and I don't hear or retain what comes through. I don't seek recompense, and the session with Miss McCarthy was to be about Conan Doyle, who personally asked me to do this very thing prior to his passing.

VILLIERS

This means very little to me. I'm not a Spiritualist.

GARRETT

Neither am I. And I don't require your beliefs to align with mine.

(beat)

Major Villiers, I didn't choose mediumship - it chooses me. I can't control what comes through. The airship tragedy was horrid, and if those poor souls are reaching out to us, I can only wish them luck in their reception and the dispensation of their pain. But if you want them to keep to themselves, then I suggest you speak to them directly.

EXT. BEDFORDSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

The London - Bedford train steams through the evening darkness.

EXT. BEDFORD STATION - MOMENTS LATER

The train rolls to a stop, steam escaping from SQUEALING brakes. We see a haggard Villiers stand and put his hat on. He passes by the News Agent.

ON THE EVENING PAPERS

Morning and evening papers from London, Manchester, and Paris. The headlines all deal with the R101:

- **Whitehall to announce Airship Enquiry.**
- **The Survivors speak out.**
- **Investigators Comb Through Wreckage.**
- **The R101 Tragedy!**

INT. VILLIERS HOME/ KITCHEN - NIGHT

Villiers drags in. Judith is sitting with a cup of tea.

VILLIERS

Missed the half seven. My fault.
Bloody nuisance.

JUDITH

You should have stayed.

VILLIERS

Where? At Brancks?

JUDITH

At the Ministry.

VILLIERS

It's a bloody morgue these days.

JUDITH

Well, we're not exactly on holiday
here, are we?

He hangs his coat and puts a kettle on.

JUDITH (CONT'D)
(sideways glance)
David waited up for you.

VILLIERS
It's all about the Inquiry. I'm
afraid that will be our lot until
it's done.

He pulls a chair out and sits with her.

JUDITH
And tonight?

VILLIERS
Tonight I met with a spiritualist
who claimed to have communicated
with the crew.

JUDITH
The airship crew?

He nods wearily.

JUDITH (CONT'D)
Before or after...

VILLIERS
After.

JUDITH
How absurd. I should think your
time is more valuable than that.
Who are these people that suddenly
appear with these preposterous and
sensational claims of rapping and
manifestation. They prey off the
grief of wounded people.

VILLIERS
Yes, of course. But I'm not being
fair. This woman isn't a
spiritualist. The messages came
through no doing of her own.

JUDITH
And you believe that?

VILLIERS
No, of course not. But if we don't
check these things out, the
newspapers will take a run with it,
won't they?

INT. VILLIERS HOME/ KITCHEN - DAY

David and Rosemary sit with breakfast as Judith makes tea.

JUDITH

David, don't pick at your food. We
want pudding tonight, don't we?

Villiers enters, back in uniform.

VILLIERS

No time for tea.

ROSEMARY

Father, will you be driving Sir
Sefton?

Villiers searches for the right answer as he puts on his coat
and scarf.

VILLIERS

No, love, I'm all alone today, I'm
afraid.

He kisses Rosemary and pats David, as he heads for the door.

David pushes back from the table and runs to the shoeshine
kit.

DAVID

(fake servent accent)
Can I add the sparkle, sir?

VILLIERS

David, I've just told you I had no
time, now haven't I?

David rushes off, near tears. Villiers starts after him. Too
late. He looks at Judith looking at him.

And then he leaves.

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS - DAY

A line of lorries and vans pass through the gates. They have
RAF and Ministry markings.

There's a swarm of activity around the Administrative Block
and Drawing Office. Streams of workers carry boxes from the
buildings.

INSIDE THE DRAWING OFFICE

The man in charge checks his clipboard, as workers slide by with boxes and blueprints. Mid 50's, distinguished, bald on top, straight posture - this is JOHN SIMON, KC (57). The KC stands for King's Counsel.

A surprised Villiers squeezes by two workers carrying boxes and enters the room.

VILLIERS

Sir John?

SIMON

You must be Villiers. They said you'd be by.

VILLIERS

We met when you served on Trenchard's staff.

SIMON

Yes, good to see you again. Can you point us to the Planning office.

Two workers carry the wind tunnel model of the R101 past Villiers.

EXT. WHITEHALL/ HORSE GUARDS PARADE - MORNING

Pigeons scramble as Villiers walks brusklly between St. James Park and the Thames. A block from 10 Downing Street.

He almost passes, but instead pauses before a white obelisk. This is the Royal Naval Division Memorial, dedicated to the division that Churchill sent to their death at Gallipoli.

The inscription is too long to read. We focus on a few phrases.

THE INSCRIPTION READS:

**BLOW OUT YOU BUGLES, OVER THE RICH DEAD / THERE'S NONE OF
THESE SO LONELY AND POOR OF OLD / BUT, DYING HAS MADE US
RARER GIFTS THAN GOLD / THESE LAID THE WORLD AWAY: POURED OUT
THE RED / SWEET WINE OF YOUTH; GAVE UP THE YEARS TO BE. / OF
WORK AND JOY, AND THAT UNHOPED SERENE / THAT MEN CALL AGE:
AND THOSE WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN / THEIR SONS, THEY GAVE THEIR
IMMORTALITY**

GARRETT

"Blow bugles blow. They brought us holiness, lacked so long, and love and pain. Honor has come back, as a king to earth."

Villiers turns. Eileen, holding a handbag, is also on her way somewhere.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

That's the second verse.

VILLIERS

Mrs. Garrett.

GARRETT

Rupert Brooke. I knew him through my husband.

(on his look)

The College is just across the way.

VILLIERS

They served together?

GARRETT

No. But they died together, didn't they?

EXT. WESTMINSTER/ONE GREAT GEORGE STREET - SOON AFTER

Imposing domed Edwardian Building opposite St. James Park. Big Ben rises up from Parliament Square in the b.g.

Men in bowlers and fedoras, motor-cars, bobbys on horseback - the streets are full.

A Bronze Plaque at the entrance announces: Institution of Civil Engineers

As we read the plaque, the stern MURMER and ECHOING VOICES of the proceedings inside gives rise to a GAVEL SOUNDING.

INT. COURT OF INQUIRY - CONTINUOUS

Set up in the Great Hall - rows of people surrounded by marbled columned walls that rise up to greet two ornate chandeliers. Overhead, a Sopwith Camel biplane soars over the Union Jack in the World War I ceiling mural.

Autumn sunlight streams through floor-to-ceiling windows across a dais containing a witness chair and table.

The wind tunnel model of the R101 hangs suspended from gallows-like supports.

ON THE DAIS

Two ASSESSORS and a SOLICITOR GENERAL sit at the bench, in short wigs and robe.

Sir John Simon, also in short wig, stands next to the witness, Ralph Booth, who we've met before.

SIMON

State your name and title for the record.

BOOTH

Wing Commander Ralph Sleigh Booth.

SIMON

And you're with the Imperial Airship Service? In what capacity?

BOOTH

Airship Captain. I helm the R-100 for the time being.

SIMON

Which you flew to Montreal and back. From Cardington?

BOOTH

From Howden.

SIMON

And you've helmed the R-101, as well?

BOOTH

I flew her once in trials. I've been on board other times. We all trade off.

ON VILLIERS

...standing in a side chamber, one of the staff. He motions to a CLERK, who dashes over and leans in for instruction. Villiers points at the newsreel camera.

VILLIERS

Tell the chap from Movietone to move away from the aisle.

The Clerk nods and walks off. Villiers shifts his gaze to the audience.

VILLIERS POV

Julia McCarthy sits among the pool of reporters scribbling furiously on notepads. RAF and Ministry staff sit stiffly.

And there are widows. Sarah Hunt among them.

And there is Nellie Brancker, motionless, as if carved in marble. Villiers watches. There is a presence. Villiers turns...

VILLIERS
(turning to speak)
She'll come around in time.

There's no one there.

Villiers stiffens. Looks around. Did anyone see?

EXT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT - NIGHT

Just off Piccadilly - a stately Mayfair Georgian building near the Royal Aero Club.

Villiers stands holding an attache case, shoulders hunched against the chill as Eileen opens the door.

GARRETT
I thought you'd had second thoughts?

VILLIERS
I have nothing but, Mrs. Garrett.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Villiers enters. She is put together, as always. Maybe even more so. He notices colorful bangles JANGLING as she reaches for his coat. Her dark Irish eyes cut through pretense.

VILLIERS
I'd like to get on with this straight away.

She nods, hangs his coat, and leads him into the...

SITTING ROOM

There is a gas fireplace with a low flame.

VILLIERS

I thought we sat at a table.

She motions for him to sit in one of two facing wingback chairs.

GARRETT

I like the chairs. Now do you know
what a Control is?

Villiers extracts a clipboard from the attache. He leans forward, leans back - trying to find the correct posture.

VILLIERS

I suppose I don't, no.

GARRETT

The first voice you will hear may
be a male of Middle Eastern or
Oriental affinity. He will announce
himself as Uvani. He may have
personalities queueing up to speak.
You may have to announce yourself.

VILLIERS

And where will you be?

GARRETT

In the Etheric realm, usually on
the third astral plane.

On his surprised reaction, she smiles and touches her breast,
the bangles JINGLE quietly.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

In here. Always in here. But I
won't hear you. I won't remember
what transpires.

VILLIERS

And you'll know when to return?

GARRETT

Presumably.

He could not look more uncomfortable.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Now, as you said. Straight away.

She settles back into the chair.

INT. CAFE ROYAL/BRASSERIE - FLASHBACK

Time is passing. We're inside Villier's head now. A continuation of the scene in the Cafe Royal Brasserie, but this is memory. Memory is flawed.

Villiers sits across the table from Scott, Brancker, Irwin, Colmore and Johnston. Scott is the most pissed.

Looking across the room at Eileen Garrett huddled conspiratorially with Coward and Shaw.

Villiers cups his hands to light a cigarette. A jet of smoke expelled.

SCOTT

(singing)

*Mad dogs and Englishmen. Go out in
the middday sun.*

COLMORE

For God's sake, Scotty, he'll hear
you.

SCOTT/BRANCKER

(singing)

Papalaka papalaka palaka boo.

Close on Irwin as Villiers leans in.

IRWIN

(shrugs)

German wine.

BRANCKER

Have you seen his latest, old boy?
Coward's, I mean. It's got this
most remarkable song.

VILLIERS

No, not yet. Haven't been to the
theater much.

BRANCKER

Well now that you're at the
Ministry you'll get more chances.
Tommy seems to have taken notice of
you.

A GASP of air.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S SITTING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Eileen's head jerks up, eyes closed.

GARRETT
(Uvani)
It is I. Uvani.

Villiers shifts uncomfortably.

GARRETT (CONT'D)
(Uvani)
The veil has parted. We are in
communion.

VILLIERS
Who is we?

Garrett's voice takes on a thick and mischievous Irish
Brogue.

GARRETT
(Pat O'Brian)
There is a great density in the
ether. But it's pleased I am to be
at your service.

VILLIERS
Do you have a name?

GARRETT
(Pat O'Brian)
Pat O'Brien. If ye like I can
whistle a hornpipe for ye.

VILLIERS
Are the Airship officers with you?

GARRETT
(mumbling)
And now begins the unfoldment.
(Pat O'Brian)
Oh, we're surrounded by angels, I
see. I'll be the lucky one to get a
word in.

VILLIERS
Does anyone wish to speak with me?

Eileen's head grows wobbly.

FLASH IMAGE IN VILLIERS' HEAD

The officers lining up for the final picture. They're holding their topees. Hunt holds the kitten.

GARRETT
(Uvani)
I regret...

VILLIERS SNAPS BACK TO PRESENT

GARRETT
(Uvani)
...that we have not made contact
with those you seek. There is much
distress here.

The clipboard back goes back into the attache.

VILLIERS
It's as I suspected. Mrs. Garrett?

GARRETT
Nineva.

Eileen's breathing deepens. Her head slumps against her chest.

Villiers looks around helplessly. He sits forward on his chair.

VILLIERS
Mrs. Garrett, can you return? I'm
afraid the session isn't working.

Villiers stands. He looks lost.

GARRETT
(Irwin)
FOR GOD'S SAKE DON'T GO, WE MUST
TALK TO YOU!

VILLIERS
Who's there?

GARRETT
(Uvani)
We have a tall, slim, fellow. He's
standing beside you. He is
distraught.

VILLIERS
Bird?

GARRETT

(Irwin)

The weight was simply too much for
us to bear.

The voice has Irwin's inflections. Villiers sits on the edge
of his chair.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

(Irwin)

The disposable lift calculations
were wrong. We were too heavy, by
several tons. The frame did not
hold.

Villiers stops his hand from shaking. He stands and edges his
way to the door.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

(Irwin)

It all happened at once. The
construction was shoddy. We knew it
at once. When the storm came. We
should have turned back. We talked
about it.

VILLIERS

This is wrong.

GARRETT

(Irwin)

Brancks wants to speak to you. For
God's sake you must listen!

Looking pale, Villiers opens the door and walks out.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT/UPSTAIRS - LATER

A young girl waits at the top of the stairs, as Eileen slowly
walks up, pulling herself on the railing. ISABEL GARRETT
(14), with long brown hair and dark Irish eyes like her
mother.

ISABEL

Are you alright, Mother?

Eileen reaches the top. She leans against the bannister.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

You've gone pale. They should have
kept you at the hospital.

(MORE)

ISABEL (CONT'D)

I can't go back to school if you're like this.

GARRETT

Oh, Isabel, don't be so dramatic.

Isabel steadies Eileen as she slips out of her dress and sits at her dressing table in a full corset. There are pictures here - a husband in uniform. But also a picture of a young boy. The elaborate frame says "In Loving Memory". This is Eileen's private world. Her daughter pours her a glass of water.

ISABEL

You're still wearing a corset?

GARRETT

It's for my back.

Eileen makes her way to the bed, with Isabel holding her. She lies on her back, exhausted.

ISABEL

Is this how you are after every session these days?

GARRETT

The energies have gotten stronger of late. I seem to have shifted vibrations.

ISABEL

You can't keep doing this, it's mad!

GARRETT

We must go where we are called, darling.

INT. COURT OF INQUIRY - DAY

In progress. Sir John Simon and the Assessors continue with testimony. The hall is full.

A studious man in an rumpled wool suit with high collars sits next to the R101 model. This is PROFESSOR LEONARD BAIRSTOW, 40s, gazing back at us with quite precise thought.

SIMON

Professor Bairstow, you participated in the engineering review required for the issuance of the Certificate of Airworthiness, am I right?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

Yes, Air Vice Marshall Dowding requested an independent review of the airship programme.

SIMON

As it was not his specialty.

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

Correct.

SIMON

Any your work at the National Physical Laboratory, did this qualify you in this field?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

I'm also a Professor of Aerodynamics at Imperial College. I'm qualified to do the calculations.

SIMON

And you issued a 'verbal' permit to fly on October one, is that correct. Is that a standard procedure?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

I was under some pressure, according to the Ministry, but I followed that sanction with a letter of explanation the next day.

SIMON

What did the letter say?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

It stated that the insertion of the new bays technically complied with the specifications, we felt, and we recommended, that additional lift and trim tests should have been undertaken under different performance and weather conditions.

Simon hands Bairstow a long pointer. Villiers enters and slips quietly into a chair in the back.

SIMON

Could you show us on the replica where the additional bay was added.

Bairstow points.

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

We inserted a new bay just behind Frame 8, at the rear end of the passengers quarters. It was the middle of the hull, essentially.

SIMON

And in your estimation, did this reengineering pose any type of structural threat to the ship?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

No, not on paper.

SIMON

And would it have affected how the ship handled?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

It would have. They had two successful trials subsequent to the insertion.

SIMON

But you still felt under pressure to issue the permit. Did this come from the staff at Cardington?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

Time was of the essence. That was clear to anyone involved.

SIMON

Was it Colmore or Richmond that asked you for the verbal permit?

PROFESSOR BAIRSTOW

(pointing)

It was Major Villiers. From the Ministry.

Heads turn to look at Villiers.

INT. VILLIERS HOME/BATHROOM - NIGHT

The view from the ceiling. Looking down on a faceless body in a full bathtub with arms splayed over the sides.

A cigarette smolders in an ashtray on the rim of the tub.

CLOSE IN ON VILLIERS

A white facecloth is draped across his face. He doesn't move.

BRRING BRRING in the b.g.

Villiers doesn't move.

BRRING BRRING again. A KNOCK at the door.

DAVID (O.S.)
(through the door)
Father, it's the telephone.

VILLIERS
Don't answer it, David.

DAVID
But, Father... someone is ringing
us.

BRRING BRRING

EXT. LONDON/BLOOMSBURY - DAY

Well-tended row houses. Lovely in the spring, but it's all bleak November gray on this day.

Nellie Brancker, locks her door, and starts down the front steps. She steadies herself on the railing as she sees

VILLIERS APPROCHING

Holding a single white rose. Chin up. Clear, steady, sad eyes.

NELLIE
My consolation from the Ministry?

VILLIERS
Sefton asked me to do this. I have
to keep my word.

Her body crumples as she slides to the stoop. He slowly sits beside her, sets the roses down beside them.

NELLIE

You know, sometimes I feel-

Villiers stares at the brick sidewalk as he listens. A young mother pushes a SQUEAKY pram past them. Nellie can't finish.

NELLIE (CONT'D)

Was he the only one who saw the folly in this?

VILLIERS

He saw duty. As did they all.

NELLIE

He knew this would happen, where was everyone else in this? Does no one take responsibility? Who did they die for, Oliver?

VILLIERS

If there's anything to know, the Inquiry will uncover it.

NELLIE

You're a good Whitehall man.

EXT. PICADILLY CIRCUS - NIGHT

Streetlights and motor-car headlamps pierce the fog. Londoners emerge from the Underground. The roiling mist makes it hard to read the adverts on the cabs and buses.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT/ SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

Eileen is in restless in trance. Villiers is back in the opposing chair.

GARRETT

(mumbling)

No. Cannot. Why? Why? Scraping the rooftops.

A different voice.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

(Sky Hunt)

We're down, lads.

And now it's the Control.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

(Uvani)

Blessing be upon you. There is anguish here. The tears are falling.

VILLIERS

Who is this? Who are you?

GARRETT

(Uvani)

It is I, Uvani. There are souls with us. They see the veil but they cannot pass over.

Eileen's chin falls, her face scrunches as her mouth tries to move. She spasms at times.

VILLIERS

Tell them I'm sorry... about...

GARRETT

(Irwin)

We're all here, old boy.

VILLIERS

Who is there... Bird? Can you prove yourself to me?

GARRETT

(Irwin)

The disposable lift calculations were wrong. We were too heavy. The frame did not hold.

Villiers scribbles in his notebook. He avoids looking at Eileen when he talks.

VILLIERS

Was there a breach in the cover?
Did the airframe break?

GARRETT

(Irwin)

It all happened at once. The construction was shoddy. We knew it at once. When the storm came. We should have turned back. We talked about it.

VILLIERS

It's not your fault, old boy.

GARRETT

(Irwin)

Brancks wants to talk. But he's too ashamed.

VILLIERS

Tell him I'm here.

GARRETT

(Irwin)

He sends his gratitude.

VILLIERS

For what?

GARRETT

(Irwin)

For visiting Nellie today.

Villiers drops his pen. He stares at Garrett.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

(Uvani)

There is one who has shame. But he wants to be heard. He's placing a round piece of glass over his eye.

VILLIERS

Brancks, old man, can you speak?

GARRETT

(Brancker)

Eh Eh Eyyy Eye. Eyes open! Keep your wits.

Villiers eyes tear up.

VILLIERS

Brancks.

GARRETT

(Irwin)

Our friend is too distraught. He hopes you'll understand.

VILLIERS

It's okay, old boy. You left with a clean pair of heels.

INT. BRITISH COLLEGE OF PSYCHIC SCIENCE/BOOKSHOP - DAY

The rolling SQUEAK of a wood floorboard. A stern MATRON glances up from her desk and sees the back of a man peering at the displays of books, pamphlets, and broadsheets.

The man holds his fedora behind his back as he leans close. It is Villiers.

The book cover says: "Spirit Intercourse: Its Theory and Practice" by J. Hewat McKenzie.

MATRON

That's Professor McKenzie's most recent.

VILLIERS

Yes, quite, thank you.

Another agonizing CREAK as Villiers moves away from her.

MATRON

Is there anything in particular that I could help you with?

VILLIERS

I was looking for my wife. To find a trance medium, possibly.

MATRON

I'm so sorry. When did she pass over?

Villiers talks sideways to her. No eye contact.

VILLIERS

No, I meant my wife is a Spiritualist. She was interested in engaging a medium. I've heard they may be engaged through you. I was looking for announcements.

MATRON

There's Mrs. Leonard, you've heard of her. Or, your wife would have. And there's Mrs. Garrett. She is perhaps the best.

Villiers picks up "Wanderings of a Spiritualist" by Arthur Conan Doyle. He replaces the book on the shelf.

VILLIERS

And what distinguishes the good ones? From the charletans?

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE
Scientific rigor.

Hewat McKenzie stands in the doorway.

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE (CONT'D)
Mrs. Leonard has subjected herself
to scientific scrutiny for years,
as has Eileen Garrett. Doyle was
quite fond of Eileen.

VILLIERS
Right. Thank you. I'll pass this on
to my wife.

Villiers briefly shakes hands, as he squeezes by McKenzie and exits.

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/SHEDS - DAY

The giant doors are wide open. Leaves swirl and blow into the cavernous hangar.

INT. NUMBER ONE SHED - CONTINUOUS

Villiers steps over scaffold boards and ropes dappled by sunlight. He kicks aside an empty bottle of rye whiskey that CLANKS and skitters across the concrete floor.

A female GIGGLE comes from the shadows. Villiers stares as his eyes adjust.

A rough-looking RIGGER emerges, head down, buttoning his trousers. Behind him, the GIGGLING TEENAGE GIRL. The Rigger edges past Villiers, tugging the girl behind him.

RIGGER
Nothing here but rats, sir.
Abandoned rats at that.

Villiers grasps the girl's arm. She stops and looks up at him nervously.

VILLIERS
(quietly)
You should get back to the village.

The Rigger puffs his chest and gets up close. You can almost smell his breath.

YOUNG WOMAN

I used to work in the fabric shop,
sir. They let us all go.

The Rigger's grimy hand releases Villiers' hand. They stare at each other.

RIGGER

I was just givin' her a little tour
of the facilities, sir.

VILLIERS

Don't make her lose her job.

RIGGER

Why's that, sir? You're expecting a
tidy order for new airships from
the Ministry, are you?

She giggles, drunk. The Rigger takes her hand, as they stumble out to the sunlight.

Another man approaches - his slim figure backlit by the sun. It's Herbert Mann, peering into the shed.

MANN

Sorry, Major, the lads are at loose
ends.

VILLIERS

Mann?

MANN

Any news from the Inquiry?

VILLIERS

I wouldn't expect any.

EXT. THE SWANS NECK PUB - NIGHT

Remnants of rain puddle in the glistening cobblestones. Couples lurk in shadows. Julia McCarthy turns a corner, glances at the painted sign, loosens her scarf, and opens the door.

INSIDE THE PUB

McCarthy waits for her eyes to adjust, as all the old boys turn to stare. The tap handles and whiskey bottles gleam behind the well-worn bar.

She scans the dark room, tables illuminated only by flickering sconces on faded wallpaper.

And in the furthest corner...

VILLIERS

Nursing a brandy. Smoking. A table of his own.

McCarthy approaches. Villiers barely turns to see her.

VILLIERS

It's not the safest place for a woman.

MCCARTHY

Buy you a pint, Major?

Villiers looks up.

VILLIERS

The bell's rung.

MCCARTHY

Rules are meant to be broken.
Except in England, I take it.

No reply.

MCCARTHY (CONT'D)

I was almost on that ship. Did you know?

VILLIERS

I know.

Villiers makes a small motion for the BARMAN, who is wiping glasses.

MCCARTHY

I was curious how things went with Mrs. Garrett.

McCarthy sits, but only just. She brushes her red hair back and lights a cigarette, conscious of all the eyes on her. Villiers hardly looks at her, much less offers a light.

VILLIERS

You're what they call a muckraker, then, is that it?

MCCARTHY

I'm just a reporter.

The Barman quietly sets a whiskey down in front of McCarthy and slides away quickly. She looks up, amused.

MCCARTHY (CONT'D)

I came over here to interview the Prince of Wales, and to do a story on Arthur Conan Doyle's promise to communicate after his death. Hewet McKenzie arranged for a session with Eileen Garrett. We didn't even know the R101 had crashed that night. The dead airmen... or whatever they were... came through. They asked for you and I contacted you. This is too important for me to ignore. I know you met with Mrs. Garrett. People should know what is happening, here. This is more than a news story.

VILLIERS

We do have rules in England. We believe in privacy and respect for the dead.

MCCARTHY

Half your country are spiritualists. Mine too.

VILLIERS

I'm not one to believe in fads, or fairies, for that matter. You have no place in this. I've no time for your sensational investigations. You have no context or history with this story.

MCCARTHY

Don't you realize that I'm a witness too? I can support the fact of the communication. You could let me come with you to a session.

VILLIERS

I have no intention of pursuing this bosh. And why do feel you want to further ruin my career by associating me with this preposterous story?

MCCARTHY

You're not the only one looking for answers, Major. You're not the only one who deserves them, either.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT/ SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

Garrett in trance. This time, Villiers sits on the edge of the chair, absorbed.

VILLIERS

Who's there with you, Bird? Is it everyone?

Eileen's posture shifts.

GARRETT

(Uvani)

I see one with a mustache. He has a white sweater.

VILLIERS

Hunt? Is that you?

Eileen stiffens.

GARRETT

(Sky Hunt)

Tell. Sarah. That I am here. Bloody hell, it all went upside down. Talk to Sarah and the children for me.

VILLIERS

Christ, Hunt. I'm so sorry. I'll check in on Sarah.

GARRETT

(Sky Hunt)

I saw the rent in the cover.

VILLIERS

What rent, old boy?

GARRETT

(Sky Hunt)

Top cover fore. I was at the bow lookout. Just before the crash. The cover was defective. Colmore is here... with evidence. He wishes to come through.

VILLIERS

Hunt, Hunt. The cat is fine. Do you hear me?

Eileen slumps, contorts, sits up.

GARRETT

(Colmore)

Do do do they have the books? They must have my books?

VILLIERS

Colmore, is that you? What books are you on about?

GARRETT

(Colmore)

My progress books. They tell the story. The rubber solution used for the tape reinforcements compromised the fabric dope. Sections of the cover had to be replaced. We protested that the entire cover should be replaced.

VILLIERS

Protested to who, old man?

GARRETT

(Colmore)

The Ministry. We wrote to Thomson directly. It's in the books.

VILLIERS

Where? I don't recall them.

GARRETT

(Colmore)

They were in my room. There was a small window shelf near my writing table.

INT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ DRAWING OFFICE

Villiers weaves head-down past empty desks and stacks of boxes as he heads to...

COLMORE'S OFFICE

Villiers opens the door and scans the room. He looks at the window shelf.

Empty. Except for a few odd boxes.

He picks up a box and places it on the desk. He looks inside to find pipe cleaners, a medal, coins, and...

A FRAMED PICTURE

... with a faded paper hat, a pink Christmas crown, tucked beneath the glass.

The picture shows Colmore, Scotty, Brancker, and Irwin grinning drunkenly, arms around each other and several bottles of Port. They're all wearing paper crowns - the kind that come folded in Christmas crackers.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL FADES IN

A flashback.

EXT. ROYAL AIRSHIP WORKS/ MOORING MAST - NIGHT 1929

A group of CAROLERS, children mostly, stand in falling snow and dim light. Red cheeked and scarves tight, they sing to a group of workers and crew.

This is Christmas. Almost a year ago.

The R101 rides smartly at mast, having completed a test flight. The running lights are on. The warm and flickering glow of the Promenade Deck shines through the Cellulon windows. This is the gleaming future of Britain, industrial and fantastic as it rocks and sways contentedly among the snowflakes.

The mooring mast has a thin strand of flickering Christmas lights threaded up through the iron latticework.

INSIDE THE AIRSHIP

A makeshift Christmas dinner at 200 feet. White linens, silver, and libation. The wireless plays the BBC evening Christmas concert.

Brancker, Colmore, Scott, Irwin stand for a picture. The table is littered with Stilton, port, and exploded Christmas crackers. The colorful, childish, paper crowns are on their heads.

Villiers frames the shot.

SCOTT

Call one of the stewards, old boy.
You should be in the shot as well.

VILLIERS

(re: camera)

I'm not sure they could manage this.

BRANCKER

Go on Villiers. We'll get you another time. Cheers, then, old chaps. Here's to the fallen.

COLMORE

Here's to the Old Contemptibles.

DRUNKEN ALL

To the Old Contemptibles.

CLICK.

Colmore has wandered to the windows. Gazing down.

COLMORE

Look down, boys.

They gather at the windows.

THE AIRSHIP'S POV

Looking down through snowflakes at the upturned heads of the village carolers gazing up at them.

It's beautiful.

BRANCKER

(straight-faced)

I loathe these bloody Christmas carols.

IRWIN

Brancks.

BRANCKER

What then? They can't hear me!

VILLIERS

(deadpan)

You're right, Brancks, they really are annoying little buggers, aren't they?

They're a little shocked at Villiers. Then they laugh at the silliness.

IRWIN
(quietly singing)
Papalaka papalaka palaka boo.

Brancker adjusts his crown and glances at Irwin. Good to see the lad loosening up.

Now they all line up, arms around each other, singing drunkenly.

ALL
Papalak papalak palaka boo.

THE CAROL BELOW continues as we switch to:

CAROLERS POV:

Looking up to the heavens at the group of airmen pressed against the cellulon windows, apparently singing along with them.

RAF GUARD (O.S.)
Do you need something, sir?

ON VILLIERS

Snapping back to reality.

RAF GUARD
Can I help you, sir?

Villiers looks up.

VILLIERS
Colmore's books. His progress books.

RAF GUARD
Gone from here, sir. I wouldn't know where.

Villiers continues to look around.

RAF GUARD (CONT'D)
You can't be here, sir.

INT. GWYDYR HOUSE/CIVIL AVIATION DEPARTMENT - DAY

Mrs. Russell-Smith rolls papers and a carbon into the typewriter. She stops and leans to the window. She lifts the sash.

Villiers enters and walks to her desk and drags a chair over to sit beside her. He's holding a folder.

A bird is SINGING.

RUSSELL-SMITH

Do you hear the warbler? He's been coming round this same time each day, but he won't show himself to me.

VILLIERS

How do you know it's a he?

RUSSELL-SMITH

It's the males who always seek the attention.

VILLIERS

Evelyn, I need to enlist you for something, can I have your confidence?

She peers at him over her eyeglasses. Do you need to ask?

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

First I must tell you - I'm not a spiritualist.

RUSSELL-SMITH

No, you're far too pragmatic.

He can't judge her tone.

VILLIERS

I don't pretend to tinker about in the etheric machinery. I think that seances are nothing more than the pagentry of wishful thinking.

RUSSELL-SMITH

Some prefer it over the pagentry of despair.

He hands her the folder.

VILLIERS

Can you read my scrawl?

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT/ FOYER - DAY

Dusty beams of November light stream through the transom as Eileen stands opening an envelope.

The staircase CREAKS as Isabel pokes her head out through the bannister above.

ISABEL

Is that the midday post?

Eileen stares at a letter.

ISABEL (CONT'D)

Mother.

GARRETT

(engrossed)

Yes. There's just this.

Isabel trundles down and goes to her mother. Eileen hands her the letter and envelope.

ISABEL

(reading)

The American Society for Psychical Research. Who is James McDougall?

GARRETT

He taught at University College and came to see me several times.

ISABEL

Like all your suiters at the Cafe Royal?

GARRETT

(ignoring)

And now he's made quite the mark in the states. He's partnered with a researcher named Rhine, and they're studying extra sensory perception, is what they call it. They want me to do some testing. I said I would. The sea air would be lovely.

ISABEL

But you're in no condition to travel to Brighton much less make the crossing to America!

GARRETT

They've pioneered an entirely new field of study. They call it Parapsychology.

ISABEL

Do you ever say no to anything? Do you honor every request? These men would bloody well dissect you and siphon your blood if they thought it would help them in their careers.

GARRETT

Lizzie, your language.

ISABEL

Well, it's true!

INT. WESTMINSTER/ONE GREAT GEORGE STREET - DAY

A private dining room for the Civil Engineers. Huge windows and high ceilings. Villiers sits with John Simon over a white linen table cloth. A waiter offers wine - Villiers covers his glass.

VILLIERS

None for me at the moment.

The waiter nods and leaves. Simon leans back and tastes his wine.

SIMON

And this is still going on?

Villiers pulls an envelope from his jacket and slides it across the table.

VILLIERS

I continue to get new information.

Simon slips the transcript from the envelope and reads.

SIMON

You wore a D.S.O., if I remember.

VILLIERS

Didn't we all?

SIMON

(still reading)

You're being modest. And the other medals?

VILLIERS
The Croix de Guerre.

SIMON
And.

VILLIERS
Legion of Honour.

SIMON
Trenchard wasn't easy. I was glad
to go.

VILLIERS
Some of us thought it was easier to
survive the war than to survive Old
Trenchard.

Simon returns the transcript back to the envelope.

SIMON
I can't admit this, of course. You
know that.

Villiers didn't know that.

VILLIERS
Right. Of course you can't. But
there must be some way to follow up
on the information.

SIMON
I'll do what I can. I may need to
call on you, you understand? Not
about this. About everything.

VILLIERS
And if I get more information?

SIMON
Communicate only with me.

INT. R101 DINING SALOON/PROMENADE - DAY 1929

Visiting MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT are seated for lunch. Lord
Thomson sits next to HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS, THE PRINCE OF WALES,
EDWARD VIII, who is dressed in a dapper tweed suit. Colmore,
Scott and Brancker are also at the main table.

Villiers watches from the the Promenade Deck windows framing
a blue sky day. Keeping an eye on the stewards.

Thomson rises.

LORD THOMSON
My Lords, Ministers, Your Royal
Highness.

Slight bow the Prince.

EDWARD VIII
If you're doing titles, CB, don't
forget the mayor here.

The Prince nods to an embarrassed little MAYOR OF BEDFORD,
50s, red-faced and balding.

LORD THOMSON
Yes, of course, for those of you
who don't know him, we're joined by
the Mayor of Bedford.

MAYOR OF BEDFORD
My entire town council wanted to
take this ride. I told them it was
for proper airship supporters only.

CHUCKLES from the dignitaries.

LORD THOMSON
We gather here, in this floating
fortress of ingenuity to celebrate
Britain's conquest of the natural
elements. We are no longer bound to
the oceans, the continents, the
mountains - as we can now soar
swiftly above them in comfort and
luxury as we are on this third test
flight. Yet despite our
achievements in aviation and
industry, I confess to being
worried we would be socked in by
good old English weather this
morning.

Nods and laughter from the assembled.

LORD THOMSON (CONT'D)
But as you can see, I think we've
got nothing but good omens.

Villiers leans into the galley and nods for the Stewards to
come forward.

Two Stewards enter the room, pouring champagne. The Prince of
Wales stands and TAPS his glass.

EDWARD VIII

Now, now, old chaps, before you get your smalls in a knot, the champagne is my personal contribution. Every penny that that the Crown has invested in this enterprise is manifest in this magnificent machine.

(he raised his glass)

And we would not be here, in the clouds, if not for the tenacious leadership of Lord Thomson of Cardington. His vision of five days to India is about to be realized, and the Dominion will soon be bound together like never before. To Lord Thomson and his realized vision of the Imperial Airship Programme.

ALL

Here here.

AT THE DOORWAY TO THE GALLEY

Villiers watches the galley stewards. Brancker comes up beside, sipping champagne.

VILLIERS

(re: Thomson)

I gather that he still wants the ship out and back before the Imperial Conference next year.

BRANCKER

If he's to be the next Viceroy of India, he needs a triumphant return from Karachi.

As they gaze out, a biplane can be seen moving toward them.

VILLIERS

The news service has arrived. I told Movietone about this flight.

BRANCKER

How are your shoes, old man? Can you do with a climb?

CUT TO:

EXT. R101/TOP LOOKOUT - A SHORT TIME LATER

The hatch on the Top Look-out opens. This is at the top center of the ship. Brancker and Villiers climb out. They steady themselves against a small windscreen, facing the bow. They're wearing fur-lined flying boots.

The blue sky and white billowing clouds are storybook perfect.

Villiers and Brancker stay low, getting their balance. The immensity of the giant airship curves out below them.

BRANCKER

It's quite marvelous, isn't it?

VILLIERS

It's quiet!

BRANCKER

We've got the whole of the ship
between us and the engines.

Villiers looks forward, stiff wind rustling his hair.

VILLIERS

Look there, Brancks!

A SMALL RIP IN THE FRONT COVER

A piece of the cover near the top bow FLAPS in the wind.

BRANCKER

It's nothing. We can patch and dope
it in place.

Brancker turns and starts moving along a small catwalk running across the top of the ship.

It's a half crawl- half walk while grasping a rope handhold that runs the length of the ship.

BRANCKER (CONT'D)

I prefer bow to stern, with the
wind at my back.

(motioning for Villiers to
follow)

Eyes open, keep your wits.

Tentative at first, the two men crawl, wind SHUSHING, towards the back fins of the ship, almost three hundred feet away.

THE VIEW BELOW

Looking past the curving gray lines of the massive dirigible - down through heavenly wisps of cloud on pastoral England.

A SHADOW

passes over them. They turn and look as the WHINE and SPUTTER of a biplane swoops and turns. Now flying lower.

THE BIPLANE

A PILOT and CAMERAMAN in the open cockpits of a de Havilland. They pull even with the airship. Engine ROARING, the cameraman waves as they fly side-by-side.

AT THE REAR FIN

Brancker and Villiers reach the back. They stand leaning on the ship's rear fin, with an enormous British empire registration class G painted on it. The blue RAF Ensign FLAPS photogenically from the rear fin.

A hatch cover lifts at the rear of the fins, just as Brancker reaches for it. Rigger Henry's surprised head emerges.

RIGGER HENRY

Oh, hello, sirs.

BRANCKER

It's alright, old boy, we were just having a bit of a smoke.

VILLIERS

(on Henry's look)

He's taking the mick, airman.

Henry climbs out, relieved. Brancker points forward.

BRANCKER

There's a bit of a rip in the cover needs tending.

INT./EXT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT - DAY

Eileen opens the door and looks up into the stern faces of two men in RAF uniforms. They are FLIGHT LIEUTENANTS HEARD and MASTERS, RAF Intelligence.

FLIGHT LT HEARD
Mrs. Eileen Garrett?

GARRETT
I am.

She does not look well. She wears no jewelry.

FLIGHT LT HEARD
We're with RAF Special Duties
Branch. Could we have a word?

They remove their hats and enter.

GARRETT
I'm sorry, I need to sit.

In some pain, Eileen slowly leads them to the

DINING ROOM

Masters holds the chair for Eileen. They all sit.

GARRETT
Yes, well this is unusual.

FLIGHT LT HEARD
If you're indisposed, we could-

GARRETT
(interrupts)
I'm quite used to it. How can I
help you?

FLIGHT LT HEARD
It's regarding the R101, and the
piece that ran in the Daily
Express.

GARRETT
The American reporter. The story
was tactless and inappropriate.

FLIGHT LT MASTERS
Did the seance occur as reported,
Ma'am?

GARRETT
I don't see that as your business,
but yes, I did a session with the
reporter and Dr. McKenzie. They
were doing a piece about Sir Conan
Doyle, who I knew well.

FLIGHT LT MASTERS
And do you have the transcript?

GARRETT
He asked me to do this upon his
death, as a matter of fact.

FLIGHT LT MASTERS
Do you have a transcript of the
session?

Eilleen looks him over.

GARRETT
I don't keep transcripts. I don't
even recall the sessions.

FLIGHT LT HEARD
But you've done other ...sessions
on the topic? The R101?

GARRETT
I'll ask you again - what do you
want with me?

FLIGHT LT MASTERS
It seems that some of the technical
details of the airship's design and
flight plan would only have been
known by the engineering staff or
officers at Cardington.

FLIGHT LT HEARD
We're concerned that you might
be... involved... with an officer
or official who might be-

She stands, eyes flashing.

GARRETT
How dare you! How thoroughly
impertinent and vile.

FLIGHT LT HEARD
Mrs. Garrett, it's not personal.

Masters produces a card.

GARRETT'S POV

The Lieutenants voices are distance. She can see their
shimmering Surrounds, their auras, - growing dull and dark.

FLIGHT LT MASTERS
You can reach us here. If you hear
anything...

The MUFFLED THUD of a body falling. SOUND OF CHAIRS pushing
back.

Eileen has fainted.

INT. R101/CONTROL CAR - NIGHT (FLASHBACK - FINAL FLIGHT)

Slashing rain buffets the ship, lashing at the windows of the
Control Car. Irwin still has the helm. It's submarine dark in
here, with dim red lights reflecting off the faces of the
Height Coxwain and the Steering Coxwain.

Sky Hunt follows the thin shaft of light as he clambers down
the ladder from the Chart Room.

HUNT
Missed an exquisite supper, sir.

IRWIN
Tell Steff and Johnnie we'll do
three hour watches while we cross.
Check in on Binks. Number five has
been shut down.

Hunt rubs the condensation off the windows with his wool
sweater sleeve. Diffuse LIGHTS from Hastings flicker below.
That's the edge of England and a point of no return.

HUNT
Roasted duck, I hear. They've
retired to the Promenade Deck, for
wine and dance.

IRWIN
They'll be needing the wine since
there are no women.

Hunt glances at the altimeter. 900 feet. Not good.

HUNT
I heard we almost had a lady
reporter.

IRWIN
(ignoring)
What did the crew have?

Now Hunt crosses back to the ladder. His hard face and square
jaw look somehow older.

HUNT

Bread, cheese, pickle. A
Ploughman's lunch. We all listened
through the wall as Lord Thomson
held forth on all manner of shite.
We're all Fabians, now, sir.

Irwin can't help but smile at that.

IRWIN

Be careful, Hunt.

Hunt glances at the altimeter.

HUNT

You do the same, sir.

He climbs up into...

THE CHART ROOM

Navigator Johnston hunches over the map showing the coasts of
England and France separated by the Channel. A slide rule and
log book share the table.

Scott, sweating and jittery, leans next to the open door of
the tiny Wireless Cabin, dictating to Arthur Disley, who TAPS
out the message. Hunt waits.

SCOTT

(dictating)
... at 2135 GMT. Ship is crossing
coast in vicinity of Hastings.
Moderate rain with-

He looks to Johnston.

JOHNSTON.

Southwesterly.

SCOTT

(dictating)
-southwesterly wind.

JOHNSTON.

Running on four engines.

SCOTT

(dictating)
Ship is performing admirably and we
have begun reclaiming water
ballast.

Disley pauses, and then TAP TAP TAPS the morse. Hunt leans in close to Johnston.

HUNT

(under his breath)

The ship performs barrel rolls
while the guests enjoy Spotted Dick
and custard for the evening's
pudding.

Johnston shares a tight-lipped glance. He reaches under the table and retrieves two calcium flares - hands them to Hunt.

JOHNSTON

I need to calculate drift. Can you
drop these thirty seconds apart.

Clutching the flares, Hunt exits the Chart Room to the...

LOWER DECK/HALLWAY

The Crew's Quarters are down here. Hunt maneuvers down the narrow hall, passing a few crew members. He keeps his hand on the wall as the ship rocks and bounces in the turbulence. The deep throated THROB of the engines is relentless.

The BBC big band MUSIC drifts down the main stairway from above.

Hunt reaches the Stern Gangway, kneels, and opens a hatch on the floor.

OUTSIDE THE SHIP

Pelting rain, strong wind, the POUNDING DRONE of four Beardsley Torpedoes. Nothing below but ten foot swells and the dread darkness of the untamed Channel.

The hatch drops and Sky Hunt climbs down toward the Number Five Egg - the one silent engine pod.

He stops on the ladder, bracing himself against the sheets of rain. He strikes the calcium flare against the ladder. It FLARES. He throws it clear of the engine pod. He waits, and follows with the second flare. They sizzle down through the rain and then splash and burn as they crest the waves.

INSIDE NUMBER FIVE ENGINE CAR

A grim and dirty Joe Binks tightens a spanner against the replacement oil guage, as Hunt lifts the hatch.

Rain pours in as Hunt climbs down into the cold and soot-filled engine pod. Binks is a prisoner in this dark, claustrophobic metal egg.

The two men stare at each other.

HUNT

I came to collect that two quid,
Joe. Now would be the time for
settling accounts.

Binks shakes his head and returns to the starter motor.

BINKS

You'd be takin' the piss out of
Saint Peter hisself, Hunt.

HUNT

Soon enough.

The dim light of the Control Car can be see above, below the immensity of the ship. SOFT LIGHT and silhouettes can be seen on the promenade deck.

Hunt looks down below at the flickering Calcium Flares that rise and drop on the cresting whitecaps. The water is close.

The starter engine SPUTTERS and actually starts. The Beardsley Tornadoe turns over and now there is a THUNDEROUS DIN and spewing oil fumes.

BINKS

Christ, I need a smoke.

Hunt stares at the water, closer than ever.

HUNT

She's leakin' like a collander,
Joe. They can't keep her up. Come
on then. We've got to find the
hole.

Binks looks at his old friend. White eyes surrounded by smeared grease. And now the gravity sinks in.

Hunt opens the hatch and scrambles up the outside ladder, rain lashing at him. Binks follows. They climb into the gangway behind the Crew's Quarters, as the BBC Big Band MUSIC blends in with the Engine DRONE surrounding them.

EXT. LONDON FEVER HOSPITAL - DAY

A drab stone and brick hospital in Islington. A white London County Council ambulance SPUTTERS away as ATTENDANTS stretch a patient up the steps.

INT. HOSPITAL RECEPTION/ WAITING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Villiers stands as Professor McKensie enters through SQUEAKING swinging doors, showing a glimpse of a stretcher-lined hallway.

VILLIERS

Thank you for seeing me.

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE

I'm not sure of your purpose.

McKensie signs out at the desk. He pulls a pipe from his coat and feigns normalcy.

VILLIERS

I was concerned.

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE

She has Paratyphoid.

VILLIERS

But her back...?

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE

Her body has been quite unkind to her. She's lost two babies and a young husband. She's had multiple operations. And I shouldn't be telling any of this to you.

VILLIERS

We had some unfinished work.

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE

Whoever you've lost, whatever forgiveness you seek, count yourself among the multitudes who have passed their burden onto Mrs. Garrett. I bear responsibility for that. And she is an extraordinary and stubborn woman. But she cannot absolve you of anything. There are other mediums in London.

VILLIERS
Why do you think I seek
forgiveness?

PROFESSOR MCKENSIE
Call it what you will.

INT. VILLIERS HOME/ KITCHEN - DAY

Still wearing his damp coat, Villiers enters the kitchen and sees a folded paper on the table. He unfolds it.

ON THE PAPER

THE SUNDAY EXPRESS - AIR MINISTRY OFFICIAL STILL TALKING WITH
DEAD R101 AIRMEN BY JULIA MCCARTHY.

He sees Judith through the kitchen window. She is hanging laundry on a clothesline. It is raining.

EXT. VILLIERS HOME/ BACK GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

As Villiers steps outside, Judith hangs a large bed linen as a barrier between them.

VILLIERS
Sweetheart. It's raining.

She hangs another FLAPPING bedsheet and pins the top.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
Judith. Dearest.

More linens. More pins.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
Let's take these inside.

He finally walks around to her side.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
Let me help-

Tears and rain stream down her face.

JUDITH
SOMEONE HAS TO DO THIS!

He holds her hands - to stop her.

JUDITH (CONT'D)

Someone has to do the wash, the cooking, the daily affairs. The children have to be dressed. Expenses must be settled - there's the butcher and the fishmonger...

VILLIERS

It's raining, darling. Let's go inside.

She doubles over as he walks her toward the house.

JUDITH

I don't know you anymore, Oliver!

INT. COURT OF INQUIRY - DAY

Doors swing open and we see a crowded hall.

NURSE'S POV

Heads turn as we move up the aisle. Women raise their hands to their mouths. The only sounds are the SQUEAKING WHEELS of a wicker wheelchair RATTLING forward through a startled audience.

We stop at the dais.

AND NOW WE SEE

A NURSE helps a bandaged man to his feet. His head is wrapped. His arm is in a sling. It's a dreadful, ghoulisn sight. And now the CROWD MURMUR grows. Photographers push forward as FLASHES POP! A man rises. Then another. And then, everyone in the room stands. A few women weep.

Sir John steps forward and helps the man to the chair. It hurts everyone to watch this. The nurse helps him settle in the witness chair and steps back to stand at wait beside the wheelchair.

SIMON

We won't keep you long.
(nodding at the nurse)
Let us know if you experience discomfort. Can you please state your name for the record.

It's painful to say. Painful to listen.

BINKS

John Henry Binks. First Engineer,
Royal Airship Works.

SIMON

(softly)

Mister Binks, how did you survive
that impossible disaster?

BINKS

The ship collapsed into the
hillside. A ballast tank burst on
top of us.

SIMON

Do you remember the moments before
the crash? Can you describe them?

BINKS

I was with the Chief Cox'n, Mister
Hunt. We had just been up top and
seen the top cover had failed. We
were trying to warn the others. Mr.
Hunt, he -

And here he breaks down for a moment.

BINKS (CONT'D)

The ship went into a dive. I broke
my leg. Sky... Mr. Hunt pushed me
out to safety and went back for
others.

SIMON

He was quite the hero.

BINKS

He was, Sir.

Simon waits a moment.

SIMON

Was it the ship's cover or the
weather?

BINKS

I can't say, sir. A bit of both, I
suppose.

SIMON

But the cover had passed all the
tests. It had been doped and
reinforced, correct?

BINKS

I couldn't say, Sir, I just looked
after the mechanical systems.

INT. ST. MARY'S CHURCH - DAY

The back of a man hunched over, head down. Perhaps in prayer.
We're in close and slowly pulling back.

It is Villiers. Sitting on a bench in front of the R101
Ensign that he recovered. It has been mounted on the wall in
memorium. A tattered symbol of the RAF's pride and
enterprise.

Villiers is alone.

He is weeping. It was time.

INT. GWYDYR HOUSE/AIR MINISTER'S CHAMBERS - DAY

Lord Amulree absentmindedly TAPS his spoon against a tea cup
on his desk. The McCarthy article is on his desk.

He rubs his temples and closes his eyes as he talks. Villiers
sits across the desk.

AMULREE

Look here, Villiers, I'll spare you
the rant that I just heard from
McDonald.

VILLIERS

I can't imagine.

AMULREE

I think you can. If there's one
thing you've shown yourself to
have, Villiers, it's imagination.

VILLIERS

I know how this looks.

Amulree lights a cigarette.

AMULREE

I'm relieving you of your duties
until we can sort this all out.
You're not to talk to the press
until we do.

VILLIERS

Sir, I would like to-

Amulree rises and walks to the door.

AMULREE
(interrupting)
That's all, Villiers.

Amulree opens the door.

INT. GWYDER HOUSE/ OUTER OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

As humiliated Villiers leaves Amulree's office, Mrs. Russell-Smith meets him with his folder.

RUSSELL-SMITH
Can you give me a minute? I want to
show you something.

Villiers keeps walking, a little devastated. She follows.

VILLIERS
Can it wait?

RUSSELL-SMITH
I don't think it should, no.

They walk down the hall...

INTO VILLIERS OFFICE

He sits and runs his hands through his hair and manages a weak smile for her. She comes to his desk and leans over to show him:

SIDE BY SIDE - HIS WRITTEN NOTES AND HER TYPED TRANSCRIPT

She turns the pages and points.

RUSSELL-SMITH
Here in Session Three, you wrote
that Colmore said his book was in
his room?

VILLIERS
They cleaned out his room at the
Block. They took all his progress
books. I searched the office
myself.

RUSSELL-SMITH
But he didn't call them his
progress books. He called it a
book.

VILLIERS

He was notorious for keeping notes.
He referred to his Progress Books
all the time.

RUSSELL-SMITH

But suppose by 'room' he meant a
different room.

INT. COLMORE'S HOUSE/STUDY - DAY

MRS. MARION COLMORE, 40s, quietly opens the door to her
husband's study. Someone is behind her.

MRS. COLMORE

I'm not sure he expected to return.
He tidied up more than usual.

Villiers steps inside the room. He's followed by Julia
McCarthy. They both stand quietly while she struggles.

MCCARTHY

Have others been here? For the
Inquiry.

MRS. COLMORE

They went through everything, yes.

VILLIERS

Did he keep any notes on
Cardington? Here, I mean.

MRS. COLMORE

He always kept a diary. I can't
bring myself to look at it.

MCCARTHY

Did you tell them about it?

MRS. COLMORE

It didn't seem appropriate.

VILLIERS

Is it on the shelf by the window?
Inside a bible.

Mrs. Colmore looks at both of them. She has to sit down now.

MRS. COLMORE

How did you know?

Villiers finds the bible and opens it. The diary.

MRS. COLMORE (CONT'D)
I've read your article.
(to Villiers)
Is that why you know about the
diary? Did he tell you?

VILLIERS
I wish I knew, Marion. He might
have. I think he wanted this to be
read.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S FLAT/ SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

Isabel holds Eileens's arm as she slowly guides her pale
mother into the sitting room.

And now we see Villiers standing, with his hat. Beside him,
Mrs. Russell-Smith sits, stiff and uncertain, with her
dictation pad.

VILLIERS
Mrs. Garrett, this can't be good
for you.

Isabel guides Eileen into her chair.

ISABEL
Here we are.

GARRETT
Off you go.

Both Villers and Isabel look at Eileen.

GARRETT (CONT'D)
I said I'll be alright.
(to Mrs. Russell-Smith)
It's good to see you again.

Isabel shuts the door as she leaves.

GARRETT (CONT'D)
There's been such a clamour.
(off their look)
On the other side.

JUMP TO:

THE SESSION IN PROGRESS - A SHORT TIME LATER

Mrs. Russell-Smith takes notes. Villiers on the edge of the chair. Eileen's posture changes with each entity.

VILLIERS

Did you meet with Thomson on the ship that night? Who was there?

GARRETT

(Colmore)

We decided to speak in one voice. Scotty and Bird joined me.

VILLIERS

What about Brancks?

GARRETT

(Colmore)

He was in a terrible state. We didn't want to put him in that position.

VILLIERS

And what of Johnston or-

GARRETT

(Colmore)

Brancks is here, old boy. He's at my sleeve. He's been the worst of us, you see.

Garrett's head drops. LABORED BREATHING, then a GASP!

GARRETT (CONT'D)

(Brancker)

You you you shouldn't be talking of this old boy, your shouldn't be taking the risk!

VILLIERS

Why did you choose me, Brancks? What else can I do?

GARRETT

(Brancker)

So sorry to leave you on your tod, old man. So sorry.

VILLIERS

But why me? Of all the people who could hear you out. You needed a Spiritualist.

GARRETT
(Brancker)
We needed one of our own.

VILLIERS
I sent you to your deaths, for
Christ's sake! I should be on your
side.

GARRETT
(Brancker)
You performed your duties. Our fate
came to get us, old boy. We need
you where you are. You agreed to
this long before -

Garrett spasms and jerks. Her head slumps. She has passed
out. Villiers rushes to her.

RUSSELL-SMITH
Oh, Dear Lord.

VILLIERS
There are salts on the sideboard.
Open the window.

INT. COURT OF INQUIRY - DAY

The Great Hall is packed with reporters, family, RAF, Royal
Airship, Royal Navy and Whitehall staff.

A narrow shaft of winter sunlight hits the empty witness
chair. Sir John Simon shuffles his papers from the podium. He
takes a long scan of the crowd - he expects this to be over
soon.

SIMON
The Crown would like to call Major
Oliver Villiers, Senior Assistant,
Staff Directorate.

The crowd stiffens. Heads swivel and whisper.

Did the R101 model just swing slightly? Did a door open, was
there a draught?

Simon scans the room. He looks at his papers. The two
Assessors behind him shift and scowl.

SIMON (CONT'D)
Well, it appears that-

And now Villiers appears, standing at the very back, in full RAF Dress Uniform. His shiny black shoes TAP TAP the marble floor as he approaches the stand.

He steps up on to the dais and stands at the chair.

SIMON (CONT'D)

(under his breath)

I thought you'd had second thoughts.

VILLIERS

(quietly)

I have nothing but.

SIMON

Please state your name for the record.

VILLIERS

Oliver George Graham Villiers,
Major, Royal Air Force, retired.

SIMON

And you are the Senior Assistant,
Staff Directorate, Civil Aviation,
with the Air Ministry, correct?

VILLIERS

Senior Assistant Intelligence
Office.

SIMON

And your duties?

VILLIERS

I was...am the liaison between
Whitehall and British Airship
Service activities at Cardington
and Howden. Primarily Cardington.

SIMON

This loss must have hit you hard.
I'm sorry.

(beat)

And in your capacity, were you the
staff person responsible for
procurement of the R One Hundred
and One's Certificate of
Airworthiness?

VILLIERS

I assisted Wing Commander Colmore with that duty. He was the Director of Airship Development.

SIMON

But you were the officer who spoke with Professor Bairstow when the ship was preparing to depart for India, correct?

VILLIERS

I was.

SIMON

And did you receive the Certificate of Airworthiness prior to the ship's departure?

VILLIERS

He issued a verbal approval.

SIMON

To you?

VILLIERS

Yes. On the telephone.

SIMON

And do you believe the telephone may replace the printed document?

VILLIERS

I do not. It was the only resort considering the time pressure.

SIMON

And you presume that we should take you at your word on this matter?

Villiers wasn't prepared for this tone.

VILLIERS

Yes, I do.

SIMON

And do you also presume that we should take your at your word that the dead spirits of the R One Hundred and One are speaking to you in nightly seances with an Irish spiritualist?

We see David sitting with his Mother in the back. Julia McCarthy is nearby.

VILLIERS

This was a confidential communication on my part.

SIMON

It was in the Daily Express.

VILLIERS

I did not contribute to those accounts.

SIMON

But-

VILLIERS

(interrupting)

But I did share a confidential brief with you which disclosed technical details about the R101 that could not have been known by anyone outside of the men on board that night. And, having been firmly convinced of these accounts, I immediately offered them privately and in good faith to this court with the mistaken and misguided presumption that you would respect the wishes of the dead.

SIMON

You seem to trade in facts that have no evidence.

VILLIERS

I speak on behalf of forty eight men who died needlessly. I use their words, not mine.

SIMON

You swore and oath of allegiance to the Crown. Do you think this outburst of irrationality furthers your service to the Crown, Major?

Villiers looks into the audience. He sees Sarah Hunt staring back at him.

VILLIERS

I think it in the service of the Crown to tell the truth.

(MORE)

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

No one knows better than I how irrational this might appear.

SIMON

And what would you have the Court know?

VILLIERS

The R101's cover was compromised by an incompatible overlay of adhesive and doping compound. The top cover suffered a large rent over France, resulting in the uncontrollable dive, compounded by the excessive intake of rain.

The Crowd MURMERS and GASPS.

SIMON

And you know this how? Was the evidence written in the ectoplasm of the spirit world?

VILLIERS

I know that the problem was documented in Colmore's personal accounts. He spoke to Brancker and Thomson directly about this.

SIMON

The Court has seen all of Wing Commander Colmore's progress books.

Villiers pulls a notebook from his jacket.

VILLIERS

You evidently haven't seen his diary.

The Crowd GASPS.

SIMON

And how do you know this book was his?

VILLIERS

Because he told me. Or some remnant of his spirit. I'm not a spiritualist, so I don't offer that explanation, but neither do I have any other explanation.

SIMON

I think you clearly are a spiritualist. Your so-called evidence does not belong in the realm of jurisprudence.

VILLIERS

It belongs in the realm of possibility.

SIMON

Is that your determination to make?

VILLIERS

I am responsible for no small part of this disaster. The Air Ministry is responsible for no small part of this disaster. But we can all agree that the officer of the R101 performed their duties until the very end.

SIMON

And what would you have us believe, Major?

VILLIERS

That the officers and crew of the R101 are anguished souls wishing only to be heard before they can rest.

SIMON

And they've chosen you as their spokesperson, have they?

VILLIERS

They speak for themselves. I seem to be the only one listening.

INT. EILEEN GARRETT'S SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

Eileen is in trance, facing us. We see Villiers from the back, standing beside someone that we can't see.

GARRETT

(Uvani)

Good Evening and blessings be to those who have assembled.

VILLIERS

Good evening, Uvani.

Eileen's head slumps and then snaps back up.

GARRETT

(Pat O'Brien)

Aye, there's not a dry eye in the house of the Lord this fine evening.

VILLIERS

We'd like to speak to Sky Hunt. Is he there?

GARRETT

(Pat O'Brien)

Are ye sure you wouldn't like a bit of the hornpipe first? The lads over here might cheer up, we can only hope.

Garrett's eyes roll. Her head slumps.

And now the camera turns and we see Villiers. His hand is on the shoulder of a weeping, frightened Sarah Hunt.

VILLIERS

No, thank you, can we speak to the Airmen?

Villiers goes down on one knee, to look at Sarah.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

(to Sarah)

Are you sure you want to continue? We can stop. This could be quite upsetting.

She nods yes she's okay. Eileen stirs and MUMBLES.

GARRETT

(Brancker)

Eye eye eyes open. Keep your wits.

VILLIERS

Brancks, old man. Is Hunt with you?

GARRETT

(Brancker)

He's never far, old boy.

VILLIERS

I have someone here for him.

There's a tough silence here as Eileen's face takes on a different shape.

GARRETT

(Hunt)

It's just the weight, is all.

Villiers stands.

VILLIERS

I'm going to leave her alone.

Sarah weeps as Villiers steps out, gently closing the door behind him.

INT./EXT R101 - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Water pours in on Binks head as he slams the hatch. Sky Hunt is halfway down the ladder, moving fast. The WIND can be heard through the torn cover above, as the giant gas bags CREAK and MOAN as they chafe against the rib cage of girders. The entire vessel seems to be MOANING.

Hunt reaches the hatch to the crew's quarters. Dim light spills around the edges. He opens the door and yells...

HUNT

WE'RE GOING DOWN, LADS!

... just as the airship plunges, tilting and twisting the billowing gas bags against their lattice of wires as pulleys CLANG against girders and PANS CLATTER in the galley below.

Binks plummets down to a catwalk, breaking his leg. Hunt is thrown into a gasbag causing a great SSSSSSHHHHHHHHH of hydrogen just as

THE SHIP HITS THE HILLSIDE

...its bow collapsing in slow motion. CRUNCHING GIRDERS punch through the silver cover as rain falls.

THE RABBIT TRAPPER

watches in horror as an ENGINE BURPS and sparks a fire in a power car while a trail of flame snakes along the leaking diesel spill to the number six gas bag and...

INSIDE THE SHIP

The first EXPLOSION shoots a wall of flame that engulfs Hunt and Binks. As the ship collapses...

A BALLAST TANK RUPTURES IN FRONT OF THEM

As water cascades from the tank suspended above in a twisted web of girders, Hunt takes Binks under the arm and leads him to the waterfall in the middle of the inferno.

HUNT

Get out now, Joe!

He pushes him through the water. Binks turns to see Hunt going back into the ship.

BINKS

Sky!

Another EXPLOSION near the tail fin. The sound of SCREAMING is hellish.

And then, miraculously, Hunt is back, half carrying Engineer Disley, who is on fire. He pushes him through the waterfall, and Disney fall to the ground, as Binks crawls toward him.

INSIDE THE SMOKING ROOM

Brancker and Colmore slump against the fireproof walls as the inferno surrounds them.

A badly burned Brancker, missing his eyepiece, stumbles over to a decanter of port on the floor.

COLMORE

You're not looking for a glass,
Brancks?

BRANCKER

I've got a reputation to uphold,
old man.

The door bursts open and there is Hunt, staring at them as the third explosion rips through the ship.

INT./EXT. WESTMINSTER TUBE STATION - DAY

Shafts of light stream down from above. GHOSTLY FIGURES climb steps, ascending from the darkness towards the light.

VILLIERS POV

He is coming up from the Underground. The RATTLE OF THE TRAIN below echoes off the dim and dingy walls lined with adverts. Silhouettes of men in bowlers and fedoras trudge upwards ahead of him.

AT THE TOP OF THE TUBE STATION

Eileen Garrett sits on a bench watching a FLOWER GIRL selling the first flowers of spring from her wooden cart. Her dark curls peak out from a stylish hat.

Villiers emerges into the light. She smiles only with her eyes and he comes over to her bench.

VILLIERS

You're feeling better, I take it?

GARRETT

Professor McKenzie has passed.
There's no one to drive me but
myself, I suppose.

She moves her bag from the bench. He sits, carefully.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

I brought you something.

BANGLES JINGLE as she reaches into her bag and hands him a book.

ANGLE ON THE BOOK: The Wanderings of a Spiritualist by Arthur Conan Doyle.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

Something told me you might like
this.

VILLIERS

What makes you think I haven't
already purchased this?

GARRETT

I hear voices, you know.

For one moment they look at each other.

Garrett stands and Villiers rises with her.

GARRETT (CONT'D)

We should leave before the press
begin to swarm.

VILLIERS

I'm sorry about McKenzie.

With that, she leans in and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. And she leaves.

EXT. PORT OF LIVERPOOL - DAY

Noel Coward, perfectly dapper and cheerfully hung over as always, steps onto the gangway of an Atlantic liner.

WRITTEN ON THE GANGWAY SIDEBOARDS:

WHITE STAR LINES - RMS BRITTANICA - LIVERPOOL-COBH-BOSTON-NEW YORK - First Class Only

He spots someone, stands on his toes to see.

COWARD

Eileen!

He steps back off the gangway and swims upstream against the crowd of PASSENGERS trying to board.

COWARD (CONT'D)

Pardon me. Excuse me.

He pushes through and comes face to face with Eileen and Isabel. She's dressed for travel. Dapper in her own alluring way.

GARRETT

Mr. Coward, what a surprise.

COWARD

(to Lizzie)

Hello, nice to see you.

(to Eileen)

Are you on my ship?

GARRETT

You've bought it? Things ARE working out for you.

He offers her a cigarette, no thank you, and lights his own.

COWARD

Be quiet about all that, would you?
I don't like to show off. Are you going to New York?

GARRETT

Only for a day. I've made other arrangements.

ISABEL

She's doing research at the invitation of Professor J.B. Rhine at the Duke University.

COWARD
Psychical research?

GARRETT
They've got a new name for it.
They're calling it Parapsychology.

COWARD
You must join me on board. Will you
be able to find me?

GARRETT
I'll just follow the smell of gin
and bonhomie.

COWARD
They're an easy mix in the salt
air. You have the advantage of
spirit guides, as well.

GARRETT
You have a luminous surround. They
can spot you across vast expanses.

Coward bows to Isabel and turns to leave.

COWARD
Do they know what they're getting
in you, these professors?

GARRETT
Probably not.

INT. VILLIERS HOME - DAY

A kettle WHISTLES on the stove.

Villiers on the telephone. He's writing on his pad. Rosemary
enters.

VILLIERS
Yes, I quite agree, wait, Sir
Arthur, here she comes now. I know
she'd love to - what's that? Oh,
you have a convening? With the
angels? Oh, by all means. Yes, I'll
relay... right, then. Goodbye, sir.

He glances at Rosemary. He looks down at his notes.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
Oh, dear, I hope I've got it all.

ROSEMARY
What is it, Father?

VILLIERS
Come here, Love. I've had the most extraordinary conversation with Sir Conan Doyle. He had a message for you!

ROSEMARY
What did he say?

Come here. I'll read it to you.

He lifts her onto his lap.

VILLIERS
(reading)
Please tell young Rosemary that I'm sorry I could not speak with her. The angels say that she is one of their absolute favorites. She is quite a marvelous girl. That's the angels speaking, of course.

David is in the doorway, now. Pretending he didn't hear every word.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
But I couldn't agree more.

He puts her down. She runs off. Villiers starts to follow.

You've never seen a sadder boy. Villiers stops at the doorway.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
Hold on, then. I almost forgot.

He pats his pocket. Nothing. David looks on. Villiers glances, and grimaces.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Right then. I know it's here somewhere.

Vest Pocket? Empty.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)
Oh, now I remember where I put the note.

Villiers takes a book off the mantle. There's a note inside.

VILLIERS (CONT'D)

(reading)

Dear Major Villiers. Owing to my present circumstances, I am unable to procure a birthday gift for your son, David, who has impressed me greatly. The young lad strikes me as having all the fibre and weave of that fictional character with all the newest contraptions. I wonder if you could buy the latest and present it to your son on my behalf. Signed. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Now we see the book as Villiers hands it to David:

DICK REGENT AND HIS WIRELESS TRANSMITTER

David takes the book. His eyes glisten.

DAVID

You've made that up, Father. It's not from Sir Arthur.

Judith enters at this awkward moment. Villiers reaches for the book.

VILLIERS

Oh well then, would you like me to take this back, then?

David pulls the book in close.

DAVID

No!

(then an embarrassed smile)

Tell Sir Arthur I said thank you.

Villiers almost winks at Judith as he puts his arm around David's shoulder and leads him out of the room.

VILLIERS

I'll do just that.

BLACK

CARD:

The R101 Inquiry ended quickly, with no significant findings, and with that, the ambitious British airship programme came to a close.

Oliver C.G. Villiers faithfully served his remaining years in several positions of distinction at Whitehall, and quietly embraced spiritualism for his remaining years.

Eileen Garrett went to become, arguably, the most respected medium of the 20th century, and was a lifelong supporter of psychical research until her death in 1970.

The memorial and mass grave for the 48 men who died in the R101 can still be found in Cardington, England. The RAF Ensign that flew from the tailfin of the ship still hangs in St. Mary's church.