

Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A HONEYMOON IN SPACE

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First published by Sheba Blake Publishing Corp. 2021

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George Griffith asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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First edition

Cover art by Sheba Blake

Editing by Sheba Blake

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

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Prologue

The first cruise of the Astronef.

About eight o'clock on the morning of the 5th of November, 1900, those of the passengers and crew of the American liner *St. Louis* who happened, whether from causes of duty or of their own pleasure, to be on deck, had a very strange—in fact a quite unprecedented experience.

The big ship was ploughing her way through the long, smooth rollers at her average twenty-one knots towards the rising sun, when the officer in charge of the navigating bridge happened to turn his glasses straight ahead. He took them down from his eyes, rubbed the two object-glasses with the cuff of his coat, and looked again. The sun was shining through a haze which so far dimmed the solar disc that it was possible to look straight at it without inconvenience to the eyes.

The officer took another long squint, put his glasses down, rubbed his eyes and took another, and murmured, "Well I'm damned!"

Just then the Fourth Officer came up on to the bridge to relieve his senior while he went down for a cup of coffee and a biscuit. The Second took him away to the other end of the bridge, out of hearing of the helmsman and the quartermaster standing by, and said almost in a whisper:

"Say, Norton, there's something ahead there that I can't make out. Just as the sun got clear above the horizon I saw a black spot go straight across it, right through the upper and lower limbs. I looked again, and it was plumb in

the middle of the disc. Look," he went on, speaking louder in his growing excitement, "there it is again! I can see it without the glasses now. See?"

The Fourth did not reply at once. He had the glasses close to his eyes, and was moving them slowly about as though he were following some shifting object in the sky. Then he handed them back, and said:

"If I didn't believe the thing was impossible I should say that's an air-ship; but, for the present, I guess I'd rather wait till it gets a bit nearer, if it's coming. Still, there is something. Seems to be getting bigger pretty fast, too. Perhaps it would be as well to notify the old man. What do you think?"

"Guess we'd better," said the Second. "S'pose you go down. Don't say anything except to him. We don't want any more excitement among the people than we can help."

The Fourth nodded and went down the steps, and the Second began walking up and down the bridge, every now and then taking another squint ahead. Again and again the mysterious shape crossed the disc of the sun, always vertically as though, whatever it might be, it was steering a direct course from the sun to the ship, its apparent rising and falling being due really to the dipping of her bows into the swells.

"Well, Mr. Charteris, what's the trouble?" said the Skipper as he reached the bridge. "Nothing wrong, I hope? Have you sighted a derelict, or what? Ay, what in hell's that!"

His hands went up to his eyes and he stared for a few moments at the pale yellow oblate shape of the sun.

At this moment the *St. Louis'* head dipped again, and the Captain saw something like a black line swiftly drawn across the sun from bottom to top.

"That's what I wanted to call your attention to, sir," said the Second in a low tone. "I first noticed it crossing the sun as it rose through the mist. I

thought it was a spot of dirt on my glasses, but it has crossed the sun several times since then, and for some minutes seemed to remain dead in the middle of it. Later on it got quite a lot larger, and whatever it is it's approaching us pretty rapidly. You see it's quite plain to the naked eye now."

By this time several of the crew and of the early loungers on deck had also caught sight of the strange thing which seemed to be hanging and swinging between the sky and the sea. People dived below for their glasses, knocked at their friends' state-room doors and told them to get up because something was flying towards the ship through the air; and in a very few minutes there were hundreds of passengers on deck in all varieties of early morning costume, and scores of glasses, held to anxious eyes, were being directed ahead.

The glasses, however, soon became unnecessary, for the passengers had scarcely got up on deck before the mysterious object to the eastward at length took definite shape, and as it did so mouths were opened as well as eyes, for the owners of the eyes and mouths beheld just then the strangest sight that travellers by sea or land had ever seen.

Within the distance of about a mile it swung round at right angles to the steamer's course with a rapidity which plainly showed that it was entirely obedient to the control of a guiding intelligence, and hundreds of eager eyes on board the liner saw, sweeping down from the grey-blue of the early morning sky, a vessel whose hull seemed to be constructed of some metal which shone with a pale, steely lustre.

It was pointed at both ends, the forward end being shaped something like a spur or ram. At the after end were two flickering, interlacing circles of a glittering greenish-yellow colour, apparently formed by two intersecting propellers driven at an enormous velocity. Behind these was a vertical fan of triangular shape. The craft appeared to be flat-bottomed, and for about a third

of her length amidships the upper half of her hull was covered with a curving, domelike roof of glass.

“She’s an air-ship of some sort, there’s no doubt about that,” said the Captain, “so I guess the great problem has got solved at last. And yet it ain’t a balloon, because it’s coming against the wind, and it’s nothing of the æroplane sort neither, because it hasn’t planes or kites or any fixings of that kind. Still it’s made of something like metal and glass, and it must take a lot of keeping up. It’s travelling at a pretty healthy speed too. Getting on for a hundred miles an hour, I should guess. Ah! he’s going to speak us! Hope he’s honest.”

Everybody on board the *St. Louis* was up on deck by this time, and the excitement rose to fever-heat as the strange vessel swept down towards them from the middle sky, passed them like a flash of light, swung round the stern, and ranged up alongside to starboard some twenty feet from the bridge rail.

She was about a hundred and twenty feet long, with some twenty feet of depth and thirty of beam, and the Captain and many of his officers and passengers were very much relieved to find that, as far as could be seen, she carried no weapons of offence.

As she ranged up alongside, a sliding door opened in the glass-domed roof amidships, just opposite to the end of the *St. Louis*’ bridge. A tall, fair-haired, clean-featured man, of about thirty, in grey flannels, tipped up his golf cap with his thumb, and said:

“Good morning, Captain! You remember me, I suppose? Had a fine passage, so far? I thought I should meet you somewhere about here.”

The Captain of the *St. Louis*, in common with every one else on board, had already had his credulity stretched about as far as it would go, and he was beginning to wonder whether he was really awake; but when he heard the hail and recognised the speaker he stared at him in blank and, for the moment,

speechless bewilderment. Then he got hold of his voice again and said, keeping as steady as he could:

“Good morning, my Lord! Guess I never expected to meet even you like this in the middle of the Atlantic! So the newspaper men were right for once in a way, and you *have* got an air-ship that will fly?”

“And a good deal more than that, Captain, if she wants to. I am just taking a trial trip across the Atlantic before I start on a run round the Solar System. Sounds like a lie, doesn’t it? But it’s coming off. Oh, good morning, Miss Rennick! Captain, may I come on board?”

“By all means, my Lord, only I’m afraid I daren’t stop Uncle Sam’s mails, even for you.”

“There’s no need for that, Captain, on a smooth sea like this,” was the reply. “Just keep on as you are going and I’ll come alongside.”

He put his head inside the door and called something up a speaking-tube which led to a glass-walled chamber in the forward part of the roof, where a motionless figure stood before a little steering wheel.

The craft immediately began to edge nearer and nearer to the liner’s rail, keeping speed so exactly with her that the threshold of the door touched the end of the bridge without a perceptible jar. Then the flannel-clad figure jumped on to the bridge and held out his hand to the Captain.

As they shook hands he said in a low tone, “I want a word or two in private with you, as soon as possible.”

The commander saw a very serious meaning in his eyes. Besides, even if he had not made his appearance under such extraordinary circumstances, it was quite impossible that one of his social position and his wealth and influence could have made such a request without good reason for it, so he replied:

“Certainly, my Lord. Will you come down to my room?”

Hundreds of anxious, curious eyes looked upon the tall athletic figure and the regular-featured, bronzed, honest English face as Rollo Lenox Smeaton Aubrey, Earl of Redgrave, Baron Smeaton in the Peerage of England, and Viscount Aubrey in the Peerage of Ireland, followed the Captain to his room through the parting crowd of passengers. He nodded to one or two familiar faces in the crowd, for he was an old Atlantic ferryman, and had crossed five times with Captain Hawkins in the *St. Louis*.

Then he caught sight of a well and fondly remembered face which he had not seen for over two years. It was a face which possessed at once the fair Anglo-Saxon skin, the firm and yet delicate Anglo-Saxon features, and the wavy wealth of the old Saxon gold-brown hair; but a pair of big, soft, pansy eyes, fringed with long, curling, black lashes, looked out from under dark and perhaps just a trifle heavy eyebrows. Moreover, there was that indescribable expression in the curve of her lips and the pose of her head; to say nothing of a lissome, vivacious grace in her whole carriage which proclaimed her a daughter of the younger branch of the Race that Rules.

Their eyes met for an instant, and Lord Redgrave was startled and even a trifle angered to see that she flushed up quickly, and that the momentary smile with which she greeted him died away as she turned her head aside. Still, he was a man accustomed to do what he wanted: and what he wanted to do just then was to shake hands with Lilla Zaidie Rennick, and so he went straight towards her, raised his cap, and held out his hand saying, first with a glance into her eyes, and then with one upward at the *Astronef*:

“Good morning again, Miss Rennick! You see it is done.”

“Good morning, Lord Redgrave!” she replied, he thought, a little awkwardly. “Yes, I see you have kept your promise. What a pity it is too late! But I hope you will be able to stop long enough to tell us all about it. This is

Mrs. Van Stuyler, who has taken me under her protection on my journey to Europe.”

His lordship returned the bow of a tall, somewhat hard-featured matron who looked dignified even in the somewhat nondescript costume which most of the ladies were wearing. But her eyes were kindly, and he said:

“Very pleased to meet, Mrs. Van Stuyler. I heard you were coming, and I was in hopes of catching you on the other side before you left. And now, if you will excuse me, I must go and have a chat with the Skipper.” He raised his cap again and presently vanished from the curious eyes of the excited crowd, through the door of the Captain’s apartment.

Captain Hawkins closed the door of his sitting-room as he entered, and said:

“Now, my Lord, I’m not going to ask you any questions to begin with, because if I once began I should never stop; and besides, perhaps you’d like to have your own say right away.”

“Perhaps that will be the shortest way,” said his lordship. “The fact is, we’ve not only the remains of this Boer business on our hands, but we’ve had what is practically a declaration of war from France and Russia. Briefly it’s this way. A few weeks ago, while the Allies thought they were fighting the Boxers, it came to the knowledge of my brother, the Foreign Secretary, that the Tsung-li-Yamen had concluded a secret treaty with Russia which practically annulled all our rights over the Yang-tse Valley, and gave Russia the right to bring her Northern Railway right down through China.

“As you know, we’ve stood a lot too much in that part of the world already, but we couldn’t stand this; so about ten days ago an ultimatum was sent declaring that the British Government would consider any encroachment on the Yang-tse Valley as an unfriendly act.

“Meanwhile France chipped in with a notification that she was going to occupy Morocco as a compensation for Fashoda, and added a few nasty things about Egypt and other places. Of course we couldn’t stand that either, so there was another ultimatum, and the upshot of it all was that I got a wire late last night from my brother telling me that war would almost certainly be declared to-day, and asking me for the use of this craft of mine as a sort of dispatch-boat if she was ready. She is intended for something very much better than fighting purposes, so he couldn’t ask me to use her as a war-ship; besides, I am under a solemn obligation to her inventor—her creator, in fact, for I’ve only built her—to blow her to pieces rather than allow her to be used as a fighting machine except, of course, in sheer personal self-defence.

“There is the telegram from my brother, so you can see there’s no mistake, and just after it came a messenger asking me, if the machine was a success, to bring this with me across the Atlantic as fast as I could come. It is the duplicate of an offensive and defensive alliance between Great Britain and the United States, of which the details had been arranged just as this complication arose. Another is coming across by a fast cruiser, and, of course, the news will have got to Washington by cable by this time.

“By the time you get to the entrance of the Channel you will probably find it swarming with French cruisers and torpedo-destroyers, so if you’ll be advised by me, you’ll leave Queenstown out and get as far north as possible.”

“Lord Redgrave,” said the Captain, putting out his hand, “I’m responsible for a good bit right here, and I don’t know how to thank you enough. I guess that treaty’s been given away back to France by some of our Irish statesmen by now, and it’d be mighty unhealthy for the *St. Louis* to fall in with a French or Russian cruiser——”

“That’s all right, Captain,” said Lord Redgrave, taking his hand. “I should have warned any other British or American ship. At the same time, I must confess that my motives in warning you were not entirely unselfish. The fact is, there’s some one on board the *St. Louis* whom I should decidedly object to see taken off to France as a prisoner of war.”

“And may I ask who that is?” said Captain Hawkins.

“Why not?” replied his lordship. “It’s the young lady I spoke to on deck just now, Miss Rennick. Her father was the inventor of that craft of mine. No one would believe his theories. He was refused patents both in England and America on the ground of lack of practical utility. I met him about two years ago, that is to say rather more than a year before his death, when I was stopping at Banff up in the Canadian Rockies. We made a travellers’ acquaintance, and he told me about this idea of his. I was very much interested, but I’m afraid I must confess that I might not have taken it up practically if the Professor hadn’t happened to possess an exceedingly beautiful daughter. However, of course I’m pretty glad now that I did do it; though the experiments cost nearly five thousand pounds and the craft herself close on a quarter of a million. Still, she is worth every penny of it, and I was bringing her over to offer to Miss Rennick as a wedding present, that is to say if she’d have it—and me.”

Captain Hawkins looked up and said rather seriously:

“Then, my Lord, I presume you don’t know——”

“Don’t know what?”

“That Miss Rennick is crossing in the care of Mrs. Van Stuyler, to be married in London next month.”

“The devil she is! And to whom, may I ask?” exclaimed his lordship, pulling himself up very straight.

“To the Marquis of Byfleet, son of the Duke of Duncaster. I wonder you didn’t hear of it. The match was arranged last fall. From what people say she’s not very desperately in love with him, but—well, I fancy it’s like rather too many of these Anglo-American matches. A couple of million dollars on one side, a title on the other, and mighty little real love between them.”

“But,” said Redgrave between his teeth, “I didn’t understand that Miss Rennick ever had a fortune; in fact I’m quite certain that if her father had been a rich man he’d have worked out his invention himself.”

“Oh, the dollars aren’t his. In fact they won’t be hers till she marries,” replied the Captain. “They belong to her uncle, old Russell Rennick. He got in on the ground floor of the New York and Chicago ice trusts, and made millions. He’s going to spend some of them on making his niece a Marchioness. That’s about all there is to it.”

“Oh, indeed!” said Redgrave, still between his teeth. “Well, considering that Byfleet is about as big a wastrel as ever disgraced the English aristocracy, I don’t think either Miss Rennick or her uncle will make a very good bargain. However, of course that’s no affair of mine now. I remember that this Russell Rennick refused to finance his brother when he really wanted the money. He made a particularly bad bargain, too, then, though he didn’t know it; for a dozen crafts like that, properly armed, would simply smash up the navies of the world, and make sea-power a private trust. After all, I’m not particularly sorry, because then it wouldn’t have belonged to me. Well now, Captain, I’m going to ask you to give me a bit of breakfast when it’s ready, and then I must be off. I want to be in Washington to-night.”

“To-night! What, twenty-one hundred miles!”

“Why not?” said Redgrave; “I can do about a hundred and fifty an hour through the atmosphere, and then, you see, if that isn’t fast enough I can rise

outside the earth's attraction, let it spin round, and then come down where I want to."

"Great Scott!" remarked Captain Hawkins inadequately, but with emphasis. "Well, my Lord, I guess we'll go down to breakfast."

But breakfast was not quite ready, and so Lord Redgrave rejoined Miss Rennick and her chaperon on deck. All eyes and a good many glasses were still turned on the *Astronef*, which had now moved a few feet away from the liner's side, and was running along, exactly keeping pace with her.

"It's so wonderful, that even seeing doesn't seem believing," said the girl, when they had renewed their acquaintance of two years before.

"Well," he replied, "it would be very easy to convince you. She shall come alongside again, and if you and Mrs. Van Stuyler will honour her by your presence for half an hour while breakfast is getting ready, I think I shall be able to convince you that she is not the airy fabric of a vision, but simply the realisation in metal and glass and other things of visions which your father saw some years ago."

There was no resisting an invitation put in such a way. Besides, the prospect of becoming the wonder and envy of every other woman on board was altogether too dazzling for words.

Mrs. Van Stuyler looked a little aghast at the idea at first, but she too had something of the same feeling as Zaidie, and besides, there could hardly be any impropriety in accepting the invitation of one of the wealthiest and most distinguished noblemen in the British Peerage. So, after a little demur and a slight manifestation of nervousness, she consented.

Redgrave signalled to the man at the steering wheel. The *Astronef* slackened pace a little, dropped a yard or so, and slid up quite close to the bridge-rail again. Lord Redgrave got in first and ran a light gangway down on

to the bridge. Zaidie and Mrs. Van Stuyler were carefully handed up. The next moment the gangway was drawn up again, the sliding glass doors clashed to, the *Astronef* leapt a couple of thousand feet into the air, swept round to the westward in a magnificent curve, and vanished into the gloom of the upper mists.

Chapter I



The situation was one which was absolutely without parallel in all the history of courtship from the days of Mother Eve to those of Miss Lilla Zaidie Rennick. The nearest approach to it would have been the old-fashioned Tartar custom which made it lawful for a man to steal his best girl, if he could get her first, fling her across his horse's crupper and ride away with her to his tent.

But to the shocked senses of Mrs. Van Stuyler the present adventure appeared a great deal more terrible than that. Both Zaidie and herself had sprung to their feet as soon as the upward rush of the *Astronef* had slackened and they were released from their seats. They looked down through the glass walls of what may be called the hurricane deck-chamber of the *Astronef*, and saw below them a snowy sea of clouds just crimsoned by the rising sun.

In this cloud-sea, which spread like a wide-meshed veil between them and the earth, there were great irregular rifts which looked as big as continents on a map. These had a blue-grey background, or it might be more correct to say under-ground, and in the midst of one of these they saw a little black speck which after a moment or two took the shape of a little toy ship, and presently they recognised it as the eleven-thousand-ton liner which a few moments ago had been their ocean home.

Mrs. Van Stuyler was shaking in every muscle, afflicted by a sort of St. Vitus' dance induced by physical fear and outraged propriety. Quite apart from