

# **HOMEWARD BOUND**

George Griffith



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AFTER leaving Saturn the Astronef pursued her lonely course on her homeward voyage across the fields of space, while the Ringed World, which had so nearly proved the end of Lord and Lady Redgrave's wanderings, grew dimmer every hour behind them.

On the morning of the fourth day from Saturn Lord Redgrave went as usual into the conning-tower to examine the instruments and to see that everything was in order. To his intense surprise he found, on looking at the gravitational compass, which was to the Astronef what the ordinary compass is to a ship at sea, that the vessel was a long way out of her course.

Such a thing had never yet occurred. Up to now the Astronef had obeyed the laws of gravitation and repulsion with absolute exactness. He made another examination of the instruments; but no, all were in perfect order.

"I wonder what the deuce is the matter," he said, after he had looked for a few moments with frowning eyes at the Heavens before him. "By Jove, we're swinging more. This is getting serious.

He went back to the compass. The long, slender needle was slowly swinging farther and farther out of the middle line of the vessel.

"There can only be two explanations of that," he went on, thrusting his hands deep into his trouser pockets; "either the engines are not working properly, or some enormous and invisible body is pulling us towards it out of our course. Let's have a look at the engines first."

When he reached the engine-room he said to Murgatroyd, who was indulging in his usual pastime of cleaning and polishing his beloved charges:

"Have you noticed anything wrong during the last hour or so, Murgatroyd?"

"No, my lord, at least not so far as concerns the engines. They're all right. Hark now, they're not making more noise than a lady's sewing machine," replied the old Yorkshireman with a note of resentment in his voice. The suspicion that anything could be wrong with his shining darlings was almost a personal offence to him. "But is anything the matter, my lord, if I might ask?"

"We're a long way off our course, and for the life of me I can't understand it," replied Redgrave. "There's nothing about here to pull us out of our line. Of course the stars—good Lord, I never thought of that! Look here, Murgatroyd, not a word about this to her ladyship. and stand by to raise the power by degrees, as I signal to you."

"Ay, my lord. I hope it's nothing bad."

Redgrave went back to the conning-tower without replying. The only possible solution of the mystery of the deviation had suddenly dawned upon him, and a very serious solution it was. He remembered that there were such things as dead suns—the derelicts of the Ocean of Space—vast, invisible orbs, lightless and lifeless, too distant from any living sun to be illumined by its rays, and yet exercising the only force left to them, the force of attraction. Might not one of these have wandered near enough to the confines of the Solar system to exert this force, a force of absolutely unknown magnitude, upon the Astronef?

He went to a little desk beside the instrument-table and plunged into a maze of mathematics, of masses and weights, angles and distances. Half-an-hour later he stood looking at the last symbol on the last sheet of paper with something like fear. It was the fatal x which remained to satisfy the last equation, the unknown quantity which represented the unseen force that was dragging the Astronef into the outer wilderness of interstellar space, into far-off regions from which, with the remaining force at his disposal, no return would be possible.

He signalled to Murgatroyd to increase the development of the R. Force from a tenth to a half. Then he went to the lower saloon, where Zaidie was busy with her usual morning "tidy-up." Now that the mystery was explained there was no reason to keep her in the dark. Indeed, he had given her his word that he would conceal from her no danger, however great, that might threaten them when he had once assured himself of its existence.

She listened to him in silence and without a sign of fear beyond a little lifting of the eyelids and a little fading

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of the colour in her cheeks.

"And if we can't resist this force," she said, when he had finished, "it will drag us millions—perhaps millions of millions—of miles away from our own system into outer space, and we shall either fall on the surface of this dead sun and be reduced to a puff of lighted gas in an instant, or some other body will pull us away from it, and then another away from that, and so on, and we shall wander among the stars for ever and ever until the end of time!"

"If the first happens, darling, we shall die—together—without knowing it. It's the second that I'm most afraid of. The Astronef may go on wandering among the stars for ever—but we have only water enough for three weeks more. Now come into the conning—tower and we'll see how things are going."

As they bent their heads over the instrument-table Redgrave saw that the remorseless needle had moved two degrees more to the right. The keel of the Astronef, under the impulse of the R. Force, was continually turning. The pull of the invisible orb was dragging the vessel slowly but irresistibly out of her line.

"There's nothing for it but this," said Redgrave, putting out his hand to the signal-board, and signalling to Murgatroyd to put the engines to their highest power. "You see, dear, our greatest danger is this; we have had to exert such a tremendous lot of power that we haven't any too much to spare, and if we have to spend it in counteracting the pull of this dead sun, or whatever it is, we may not have enough of what I call the R. Fluid left to get home with."

"I see," she said, staring with wide-open eyes at the needle. "You mean that we may not have enough to keep us from falling into one of the planets or perhaps into the sun itself. Well, supposing the dangers are equal, this one is the nearest, and so I guess we've got to fight it first."

"Spoken like a good American!" he said, putting his arm across her shoulders and looking at once with infinite pride and infinite regret at the calm, proud face which the glory of resignation had adorned with a new beauty.

She bowed her head and then looked away again so that he should not see that there were tears in her eyes. He took his hand from her shoulder and stared in silence down at the needle. It was stationary again.

"We've stopped!" he said, after a pause of several moments. "Now, if the body that's taken us out of our course is moving away from us we win, if it's coming towards us we lose. At any rate, we've done all we can. Come along, Zaidie, let's go and have a walk on deck."

They had scarcely reached the upper deck when something happened which dwarfed all the other experiences of their marvellous voyage into utter insignificance. Above and around them the constellations blazed with a splendour inconceivable to an observer on earth, but ahead of them gaped the vast, black void which sailors call "the coal-hole," and in which the most powerful telescopes have only discovered a few faintly luminous bodies. Suddenly, out of the midst of this infinity of darkness, there blazed a glare of almost intolerably brilliant radiance. Instantly the forward end of the Astronef was bathed in light and heat—the light and heat of a re-created sun, whose elements had been dark and cold for uncounted ages.

Hundreds of tiny points of light, unknown worlds which had been dark for myriads of years, twinkled out of the blackness. Then the fierce glare grew dimmer. A vast mantle of luminous mist spread out with inconceivable rapidity, and in the midst of this blazed the central nucleus—the sun which in far-off ages to come would be the giver of light and heat, of life and beauty to worlds unborn, to planets which were now only little eddies of atoms whirling in that ocean of nebulous flame.

For more than an hour the two voyagers stood motionless and silent, gazing on the indescribable splendours of a spectacle such as no human eyes but theirs had ever beheld. Every earthly thought seemed burnt out of their souls by the glory and the wonder of it. It was almost as though they were standing in the very presence of God, for were they not witnessing the supreme act of omnipotence, a new creation? Their peril, a peril such as had never threatened mortals before, was utterly forgotten. They had even forgotten each other's presence. For the time being they existed only to look and to wonder.

They were called at length out of their trance by the matter-of-fact voice of Murgatroyd saying: "My lord, she's back to her course. Will I keep the power on full?"

"Eh! What's that?" exclaimed Redgrave, as they both turned quickly round. "Oh, it's you, Murgatroyd. The power? Yes, keep it on full till I have taken the bearings."

"Ay, my lord, very good." replied the engineer. As he left the deck Redgrave put his arm round Zaidie and drew her gently towards him and said: "Zaidie, truly you are favoured among women! You have seen the

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beginning of a new creation. You will certainly be saved somehow after that."

"Yes, and you too, dear," she murmured, as though still half-dreaming. "It is very glorious and wonderful; but what is it all—I mean, what is the explanation of it?"

"The merely scientific explanation, dear, is very simple. I see it all now. The force that was dragging us out of our course was the united pull of two dead stars approaching each other in the same orbit. They may have been doing that for millions of years. The shock of their meeting has transformed their motion into light and heat. They have united to form a single sun and a nebula, which will some day condense into a system of planets like ours. To-night the astronomers on earth will discover a new star—a variable star as they'll call it—for it will grow dimmer as it moves away from our system. It has often happened before."

Then they turned back to the conning-tower. The needle had swung to its old position. The new star, henceforth to be known in the annals of astronomy as Lilla-Zaidie, had already set for them to the right of the Astronef and risen on the left, and, at a distance of over nineteen hundred million miles from the earth, the corner was turned, and the homeward voyage began.

A few days later they crossed the path of Jupiter, but the giant was invisible, far away on the other side of the sun. Redgrave laid his course so as to avail himself to the utmost of the "pull" of the planets without going near enough to them to be compelled to exert too much of the priceless R. Force, which the indicators showed to be running perilously low.

Between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars they made a decided economy by landing on Ceres, one of the largest of the asteroids, and travelling about fifty million miles on her towards the orbit of the earth without any expenditure of force whatever. They found the tiny world possessed of a breathable atmosphere and a fluid resembling water but nearly as dense as mercury. A couple of flasks of it form the greatest treasures of the British Museum and the National Museum at Washington. The vegetable world was represented by coarse grass, lichens, and dwarf shrubs, and the animal by different species of worms, lizards and flies, and small burrowing animals of the rodent type.

As the orbit of Ceres, like that of the other asteroids, is considerably inclined to that of the earth, the Astronef rose from its surface when the plane of the earth's revolution was reached, and the glittering swarm of miniature planets plunged away into space beneath them.

"Where to now?" said Zaidie, as her husband came down on deck from the conning-tower.

"I am going to try to steer a middle course between the orbits of Mercury and Venus," he replied. "They just happen to be so placed now that we ought to be able to get the advantage of the pull of both of them as we pass, and that will save us a lot of power. The only thing I'm afraid of is the pull of the sun, equal to goodness knows how many times the attraction of all the planets put together. You see, little woman, it's like this," he went on, taking out a pencil and going down on one knee on the deck: "Here's the Astronef; there's Venus; there's Mercury; there's the sun; and there, away on the other side of him, is Mother Earth: If we can turn that corner safely and without expending too much power we should be all right."

"And if we can't, what will happen?"

"It will be a choice between morphine and cremation in the atmosphere of the sun, dear, or rather gradually roasting as we fall towards it."

"Then, of course, it will be morphine," she said quite quietly, as she turned away from his diagram and looked at the now fast increasing disc of the sun. A well-balanced mind speedily becomes accustomed even to the most terrible perils, and Zaidie had now looked this one so long and so steadily in the face that for her it had already become merely the choice between two forms of death with just a chance of escape hidden in the closed hand of Fate.

Thirty-six earth-hours later the glorious golden disc of Venus lay broad and bright beneath them. Above was the blazing orb of the Sun, nearly half as big again as it appears from the earth, with Mercury, a round black spot, travelling slowly across it.

"My dear Bird-Folk!" said Zaidie, looking down at the lovely world below them. "If home wasn't home—"

"We can be back among, them in a few hours with absolute safety," interrupted her husband, catching at the suggestion. "I've told you the truth about getting back to the earth. It's only a chance at best, and even if we pass the sun we may not have force enough left to prevent the Astronef from being smashed to dust or burnt up in the atmosphere. After all we might do worse—"

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"What would you do if you were alone, Rollo?" she said, interrupting him in turn.

"I should take my chance and go on. After all home's home and worth a struggle. But you, dear—"

"I'm you, and so I take the same chances as you do. Besides, we're not perfect enough for a world where there isn't any sin. We should probably get quite miserable there. No, home's home, as you say."

"Then home it is, dear!" he replied.

The vast, resplendent hemisphere of the Love-Star sunk down into the vault of space, growing swiftly smaller and dimmer as the Astronef sped towards the little black spot on the face of the sun, which to them was like a buoy marking a place of utter and hopeless shipwreck in the ocean of immensity.

The chronometer, still set to earth time, had now begun to mark the last hours of the Astronef's voyage. She was not only travelling at a speed of which figures could give no comprehensible idea, but the Sun, Mercury, and the Earth were rushing towards her with a compound velocity, composed of the movement of the Solar System through space and of the movement of the two planets round the sun.

Murgatroyd was at his post in the engine-room. Redgrave and Zaidie had gone into the conning-tower, perhaps for the last time. For good fortune or evil, for life or death, they would see the end of the voyage together.

"How far yet, dear?" she said, as Venus began to slip away behind them, rising like a splendid moon in their wake.

"Only sixty million miles or so, a matter of a few hours, more or less—it all depends," he replied, without taking his eyes off the compass.

"Sixty millions! Why I feel almost at home again."

"But we have to turn the corner of the street yet, dear, and after that there's a fall of more than twenty-five million miles on to the more or less kindly breast of Mother Earth."

"A fall! It does sound rather awful when you put it that way; but I am not going to let you frighten me. I believe Mother Earth will receive her wandering children quite as kindly as they deserve."

The moon-like disc of Venus grew swiftly smaller, and the black spot on the face of the sun larger and larger as the Astronef rushed silently and imperceptibly, and yet with almost inconceivable velocity, towards doom or fortune. Neither Zaidie nor Redgrave spoke again for nearly three hours—hours which to them seemed to pass like so many minutes. Their eyes were fixed on the black disc of Mercury, which, as they approached it, expanded with magical rapidity till it completely eclipsed the blazing orb behind it. Their thoughts were far away on the still invisible earth and all the splendid possibilities that it held for two young lives like theirs.

As the sunlight vanished they looked at each other in the golden moonlight of Venus, and Zaidie let her head rest for a moment on her husband's shoulder. Then a swiftly broadening gleam of light shot out from behind the black circle of Mercury. The first crisis had come. Redgrave put out his hand to the signal-board and rang for full power. The planet seemed to swing round as the Astronef rushed into the blaze. In a few minutes it passed through the phases from "new" to "full." Venus became eclipsed in turn as they swung between Mercury and the Sun, and then Redgrave, after a rapid glance to either side, said:

"If we can only keep the two pulls balanced we shall do it. That will keep us in a straight line, and our own momentum ought to carry us into the earth's attraction."

Zaidie did not reply. She was shading her eyes with her hand from the almost intolerable brilliance of the sun's rays, and looking straight ahead to catch the first glimpse of the silver-grey orb. Her husband read her thoughts and respected them. But a few minutes later he startled her out of her dream of home by exclaiming:

"Good God, we're turning!"

"What do you say, dear? Turning what?"

"On our own centre. Look! I'm afraid only a miracle can save us now, darling."

She looked to the left-hand side where he was pointing. The sun, no longer now a sun, but a vast ocean of flame filling, nearly a third of the vault of space, was sinking beneath them. On the right Mercury was rising. Zaidie knew only too well what this meant. It meant that the keel of the Astronef was being dragged out of the straight line which would cut the earth's orbit some forty million miles away. It meant that, in spite of the exertion of the full power that the engines could develop, they had begun to fall into the sun.

Redgrave laid his hand on his wife's, and their eyes met. There was no need for words. Perhaps speech just then would have been impossible. In that mute glance each looked into the other's soul and was content. Then he left the conning-tower, and Zaidie dropped on to her knees before the instrument-table and laid her forehead



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upon her clasped hands.

Her husband went to the saloon, unlocked a little cupboard in the wall and took out a blue bottle of corrugated glass labeled "Morphine, poison." He took another empty bottle of white glass and measured fifty drops into it. Then he went to the engine-room and said abruptly:

"Murgatroyd, I'm afraid it's all up with us. We're falling into the sun, and you know what that means. In a few hours the Astronef will be red-hot. So it's roasting alive—or this. I recommend this."

"And what might that be, my lord?" said the old engineer, looking at the bottle which his master held out towards him. "That's morphine—poison. Fill that up with water, drink it, and in half-an-hour you'll be dead without knowing it. Of course, you won't take it until there's absolutely no hope; but, granted that, you'll find this a better death than roasting or baking alive." Then his voice changed suddenly as he went on: "Of course, I need not say, Murgatroyd, how deeply I regret now that I asked you to come in the Astronef."

"My lord, my people have served yours for seven hundred years, and, whether on earth or among the stars, where you go it is my duty to go also. But don't ask me to take the poison. It is not for me to say that a journey like this is tempting Providence, but, by my lights, if I am to die it will be the death that Providence sends."

"I daresay you're right in one way, Murgatroyd, but it's no time to argue about beliefs now. There's the bottle. Do as you think right. And now, in case the miracle doesn't happen, good-bye."

"Good-bye, my lord, if it be so," replied the old Yorkshireman, taking the hand which Redgrave held out to him. "I'll keep the power on to the last, I suppose?"

"Yes, you may as well. If it doesn't keep us away from the Sun it won't be much use to us in two or three hours."

He left the engine-room and went back to the conning-tower. Zaidie was still on her knees. Beneath and around them the awful gulf of flame was broadening and deepening. Mercury was rising higher and growing smaller. He put the bottle down on the table and waited. Then Zaidie looked up. Her eyes were clear, and her face was perfectly calm. She rose and put her arm through his, and said:

"Well, is there any hope, dear? There can't be now, can there? Is that the morphine?"

"Yes," he replied, slipping his arm beneath hers and round her waist. "I'm afraid there's not much hope now, little woman. We're using up the last of the power, and you see—"

As he said this he looked at the thermometer. The mercury had risen from 65 deg. Fahrenheit, the normal temperature of the interior of the Astronef, to 93 deg., and during the half-minute that he watched it rose another degree. There was no mistaking such a warning as that. He had brought two little liqueur glasses in his pocket from the saloon. He divided the morphine between them, and filled them up with water.

"Not until the last moment, dear," said Zaidie, as he set one of them before her. "We have no right to do it until then."

"Very well. When the mercury reaches a hundred and fifty. After that it will go up ten and fifteen degrees at a jump, and we —"

"Yes, at a hundred and fifty," she replied, cutting short a speech she dared not hear the end of. "I understand. It will be impossible to hope any more."

Now, side by side, they stood and watched the thermometer.

N i n e t y - f i v e - n i n e t y - e i g h t - a h u n d r e d a n d t h r e e - a h u n d r e d a n d t e n - e i g h t e e n - t w e n t y - f o u r - t h i r t y - t w o - f o r t y - o n e -

The silent minutes passed, and with each the silver thread—for them the thread of life—grew, with strange contradiction, longer and longer, and with every minute it grew more quickly.

A hundred and forty-six.

With his right arm Redgrave drew Zaidie still closer to him. He put out his left hand and took up the little glass. She did the same.

"Good-bye, dear, till we have slept and wake again!"

"Good-bye, darling, God grant that we may!" But the agony of that last farewell was more than Zaidie could hear. She looked away at the little glass in her hand, a hand which even now did not tremble. Then she raised her eyes again to take one last look at the glory of the stars, and at the Fate incarnate in flame which lay beneath them.

"The Earth, the Earth—thank God, the Earth! "

With the hand that held the draught of Lethe—which in another moment would have passed her lips—she

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caught at her husband's hand, pulled the glass out of it, and then with a little sigh she dropped senseless on the floor of the conning-tower. Redgrave looked for a moment in the direction that her eyes had taken. A pale, silver-grey crescent, with a little white spot near it, was rising out of the blackness beyond the edge of the solar ocean of flame. Home was in sight at last, but would they reach it—and how?

He picked her up and carried her to their room and laid her on the bed. Then he went to the medicine chest again, this time for a very different purpose.

An hour later, they were on the upper deck with their telescopes turned on to the rapidly-growing crescent of the home-world, which, in its eternal march through space, had come into the line of direct attraction just in time to turn the scale in which the lives of the star-voyagers were trembling. The higher it rose, the bigger and broader and brighter it grew, and, at last, Zaidie—forgetting in her transport of joy all the perils that were yet to come—sprang to her feet and clapped her hands, and cried:

"There's America!"

Then she dropped back into her long deck-chair and began a good, hearty, healthy cry.

Note.— The manner of the ending of the Astronef's marvellous voyage is now as much a matter of public knowledge as are the circumstances of its beginning. Everyone knows now how, with the remains of the R force, Lord Redgrave managed to steer the star-navigator so accurately between the earth and the moon that, descending obliquely towards the earth, she became, during eleven days and twelve nights of terrible suspense, a tiny satellite of the Mother Planet with a constantly decreasing orbit. How, during one awful hour, by the exertions of the last unit of power, of which her engines were capable, she almost grazed the highest peaks of the Bolivian Andes, swept like a meteor over the foot-hills and plains of the western slope of Peru and took the waters of the Pacific barely ten miles from the coast. It is equally needless to recapitulate the delights and the splendours of the welcome home which the whole civilised world united to give to Lord Redgrave and his lovely countess, whose diary of the star voyage has, thanks to her Ladyship's generous condescension, furnished alike the groundwork and the inspiration of the present series of narratives.