

THE WORLD OF THE WAR GOD

George Griffith

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INTRODUCTION.

For their honeymoon Rollo Lenox Smeaton Aubrey, Earl of Redgrave, and his bride, Lilla Zaidie, leave the earth on a visit to the moon and the principal planets; their sole companion being Andrew Murgatroyd, an old engineer who had superintended the building of the Astronef in which the journey is made. By means of the "R Force," or Anti-Gravitational Force, of the secret of which Lord Redgrave is the sole possessor, they are able to navigate with precision and safety the limitless ocean of space. Their adventures on the moon were described in the first story of the series.

THE Earth and the Moon were more than a hundred Million miles behind in the depths of Space, and the Astronef had crossed this immense gap in eleven days and a few hours; but this apparently inconceivable speed was not altogether due to the powers of the Navigator of the Stars, for Lord Redgrave had taken advantage of the passage of the planet along its orbit towards that of the earth; therefore, while the Astronef was approaching Mars with ever-increasing speed, Mars was travelling towards the Astronef at the rate of sixteen miles a second. The great silver disc of the earth had diminished until it looked only a little larger than Venus appears from the earth. In fact the planet Terra is to the inhabitants of Mars what Venus is to us, the star of the morning and evening.

Breakfast on the morning of the twelfth day, or, since there is neither day nor night in Space, it would be more correct to say the twelfth period of twenty-four earth-hours as measured by the chronometers, was just over, and the Commander of the Astronef was standing with his bride in the forward end of the glass-covered deck looking downwards at a vast crescent of rosy light which stretched out over an arc of more than ninety degrees. Two tiny black spots were travelling towards each other across it. "Ah!" said her ladyship, going towards one of the telescopes, "there are the moons. I was reading my Gulliver last night. I wonder what the old Dean would have given to be here, and see how true his guess was. Have you made up your mind to land on them?"

"I don't see why we shouldn't," said her husband. "I think they'd make rather convenient stopping-places; besides, we want to know whether they have atmospheres and inhabitants."

"What, people living on those wee things?" she laughed, "why, they're only about thirty or forty miles round, aren't they?"

"That's about it," he said, "but that's just one of the points I want to solve, and as for life, it doesn't always mean people, you know. We are only a few hundred miles away from Deimos, the outer one, and he is twelve thousand five hundred miles from Mars. I vote we drop on him first and let him carry us towards his brother Phobos. Then when we've examined him we'll drop down to Phobos and take a trip round Mars on him. He does the journey in about seven hours and a half, and as he's only three thousand seven hundred miles above the surface we ought to get I've thousand five hundred miles from Mars. I vote we drop on him first and let him carry us towards his brother Phobos. Then when we've examined him we'll drop down to Phobos and take a trip round Mars on him. He does the journey in about seven hours and a half, and as he's only three thousand seven hundred miles above the surface we ought to get a very good view of our next stopping-place."

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"That ought to be quite a delightful trip!" said her ladyship. "but how commonplace you are getting, Lenox. That's so like you Englishmen. We are doing what has only been dreamt of before, and here you are talking about moons and planets as if they were railway stations."

"Well, if your ladyship prefers it, we will call them undiscovered islands and continents in the the Ocean of Space. That does sound a little bit better, doesn't it? Now I must go down and see to my engines."

When he had gone, Zaidie sat down to the telescope again and kept it on one of the little black spots travelling across the crescent of Mars. Both it and the other spot rapidly grew larger, and the features of the planet itself became more distinct. She could make out the seas and continents and the mysterious canals quite plainly through the clear rosy atmosphere, and, with the aid of the telescope, she could even make out the glimmer which the inner moon threw upon the unlighted portion of the disc.

Deimos grew bigger and bigger, and in about half-an-hour the Astronef grounded gently on what looked to her like a dimly-lighted circular plain, but which, when her eyes became accustomed to the light, was more like the summit of a conical mountain. Redgrave raised the keel a little from the surface again and propelled her towards a thin circle of light on the tiny horizon. As they crossed into the sunlit portion it became quite plain that Deimos at any rate was as airless and lifeless as the moon. The surface was composed of brown rock and red sand broken up into miniature hills and valleys. There were a few traces of bygone volcanic action, but it was evident that the internal fires of this tiny world must have burnt themselves out very quickly.

"Not much to be seen here," said Redgrave, "and I don't think it would be safe to go out. The attraction is so weak here that we might find ourselves falling off with very little exertion. You might take a couple of photographs of the surface, and then we'll be off to Phobos."

A few minutes later Zaidie got a couple of good photographs of the satellite. The attraction of Mars now began to make itself strongly felt, and the Astronef dropped rapidly through the eight thousand miles which separate the inner and outer Moons of Mars. As they approached Phobos they saw that half the little disc was brilliantly lighted by the same rays of the sun which were glowing on the rapidly increasing crescent of Mars beneath them. By careful manipulation of his engines Lord Redgrave managed to meet the approaching satellite with a hardly perceptible shock about the centre of its lighted portion, that is to say the side turned towards the planet.

Mars now appeared as a gigantic rosy moon filling the whole vault of the heavens above them. Their telescopes brought the three thousand seven hundred and fifty miles down to about fifty. The rapid motion of the tiny satellite afforded them a spectacle which might be compared to the rising of a moon glowing with rosy light and hundreds of times larger than the earth. The speed of the vehicle of which they had taken possession, something like four thousand two hundred miles an hour, caused the surface of the planet to apparently sweep away from below them from west to east, just as the earth appears to slip away from under the car of a balloon.

Neither of them left the telescopes for more than a few minutes during this aerial circumnavigation. Murgatroyd, outwardly impassive, but inwardly filled with solemn fears for the fate of this impiously daring voyage, brought them wine and sandwiches and later on tea and toast and more sandwiches; but they hardly touched even these, so absorbed were they in the wonderful spectacle which was passing swiftly under their eyes. Their telescopes were excellent ones, and at that distance Mars gave up all his secrets.

Phobos revolves from west to east almost along the plane of the planet's equator. To left and right they saw the huge ice-caps of the South and North Poles gleaming through the red atmosphere with a pale sunset glimmer. Then came the great stretches of sea, often obscured by vast banks of clouds, which, as the sunlight fell upon them, looked strangely like the earth-clouds at sunset. Then, almost immediately underneath them spread out the great land areas of the equatorial region. The three continents of Halle, Gallileo, and Tychoiland; then Huygens—which is to Mars what Europe, Asia, and Africa are to the earth. Then Herschell and Copernicus. Nearly all of these land masses were split up into semi-regular divisions by the famous canals which have so long puzzled terrestrial observers.

"Well, there is one problem solved at any rate," said Redgrave, when after a journey of nearly four hours they had crossed the western hemisphere. "Mars is getting, very old, her seas are diminishing, and her continents are increasing, and those canals are the remains of gulfs and isthmuses which have been widened and deepened and lengthened by human, or we'll say Martian, labour, partly, I've no doubt, for purposes of navigation, and partly to keep the inhabitants of the interior of the continent within measurable distance of the sea. There's not the slightest

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doubt about that. Then, you see, we've seen scarcely any mountains to speak of so far, only ranges of low hills."

"And that means, I suppose," said Zaidie. "that they've all been worn down as the mountains of the earth are worn away. I was reading Flammarion's 'End of the World' last night, and he, you know, painted the earth at the end as an enormous plain of land, no hills or mountains, no seas, and only sluggish rivers draining into marshes. I suppose that's what they're coming to down yonder. Now, I wonder what sort of civilisation we shall find. Perhaps we shan't find any at all. Suppose all their civilisations have worn out, and they are degenerating into the same struggle for sheer existence those poor creatures in the moon must have had."

"Or suppose," said his lordship seriously, "we find that they have passed the zenith of civilisation, and are dropping back into savagery, but still have the use of weapons and means of destruction which we, perhaps, have no notion of, and are inclined to use them. We'd better be careful, dear."

"What do you mean, Lenox?" she said. "They wouldn't try to do us any harm, would they? Why should they?"

"I don't say they would" he replied, "but still you never know. You see, their ideas of right and wrong and hospitality and all that sort of thing might quite different to what we have on the earth. In fact, they may not be men at all, but just a sort of monster with a semi-human intellect, perhaps a superhuman one with ideas that we have no notion of. Then there's another thing: suppose they fancied a trip through Space, and thought that they had quite as good a right to the Astronef as we have? I dare say they've seen us if they've got telescopes, as no doubt they have, perhaps a good deal more powerful than ours, and they may be getting ready to receive us now. I think I'll get the guns up before we go down, in case our reception may not be a friendly one."

The defensive armament of the Astronef consisted of four pneumatic guns, which could be mounted on swivels, two ahead and two astern, and which carried a shell containing either one of two kinds of explosives invented by her creator. One was a solid, and burst on impact with an explosive force equal to about twenty pounds of dynamite. The other consisted of two liquids separated in the shell, and these, when mixed by the breaking of the partition, nurse into a volume of flame which could not be extinguished by any known human means. It would burn even in a vacuum, since it supplied its own elements of combustion. The guns would throw these shells to a distance of about seven terrestrial miles. On the upper deck there were also stands for a couple of light machine guns, capable of discharging seven hundred bullets a minute.

The small arms consisted of a couple of heavy, ten-bore, elephant guns carrying explosive bullets, a dozen rifles and fowling pieces of different makes of which three, a single and a double-barrelled rifle and a double-barrelled shot-gun, belonged to her ladyship, as well as a dainty brace of revolvers, one of half-a-dozen brace of various calibres which completed the minor armament of the Astronef.

These guns were got up and mounted while the attraction of the planet was comparatively feeble, and the guns themselves were, therefore, of very little weight. On the surface of the earth a score of men could not have done the work, but on board the Astronef, suspended in space, his lordship and Murgatroyd found the work easy, and Zaidie herself picked up a Maxim and carried it about as though it were a toy sewing-machine.

"Now I think we can go down," said Redgrave, when everything had been put in position as far as possible. "I wonder whether we shall find the atmosphere of Mars suitable for terrestrial lungs. It will be rather awkward if it isn't."

A very slight exertion of repulsive force was sufficient to detach the Astronef from the body of Phobos. She dropped rapidly towards the surface of the planet, and within three hours they saw the sunlight for the first time since they had left the Earth shining through an unmistakable atmosphere, an atmosphere of a pale, rosy hue, instead of the azure of the earthly skies, and an angular observation showed that they were within fifty miles of the surface of the undiscovered world.

"Well, there's air here of some sort, there's no doubt. We'll drop a bit further and then Andrew shall start the propellers. They'll very soon give us an idea of the density. Do you notice the change in the temperature? That's the diffused rays instead of the direct ones. Twenty miles! think that will do. I'll stop her now and we'll prospect for a landing-place."

He went down to apply the repulsive force directly to the surface of Mars, so as to check the descent, and then he put on his breathing-dress, went into the exit chamber, closed one door behind him, opened the other and allowed it to fill with Martian air; then he shut it again, opened his visor and took a cautious breath.

It may, perhaps, have been the idea that he, the first of all the sons of Earth, was breathing the air of another world, or it might have been some peculiar property from the Martian atmosphere, but he immediately

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experienced a sensation such as usually follows drinking a glass of champagne. He took another breath, and another. Then he opened the inner door and went on to the lower deck, saying to himself:

"Well, the air's all right if it is a bit champagny, rich in oxygen, I suppose, with perhaps a trace of nitrous-oxide in it. Still, it's certainly breathable and that's the principal thing.

"It's all right, dear," he said as he reached the upper deck where Zaidie was walking about round the sides of the glass dome gazing with all her eyes at the strange scene of mingled cloud and sea, and land, which spread for an immense distance on all sides of them. "I have breathed the air of Mars, and even at this height it is distinctly wholesome, though of course it's rather thin, and I had it mixed with some of our own atmosphere. Still I think it will agree all right with us lower down."

"Well, then," said Zaidie, "suppose we get down below those clouds and see what there really is to be seen."

"Your ladyship has but to speak and be obeyed," he replied, and disappeared into the lower regions of the vessel.

In a couple of minutes she saw the cloud belt below them rising rapidly. When her husband returned the Astronef plunged into a sea of rosy mist.

"The clouds of Mars," she exclaimed, "fancy a world with pink clouds! I wonder what there is on the other side." The next moment they saw.

Just below them, at a distance of about five earth-miles, lay an irregularly triangular island, a detached portion of the Continent of Huygens almost equally divided by the Martian equator, and lying with another almost similarly shaped island between the fortieth and fiftieth meridians of west longitude. The two islands were divided by a broad straight stretch of water about the width of the English Channel between Folkestone and Boulogne. Instead of the bright blue green of terrestrial seas, this connecting link between the great Northern and Southern Martian oceans had an orange tinge.

The land immediately beneath them was of a gently undulating character, something like the Downs of South-Eastern England. No mountains were visible in any direction. The lower portions, particularly along the borders of the canals and the sea, were thickly dotted with towns and cities, apparently of enormous extent. To the north of the Island Continent there was a Peninsula, covered with a vast collection of buildings, which, with the broad streets and spacious squares which divided them, must have covered an area of something like two hundred square miles.

"There's the London of Mars!" said Redgrave, pointing down towards it; "where the London of Earth will be in a few thousand years, close to the equator. And you see all those other towns and cities crowded round the canals! I dare say when we go across the northern and southern temperate zones we shall find them in about the state that Siberia or Patagonia are in."

"I dare say we shall," replied Zaidie, "Martian civilisation is crowding towards the equator, though I should call that place down there the greater New York of Mars, and see there's Brooklyn just across the canal. I wonder what they're thinking about us down there."

"Hullo, what's that!" exclaimed Redgrave, interrupting her and pointing towards the great city whose roofs, apparently of glass, were flashing with a thousand tints in the pale crimson sunlight. "That's either an airship or another Astronef, and it's evidently coming up to interview us. So they've solved the problem, have they? Well, dear, I think it quite possible that we're in for a pretty exciting time on Mars."

While he was speaking a little dark shape, at first not much bigger than a bird, had risen from the glittering roofs of the city. It rapidly increased in size until in a few minutes Zaidie got a glimpse of it through one of the telescopes and said:

"It's a great big thing something like the Astronef, only it has wings and, I think, masts; yes, there are three masts and there's something glittering on the tops of them."

"Revolving helices, I suppose. He's screwing himself up into the air. That shows that they must either have stronger and lighter machinery here than we have, or, as the astronomers have thought, this atmosphere is denser than ours and therefore easier to fly in. Then, of course, things are only half their earthly weight here. Well, I suppose we may as well let them come and reconnoitre; then we shall see what kind of creatures they are. Ah! there are a lot more of them, some coming from Brooklyn, too, as you call it. Come up into the wheelhouse and I'll relieve Murgatroyd so that he can go and look after his engines. We shall have to give these gentlemen a lesson in flying. Meanwhile, in case of accidents, we may as well make ourselves as invulnerable as possible."

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A few minutes later they were in the little steel conning-tower forward, watching the approach of the Martian fleet through the thick windows of toughened glass which enabled them to look in every direction except straight down. The steel coverings had been drawn down over the glass dome of the main deck, and Murgatroyd had gone down to the engine-room, which was connected with the conning-tower by telephone and electric signal, as well as by speaking tubes. Fifty feet ahead of them stretched out a long shining spur, the forward end of the Astronef of which ten feet were solid steel, a ram which no floating structure built by human hands could have resisted.

Redgrave was at the wheel, standing with his hands on the steering-wheel, looking more serious than he had done so far during the voyage. Zaidie stood beside him with a powerful binocular telescope watching, with cheeks a little paler than usual, the movements of the Martian air-ships. She counted twenty-five vessels rising round them in a wide circle.

"I don't like the idea of a whole fleet coming up," said Redgrave, as he watched them rising, and the ring narrowing round the still motionless Astronef. "If they only wanted to know who and what we are, or to leave their cards on us, as it were, and bid us welcome to the world, one ship could have done that just as well as fifty. This lot coming up looks as if they wanted to get round and capture us."

"It does look like it!" said Zaidie, with her glasses fixed on the nearest of the vessels; "and now I can see they've guns, too, something like ours, and, perhaps, as you said just now, they may have explosives that we don't know anything about. Oh, dear, suppose they were able to smash us up with a single shot!"

"You needn't be afraid of that, dear!" said Redgrave, laying his hand on her shoulder; "but, of course, it's perfectly natural that they should look upon us with a certain amount of suspicion, dropping like this on them from the stars. Can you see anything like men on board them yet?"

"No, they're all closed in," she replied, "just as we are; but they've got conning-towers like this, and something like windows along the sides; that's where the guns are, and the guns are moving, they're pointing them at us. Lenox, I'm afraid they're going to shoot."

"Then we may as well spoil their aim," he said, pressing an electric button three times, and then once more after a little interval. In obedience to the signal Murgatroyd turned on the repulsive force to half power, and the Astronef leapt up vertically a couple of thousand feet; then Redgrave pressed the button once and stopped. Another signal set the propellers in motion, and as she sprang forward across the circle formed by the Martian air-ships, they looked down and saw that the place which they had just left was occupied by a thick, greenish-yellow cloud.

"Look, Lenox, what on earth is that?" exclaimed Zaidie, pointing down to it.

"What on Mars would be nearer the point, dear," he said, with what she thought a somewhat vicious laugh. "That I'm afraid means anything but a friendly reception for us. That cloud is one of two things. It's either made by the explosion of twenty or thirty shells, or else it's made of gases intended to either poison us or make us insensible, so that they can take possession of the ship. In either case I should say that the Martians are not what we should call gentlemen."

"I should think not," she said angrily. "They might at least have taken us for friends till they had proved us enemies, which they wouldn't have done. Nice sort of hospitality that, considering how far we've come, and we can't shoot back because we haven't got the ports open."

"And a very good thing too!" laughed Redgrave. "If we had had them open, and that volley had caught us unawares, the Astronef would probably have been full of poisonous gases by this time, and your honeymoon, dear, would have come to a somewhat untimely end. Ah, they're trying to follow us! Well, now we'll see how high they can fly."

He sent another signal to Murgatroyd, and the Astronef, still beating the Martian air with the fans of her propellers, and travelling forward at about fifty miles an hour, rose in a slanting direction through a dense bank of rosy-tinted clouds, which hung over the bigger of the two cities—New York, as Zaidie had named it. When they reached the golden red sunlight above it, the Astronef stopped her ascent, and with half a turn of the wheel her commander sent her sweeping round in a wide circle. A few minutes later they saw the Martian fleet rise almost simultaneously through the clouds. They seemed to hesitate a moment, and then the prow of every vessel was directed towards the swiftly moving Astronef.

"Well, gentlemen," said Redgrave, "you evidently don't know anything about Professor Rennick and his R.Force; and yet you ought to know that we couldn't have come through space without being able to get beyond

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this little atmosphere of yours. Now let us see how fast you can fly."

Another signal went down to Murgatroyd, and the whirling propellers became two intersecting circles of light. The speed of the Astronef increased to a hundred miles an hour, and the Martian fleet began to drop behind and trail out into a triangle like a flock of huge birds.

"That's lovely; we're leaving them!" exclaimed Zaidie leaning forward with the glasses to her eyes and tapping the floor of the conning-tower with her toe as if she wanted to dance. "and their wings are working faster than ever. They don't seem to have any screws."

"Probably because they've solved the problem of the bird's flight," said Redgrave, "They're not gaining on us, are they? "

"No, they're at about the same distance."

"Then we'll see how they can soar."

Another signal went over the wire, the Astronef's propellers slowed down and stopped, and the vessel began to rise swiftly towards the Zenith, which the Sun was now approaching. The Martian fleet continued the impossible chase until the limits of the navigable atmosphere. about eight earth-miles above the surface, was reached. Here the air was evidently too rarefied for their wings to act. They came to a standstill arranged in an irregular circle, their occupants no doubt looking up with envious eyes upon the shining body of the Astronef glittering like a tiny star in the sunlight ten thousand feet above them.

"Now, gentlemen, " said Redgrave, "I think we have shown you that we can fly faster and soar higher than you can. Perhaps you'll be a bit more civil now. And, if you're not, well, we shall have to teach you manners."

"But you're not going to fight them all dear, are you? Don't let us be the first to bring war and bloodshed with us into another world."

"Don't trouble about that, little woman, it's here already." said her husband. "People don't have air-ships and guns, which fire shells or whatever they were, without knowing what war is. From what I've seen, I should say these Martians have civilised themselves out of all the emotions, and, I daresay, have fought pitilessly for the possession of the last habitable lands of the planet. They've preyed upon each other till only the fittest are left, and those, I suppose, were the ones who invented the air-ships and finally got possession of all that existed. Of course that would give them the command of the planet, land, and sea. In fact, if we were able to make the personal acquaintance of the Martians, we should probably find them a set of over-civilised savages."

"That's a rather striking paradox, isn't it, dear?" said Zaidie, slipping her hand through his arm: "but still it's not at all bad. You mean, of course, that they've civilised themselves out of all the emotions until they're just a set of cold, calculating, scientific animals. After all they must be. We should not have done anything like that on earth if we'd had a visitor from Mars. We shouldn't have got out cannons, and shot at him before we'd even made his acquaintance.

"Now, if he or they had dropped in America as we were going down there, we should have received them with deputations, given them banquets, which they might not have been able to eat, and speeches, which they would not understand, photographed them, filled the newspapers with everything that we could imagine about them, put them in a palace car and hustled them round the country for everybody to look at."

"And meanwhile," laughed Redgrave. "some of your smart engineers, I suppose, would have gone over the vessel they had come in, found out how she was worked, and taken out a dozen patents for her machinery."

"Very likely," replied Zaidie, with a saucy little toss of her chin; "and why not? We like to learn things down there—and anyhow that would be better than shooting at them."

While this little conversation was going on, the Astronef was dropping rapidly into the midst of the Martian fleet, which had again arranged itself in a circle. Zaidie soon made out through the glasses that the guns were pointed upwards.

"Oh, that's your little game, is it!" said Redgrave, when she told him of this. "Well, if you want a fight, you can have it."

As he said this, his jaws came together, and Zaidie saw a look in his eyes that she had never seen there before. He signalled rapid two or three times to Murgatroyd. The propellers began to whirl at their utmost speed, and the Astronef, making a spiral downward course, swooped down on to the Martian fleet with terrific velocity. Her last curve coincided almost exactly with the circle occupied by the fleet. Half-a-dozen spouts of greenish flame came from the nearest vessel, and for a moment the Astronef was enveloped in a yellow mist.

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"Evidently they don't know that we are air-tight, and they don't use shot or shell. They've got past that. Their projectiles kill by poison or suffocation. I daresay a volley like that would kill a regiment. Now give that fellow a lesson which he won't live to remember."

They swept through the poison mist. Redgrave swung the wheel round. The Astronef dropped to the level of the ring of Martian vessels which had now got up speed again. Her steel ram was directed straight at the vessel which had fired the last shot. Propelled at a speed of more than a hundred miles an hour, it took the strange-winged craft amidships. As the shock came, Redgrave put his arm round Zaidie's waist and held her close to him, otherwise she would have been flung against the forward wall of the conning tower.

The Martian vessel stopped and bent up. They saw human figures, more than half as large again as men, inside her, staring at them through the windows in the sides. There were others at the breaches of the guns in the act of turning the muzzles on the Astronef; but this was only a momentary glimpse, for in a second or two after the Astronef's spur had pierced her, the Martian air-ship broke in twain, and her two halves plunged downwards through the rosy clouds.

"Keep her at full speed, Andrew," said Redgrave down the speaking-tube, "and stand by to jump if we want to."

"Ready, my lord!" came back up the tube.

The old Yorkshireman during the last few minutes had undergone a transformation which he himself hardly understood. He recognised that there was a fight going on, that it was a case of "burn, sink and destroy," and the thousand-year-old savage awoke in him just, as a matter of fact, it had done in his lordship.

"Well, they can pick up the pieces down there," said Redgrave, still holding Zaidie tight to his side with one hand and working the wheel with the other. "Now we'll teach them another lesson."

"What are you going to do, dear?" she said, looking up at him with somewhat frightened eyes.

"You'll see in a moment," he said, between his shut teeth. "I don't care whether these Martians are degenerate human beings or only animals; but from my point of view the reception that they have given us justifies any kind of retaliation. If we'd had a single port hole open during the first volley you and I would have been dead by this time, and I'm not going to stand anything like that without reprisals. They've declared war on us, and killing in war isn't murder."

"Well, no, I suppose not," she said; "but it's the first fight I've been in, and I don't like it. Still, they did receive us pretty meanly, didn't they?"

"Meanly? If there was anything like a code of interplanetary morals, one might call it absolutely caddish."

He sent another message to Murgatroyd. The Astronef sprang a thousand feet towards the zenith; another signal, and she stopped exactly over the biggest of the Martian air-ships; another, and she dropped on to it like a stone and smashed it to fragments. Then she stopped and mounted again above the broken circle of the fleet, while the pieces of the air-ship and what was left of her crew plunged downwards through the crimson clouds in a fall of nearly thirty thousand feet.

Within the next few moments the rest of the Martian fleet had followed it, sinking rapidly down through the clouds and scattering in all directions. "They seem to have had enough of it," laughed Redgrave, as the Astronef, in obedience to another signal, began to drop towards the surface of Mars. "Now we'll go down and see if they're in a more reasonable frame of mind. At any rate we've won our first scrimmage, dear."

"But it was rather brutal, Lenox, wasn't it?"

"When you are dealing with brutes, Zaidie, it is sometimes necessary to be brutal."

"And you look a wee bit brutal now," she replied, looking up at him with something like a look of fear in her eyes. "I suppose that is because you have just killed somebody—or some things—whichever they are."

"Do I, really?"

The hard-set jaw relaxed and his lips melted into a smile under his moustache, and he bent down and kissed her. And then he said:

"Well, what do you suppose I should have thought of them if you had had a whiff of that poison?"

"Yes, dear," she said; "I see now."

When the Astronef dropped through the clouds, they saw that the fleet had not only scattered, but was apparently getting as far out of reach as possible. One vessel had dropped into the principal square in the centre of the city which her ladyship had called New York.

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"That fellow has gone to report, evidently," said Redgrave. "We'll follow him, but I don't think we'd better open the ports even then. There's no telling when they might give us a whiff of that poison-mist, or whatever it is."

"But how are you going to talk to them, then, if they can talk?—I mean, if they know any language that we do?"

"They're something like men, and so I suppose they understand the language of signs, at any rate. Still, if you don't fancy it, we'll go somewhere else."

"No thanks," she said. "That's not my father's daughter. I haven't come a hundred million miles from home to go away before the first act's finished. We'll go down to see if we can make them understand."

By this time the Astronef was hanging suspended over an enormous square about half the size of Hyde Park. It was laid out just as a terrestrial park would be in grassland, flower beds, and avenues, and patches of trees, only the grass was a reddish yellow, the leaves of the trees were like those of a beech in autumn, and the flowers were nearly all a deep violet, or a bright emerald green.

As they descended they saw that the square, or Central Park, as her ladyship at once christened it, was flanked by enormous blocks of buildings, palaces built of a dazzlingly white stone, and topped by domed roofs, and lofty cupolas of glass.

"Isn't that just lovely!" she said, swinging her binoculars in every direction. "Talk about Fifth Avenue and the houses in Central Park; why, it's the Chicago Exposition, and the Paris one, and your Crystal Palace, multiplied by about ten thousand, and all spread out just round this one place. If we don't find these people nice, I guess we'd better go back and build a fleet like this, and come and take it."

"There spoke the new American imperialism" laughed Redgrave. "Well, we'll go and see what they're like first, shall we?"

The Astronef dropped a little more slowly than the air-ship had done, and remained suspended a hundred feet or so above her after she had reached the ground. Swarms of human figures, but of more than human statures clad in tunics and trousers or knickerbockers, came out of the glass-domed palaces from all sides into the park. They were nearly all of the same stature and there appeared to be no difference whatever between the sexes. Their dress was absolutely plain; there was no attempt at ornament or decoration of any kind.

"If there are any of the Martian women among those people," said her ladyship, "they've taken to rationals and they've grown about as big as the men. And look; there's someone who seems to want to communicate with us. Why, they're all bald! They haven't got a hair among them—and what a size their heads are!"

"That's brains—too much brains, I expect! Those people have lived too long. I expect they've ceased to be animals—civilised themselves out of everything in the way of passions and emotions, and are just purely intellectual beings, with as much human nature about them as a limited company has."

The orderly swarms of figures, which were rapidly filling the park, divided as he was speaking, making a broad lane from one of its entrances to where the Astronef was hanging above the air-ship. A light four-wheeled vehicle, whose framework and wheels glittered like burnished gold, sped towards them, driven by some invisible agency. Its only occupant was a huge man, dressed in the universal costume, saving only a scarlet sash in place of the cord-girdle which the others wore round their waists. The vehicle stopped near the air-ship, over which the Astronef was hanging, and, as the figure dismounted, a door opened in the side of the vessel and three other figures, similar both in stature and attire, came out and entered into conversation with him.

"The Admiral of the Fleet is evidently making his report," said Redgrave. "Meanwhile, the crowd seems to be taking a considerable amount of interest in us."

"And very naturally, too!" replied Zaidie. "Don't you think we might go down now and see if we can make ourselves understood in any way? You can have the guns ready in case of accidents, but I don't think they'll try and hurt us now. Look, the gentleman with the red sash is making signs."

"I think we can go down now all right," replied Redgrave, "because it's quite certain they can't use the poison guns on us without killing themselves as well. Still, we may as well have our own ready. Andrew, load up and get that port Maxim ready. I hope we shan't want it, but we may. I don't quite like the look of these people."

"They're very ugly, aren't they?" said Zaidie; "and really you can't tell which are men and which are women. I suppose they've civilised themselves out of everything that's nice, and are just scientific and utilitarian and everything that's horrid."

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"I shouldn't wonder. They look to me as if they've just got common sense as we call it, and hadn't any other sense; but, at any rate, if they don't behave themselves, we shall be able to teach them manners of a sort, though I dare say we've done that to some extent already."

As he said this Redgrave went into the conning-tower, and the Astronef moved from above the air-ship, and dropped gently into the crimson grass about a hundred feet from her. Then the ports were opened, the guns, which Murgatroyd had loaded, were swung into position, and they armed themselves with a brace of revolvers each, in case of accident.

"What delicious air this is!" said her ladyship, as the ports were opened, and she took her first breath of the Martian atmosphere. "It's ever so much nicer than ours; it's just like breathing champagne."

Redgrave looked at her with an admiration which was tempered by a sudden apprehension. Even in his eyes she had never seemed so lovely before. Her cheeks were glowing and her eyes were gleaming with a brightness that was almost feverish, and he was himself sensible of a strange feeling of exultation, both mental and physical, as his lungs filled with the Martian air.

"Oxygen," he said shortly, "and too much of it! Or, I shouldn't wonder if it was something like nitrous-oxide—you know, laughing gas."

"Don't!" she laughed, "it may be very nice to breath. but it reminds one of other things which aren't a bit nice. Still, if it is anything of that sort it might account for these people having lived so fast. I know I feel just now as if I were living at the rate of thirty-six hours a day and so, I suppose, the fewer hours we stop here the better."

"Exactly!" said Redgrave, with another glance of apprehension at her. Now, there's his Royal Highness, or whatever he is, coming. How are we going to talk to him? Are you all ready, Andrew?"

"Yes, my lord, all ready" replied the old Yorkshireman, dropping his huge, hairy hand on the breach of the Maxim.

"Very well, then, shoot the moment you see them doing anything suspicious, and don't let anyone except his Royal Highness come nearer than a hundred yards."

As he said this, Redgrave, revolver in hand, went to the door, from which the gangway steps had been lowered, and, in reply to a singularly expressive gesture from the huge Martian, who seemed to stand nearly nine feet high, he beckoned to him to come up on to the deck.

As he mounted the steps the crowd closed round the Astronef and the Martian air-ship; but, as though in obedience to orders which had already been given, they kept at a respectful distance of a little over a hundred yards away from the strange vessel, which had wrought such havoc with their fleet. When the Martian reached the deck Redgrave held out his hand and the giant recoiled, as a man on earth might have done if, instead of the open palm, he had seen a clenched hand gripping a knife.

"Take care, Lenox," exclaimed Zaidie, taking a couple of steps towards him, with her right hand on the butt of one of her revolvers. The movement brought her close to the open door, and in full view of the crowd outside.

If a seraph had come on earth and presented itself thus before a throng of human beings, there might have happened some such miracle as was wrought when the swarm of Martians beheld the strange beauty of this radiant daughter of the earth. As it seemed to them, when they discussed it afterwards, ages of purely mechanical and utilitarian civilisation had brought all conditions of Martian life up—or down—to the same level. There was no apparent difference between the males and females in stature; their faces were all the same, with features of mathematical regularity, pale skin, bloodless cheeks, and all expression, if such it could be called, utterly devoid of emotion.

But still these creatures were human, or at least their forefathers had been. Hearts beat in their breasts, blood flowed through their veins, and so the magic of this marvellous vision instantly awoke the long-slumbering elementary instincts of a bye-gone age. A low murmur ran through the vast throng, a murmur, half-human, half-brutish, which swiftly rose to a hoarse, screaming roar.

"Look out, my lord! Quick! Shut the door, they're coming! It's her ladyship they want; she must look like an angel from Heaven to them. Shall I fire?"

"Yes," said Redgrave, gripping the lever, and bringing the door down. "Zaidie, if this fellow moves, put a bullet through him. I'm going to talk to that air-ship before he gets his poison guns to work."

As the last word left his lips, Murgatroyd put his thumb on the spring on the Maxim. A roar such as Martian ears had never heard before resounded through the vast square, and was flung back with a thousand echoes from

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the walls of the huge palaces on every side. A stream of smoke and flame poured out of the little port-hole, and then the onward-swarming throng seemed to stop, and the front ranks of it began to sink down silently in long rows.

Then through the roaring rattle of the Maxim, sounded the deep, sharp bang of Redgrave's gun, as he sent twenty pounds' weight of an explosive, invented by Zaidie's father, which was nearly four times as powerful as Lyddite, into the Martian air-ship. Then came an explosion, which shook the air for miles around. A blaze of greenish flame, and a huge cloud of steamy smoke, showed that the projectile had done its work, and, when the smoke drifted away, the spot on which the air-ship had lain was only a deep, red, jagged gash in the ground. There was not even a fragment of the ship to be seen.

Then Redgrave left the gun and turned the starboard Maxim on to another swarm which was approaching the Astronef from that side. When he had got the range, he swung the gun slowly from side to side. The moving throng stopped, as the other one had done, and sank down to the red grass, now dyed with a deeper red.

Meanwhile, Zaidie had been holding the Martian at something more than arm's length with her revolver. He seemed to understand perfectly that if she pulled the trigger, the revolver would do something like what the Maxims had done. He appeared to take no notice whatever either of the destruction of the airship or of the slaughter that was going on around the Astronef. His big pale blue eyes were fixed upon her face. They seemed to be devouring a loveliness such as they had never seen before. A dim, pinky flush stole for the first time into his sallow cheeks, and something like a light of human passion came into his eyes.

Then he spoke. The words were slowly uttered, passionless, and very distinct. As words they were unintelligible but there was no mistaking their meaning or that of the gestures which accompanied them. He bent forward, towering over her with outstretched arms, huge, hideous, and half human.

Zaidie took a step backwards and, just as Redgrave whipped out one of his revolvers, she pulled the trigger of hers. The bullet cut a clean hole through the smooth, hairless skull of the Martian, and he dropped to the deck without a sound other than what was made by his falling body.

"That's the first man I've ever killed," she faltered, as her hand fell to her side, and the revolver dropped from it. "Still, do you think it really was a man?"

"That a man!" said Redgrave through his clenched teeth. "Not much! Here, Andrew, open that door again and help me to heave this thing overboard, and then we'd better be off or we shall be having the rest of the fleet with their poison guns around us. Hurry up! Zaidie, I think you'd better go below for the present, little woman, and keep the door of your room tight shut. There's no telling what these animals may do if they get a chance at us."

Although she would rather have remained on deck to see what was to happen, she saw that he was in earnest, and so she at once obeyed.

The dead body of the Martian was tumbled out, Murgatroyd closed all the air-tight doors of the upper deck chamber, while Redgrave set the engines in motion and, with hardly a moment's delay, the Astronef sprang up into the crimson sky from her first and last battle-field in the well-named world of the War God.