

THE MYSTERIOUS AIR PIRATES

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FILIBUS ABOARD THE BLACKBIRD

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The Mysterious Air Pirates
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Baroness Troixmonde sat at a small table in a well-appointed garden, sipping a cup of strong coffee and reading the paper. A sea of people ebbed and flowed around her, walking, sightseeing, playing games—it was, in nearly every respect, a perfectly normal mid-spring morning.

But only nearly every respect.

The large airship which floated listlessly over the garden was certainly impressive, and while most in the crowded throng were aware of such machines, seeing one in person was another matter altogether.

The crowd slowed; dozens of people turned their heads skyward, shielding their eyes against the harsh morning sun and speaking in sharp whispers. Baroness Troixmonde did not look up from her paper, but she smiled slightly at nothing particular.

The giant dirigible floated lower, performed a large sweeping arc, and slowed considerably. It was still several hundred meters from the park and its many guests, and it hung in the air with an unnatural stillness.

The Baroness glanced at her watch. A small jewel on the bezel of the watchface seemed to flash back at her. To the untrained eye, it would have appeared as nothing more than a trick of the light, but it was, in fact, a coded message, flashing in the dots and dashes of Morse code, received through a radio receiver in the Baroness' handbag and relayed discreetly to a small light behind the jewel on the watch face.

She fished a ballpoint pen from her handbag, began to jot down the symbols, and then swore quietly to herself.

"Damn newfangled thing always clogs."

She persevered, scratching a series of dots and dashes into the paper. Occasionally, these scratches even had ink in them.

...— ----- / - . - . . - / - . — . - . - ... ---
. ... - / — ...- . / -... ...- - . - . - . - / . - . — - .
-...

20 meters northwest of duck pond

The message repeated four times. She did not signal a reply.

The airship remained largely motionless but drifted slowly higher. The movement was almost imperceptible, but the craft gradually shrank into the sky. The gathered crowd began to disperse, convinced that nothing of further interest would come of the distant airship.

Lady Troixmonde sighed deeply. She was not ready to depart—there was still a full cup of coffee. She sat for a moment, her usually elegant features contorted in frustration. Finally, she folded the paper and placed it under her arm, and threw back what remained of the coffee in a single gulp. She began to stand but paused for a moment and instead opened her handbag. She replaced the nearly useless ballpoint pen and then, careful not to disturb the radio receiver, removed a long metal tube.

"The boys will wait another few minutes," she said to no one in particular. "It's a lovely day, and I'd like to finish the paper."

Unscrewing the lid of the large metal tube revealed it to be a vacuum flask. Lady Troixmonde poured the remaining brew into her now-empty cup and smiled to herself as she noticed the steam rising from the liquid.

"Ah yes, still hot."

A young boy stopped and stared at this.

"How did you do that?" he said.

"Do what?"

"How did you get hot coffee way out here?"

Lady Troixmonde laughed slightly and took a sip. She regretted it almost instantly as the still-scalding liquid burned her tongue.

Some things work a bit too well, she thought.

"It's called a vacuum flask, dear," she said finally, with all the aristocratic charm she could muster. "They are the latest thing."

Satisfied, the boy shuffled back into the sea of people going about their lives, and Lady Troixmonde wavered for a moment before unfolding her newspaper once more.

She glanced in the general direction the airship had been. It was gone now, a mere speck in the distant sky and one moving fairly quickly.

"They'll wait," she decided, and returned to her paper and her coffee. The front page held two headlines of interest: first, "Hardy Goes Free," and second, "Search for Filibus Continues. Reward Offered."

Lady Troixmonde was familiar with both of these stories already, but she allowed herself the indulgence to read them again. Detective Hardy had been framed for a series of robberies and kidnappings and had almost ended up in prison before finally clearing his name. His reputation as a detective was in tatters, as he had been unable to locate the perpetrator of the crimes in question.

This made the Baroness smile.

The second story read as follows:

SEARCH FOR FILIBUS CONTINUES

REWARD OFFERED

MYSTERIOUS SKY PIRATE ESCAPES FROM DETECTIVE HARDY. IDENTITY REMAINS UNKNOWN. HE MAY BE USING THE ALIAS COUNT DE LA BRÈVE. SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS. \$50,000 REWARD FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO CAPTURE OF FILIBUS. CONTACT PAPER FOR DETAILS.

"That would be one way to make some money," the Baroness mused, before throwing back her coffee, packing her things, and making for the treeline.

No one noticed her leaving the populated area of the park. No one noticed her ducking behind some trees to the north of the duck pond. No one noticed as she removed a signaling device from her bag and signaled to the airship above.

The airship lowered a small tube, an elevator, and the Baroness entered it, flipping a switch once inside to indicate it was safe to raise.

The winch tightened, the tube began to rise, and the Baroness took the opportunity to peel herself out of the ornate and overwrought dress she had worn to the park, revealing that underneath she wore a pair of black boots, a black woolen suit, and a white dress shirt. She donned her customary mask to complete the ensemble and, having done so, completed the transformation from Baroness Troixmonde, darling of Italian high society, to Filibus, the mysterious air pirate.

As Filibus stepped out of the capsule and onto the bridge of the airship, they noticed, not for the first time, that it had become somewhat crowded. Their crew had, in recent months, grown to number five people:

Bartholomew and Bartimeaus

Thompson

Bartholomew and Bartimeaus Thompson, known more often as The Barts, were not related in any way, despite sharing a last name and most of a first name. These two were nearly polar opposites. Bartholomew was an electrical engineer and inventor. He was tall and slender, clean-cut, organized, and almost infuriatingly tidy. He was responsible for the radio receiver in Lady Troixmonde's watch (and a similar device which rested in one of Filibus' cufflinks), among many other gadgets and gizmos.

Bartholomew also considered himself Filibus' personal bodyguard. Filibus didn't feel much like they needed a bodyguard. Bartholomew pretended not to mind.

Bartimeaus was the airship's mechanic and engineer. He kept the ship in the air, kept the crew well armed with a wide variety of weaponry of varying degrees of lethality, and spent whatever time he had left over bickering with Bartholomew. Bartimeaus was short, squat, stocky, and perpetually dirty. He was, without question, the messiest human any member of the crew had ever known. He was also, it must be said, the finest mechanic any of them had ever met.

Bartimeaus and Bartholomew were practically inseparable. They didn't hate one another, exactly, but you wouldn't know it from listening to the way they carried on, or from watching them repeatedly come to blows after one Bart cleaned up after the other (or after the other Bart dirtied up after the first).

But they'd been friends for longer than either of them cared to remember and partners in crime for two decades prior to joining up with Filibus' crew, and there was no finer team of inventors (or munitions experts).

Lenora Hardy

Lenora Hardy was the newest member of the crew, and the one who least fit the mold from which the rest had been cast. She was the younger sister of the great Detective Hardy who had spent the better part of the last five years trying to bring down Filibus and their crew.

Lenora was a slight woman in her early twenties, with long dark hair and a mischievous smile. She was an expert in sleight of hand, and she was aboard this ship because she had thoroughly fallen in love with Count de la Brève.

Of course, he didn't exist any more than Lady Troixmonde. Both the Count and the Baroness were simply convenient characters for Filibus to play.

And so, Lenora now found herself tagging along with a group of air pirates, practicing sleight of hand, and hoping that her smile would be enough to keep her out of trouble.

It often was.

Edgar Reeves

Edgar Reeves had served with Filibus for a little over five years. He was a short, slender Black man, and the only American on the crew. Edgar was an artist, a poet, and a master forger, a skill which endeared him deeply to Filibus.

Edgar originally joined Filibus' crew in 1910 after they sprung him from prison. Edgar had been convicted of a crime that Filibus committed and, thanks to the brutal and racist prison system of the United States, it seemed likely that Edgar was going to spend the rest of his life being tortured by sadistic racists in the name of Justice. Filibus had, by way of apology, busted him out of prison and supplied him with some forged papers to help him start a new life in Canada. Edgar laughed at the poor quality of the forgeries, and offered his services to Filibus instead. The two became fast friends, and Edgar ultimately convinced Filibus to take on a crew on a more permanent basis, rather than picking up hired help for each job. Much of what had transpired since was, in ways big and small, thanks to Edgar.

Jerry Smithfield

Jerry was a racecar driver before joining the crew. These days, he spent most of his time as scout, lookout, pilot, translator, and occasionally getaway driver. Jerry seemed to speak whatever language he was called upon to speak, and while he would only claim knowledge of "6 or 7, maybe 8" distinct tongues, he never seemed to have a problem making himself understood.

He had short white hair, pale blue eyes, a strong jawline, and a right hook that you'd never forget (provided you were able to remember it). He was quick to anger, quick to forgive, and quick with a bottle of wine.

Filibus

Filibus was a mystery, even to Edgar who had known them for years, and Lenora who professed to love them deeply. Filibus liked it that way.

They were of average height, of average weight, with fine, short, sandy blonde hair and green eyes. When disguised as The Baroness (or any of another female aliases they'd used over the years) no one doubted that Filibus was indeed a woman. When disguised as The Count (or any of the other male aliases they'd used over the years) no one doubted that Filibus was a man.

This suited Filibus fine. They preferred to remain a mystery.

It was Jerry, finally, who broke the silence.

"You got anymore coffee, or do I need to put another pot on?"

"Put another pot on, Jer," Filibus said, walking to the edge of the deck to survey the landscape below.

Jerry laughed to himself; the pot was already on, of course. He'd been at this job long enough to know Filibus never had any coffee left over.

They were high enough in the sky that the details of the ground below were difficult to discern to even the keenest eyes, so without giving it much thought, Filibus tapped the side of their mask, and magnifying lenses rotated into place.

"So, what's the scoop?" Edgar asked impatiently. "Are they going to lock Hardy up?"

"I certainly hope they don't!" Lenora interrupted. "Certainly, the man is a nuisance, but he's my brother!"

Filibus tapped their mask again, returning their vision to normal, and

fished the newspaper out of the Baroness' handbag.

"Looks like they're still pinning the Cat's Eye diamonds on us, folks," Filibus said, passing the paper around the crowd.

Lenora looked relieved, but no obvious emotions registered with the others.

"What about the other thing?" Jerry asked, returning to the group with a tray full of coffee cups, and watching with amusement as the various members of the crew scrambled to doctor their cups.

"Other thing?" Edgar said, as he stirred a generous helping of cream into his mug. "I don't like the sound of that. What other thing?"

Filibus retrieved the paper, riffled through several pages, and set it down on their communal table again. Circled in ink on the page was an advertisement for an exhibit of Egyptian artifacts at the British Museum.

"Are we going to a museum?" Lenora asked, excitement creeping into her voice.

"Indeed," said Filibus.

"Is it for a job?" Lenora asked, this time somewhat dejectedly.

Filibus started to answer, but before they had the chance, Bartimeaus spoke. "For you, it is a trip to the museum, Lenora. For Filibus, there will also be a job." As he spoke, he poured sugar into his coffee. One spoonful, two, three, four. "I have some friends in Egypt. They are very upset with the British Museum. They have hired us to retrieve some things." He took a sip of his coffee, made a face, and added two more spoonfuls of sugar.

Bartholomew went pale. "Surely you

don't mean those friends."

"I do."

"The ones who tried to kill me."

"Yes."

"Do you think they'll try again?"

"One must hope, Bart, one must hope!"

The journey from Turin to London was approximately 500 miles. Operating at maximum speed, and with friendly weather conditions, it would take approximately 6 hours to make the flight. Sadly, on this day, weather conditions were not optimal.

The crew had been in flight for some 3 hours when they were beset by a thunderstorm. Heavy rain poured onto the deck, and turbulence shook the craft. Lenora and Edgar took shelter below deck. Bartimeaus and Bartholomew retreated to the engine room, to ensure the ship kept moving. Jerry and Filibus stayed above deck to make sure the ship didn't fall out of the sky.

Jerry stood at the helm, the wind whipped at him and the rain stung his eyes, but he held fast. He slid his shoes into special notches near the helm, and they locked in place. He pulled a cord from his belt and clipped it to the helm. He was determined to keep the airship on course.

Filibus, on the other hand, had a far more perilous job. Thunderstorms, even at this high altitude, could mean hail. And hail, especially at the tremendous speed the ship was traveling, could mean disaster for the ship and its crew.

Filibus' job was simple: Climb the network of ropes that crisscrossed the giant balloon which kept their ship afloat and listen for the sound of escaping air, or look for other damage. Then patch that damage as quickly as possible, while also not falling to their

death.

Simple, yes. Easy, no.

Filibus climbed the rigging, clipped a safety line in place, and began their vigil. The rain pummeled the ship. It would be difficult to find footing at the best of times on the round semi-rigid hull of the balloon, but now, with the wind and the rain about them, it was nearly impossible. Filibus stumbled and slid towards the edge.

In an instant there was a crash of thunder and a bolt of lightning collided with the ship. The ship's lightning rod did its job routing the dangerous bolt away from the balloon's flammable lifting gas, but began to smolder and smoke.

Filibus' hands found purchase on a piece of rigging, and they were able to scramble in the general direction of the lightning strike. The onslaught of rain put the fire out before it could spread, but much of the rigging would need to be replaced when they next landed.

The hail did come eventually. Little pellets, the size of blueberries but hard as rock and traveling incredibly fast. They struck at Filibus' arms and back, and Filibus was once again grateful for the padding and armor hidden within their jacket.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the ship sailed clear of the bulk of the storm and into clear skies. Filibus waited a moment, catching their breath, trying to make certain that there was no damage their eyes had missed.

In the distance they heard another crack of thunder. As it faded, they heard the hiss of a hole in their balloon, and the escape of lifting gas. Filibus acted quickly, scrambling across the rigging to the location of the

hole.

It was small, nearly perfectly round, and across the side of the balloon.

Not Hail.

Another crack rang out in the distance and Filibus shot their eyes in that direction, depressing the mechanism to engage their magnifying lenses.

What they saw made their blood run cold.

Filibus was not alone in the skies. Their ship was under pursuit, and they were being fired upon.

The urgency of the situation overtook everything else. Filibus leapt clear of the balloon, counting on their safety line to catch and pull them back. It did, and they were hurled towards the deck at tremendous speed. As they flew, Filibus removed a knife from their belt, and sliced through the safety line, hitting the deck at a run.

"We're under attack," they said. "Prepare for combat." Their voice was firm, but it didn't feel especially loud. Somehow it was heard throughout the ship, and many things began to happen all at once.

First, Lenora and Edgar stayed below deck. They would not be useful in this fight. They busied themselves with tidying the mess the storm had created throughout the lower decks. Edgar put on another pot of coffee. There was always time for coffee.

At the same time, the Barts rushed up the ladder from the engine room through the ship and onto the main deck. They started pulling levers and flipping switches, the purpose of which was difficult to discern.

An elegant long-gun popped up out of the floor in front of Bartholomew, and a fraction of a second later a large squat cannon swung out of a section of railing in front of Bartimeaus.