The Air Pirate

Guy Thorne

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The Air Pirate

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THE AIR PIRATE

By Ranger Gull, Author of "The Serf," "Back to Lilac Land," "The Snare of the Fowler," etc.

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Dedication

TO PERCY BURTON, Esq.

In memory of a certain celebrated walk from Great Holland to Frinton-on-Sea, and the salmon we met at the end of it. With all good

wishes from the Author.

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THE AIR PIRATE

CHAPTER I

THE COMMISSIONER OF AIR POLICE FOR GREAT BRITAIN RIDES TO PLYMOUTH IN GOOD COMPANY

Nearly two years ago a leading London daily newspaper said: "The

Government have assured us that all danger from present and future air piracies is now over, and that the recent events which so startled and horrified both this country and the United States of America can never recur. For our own part we accept that assurance, and we do not think that the Commissioner of Air Police for the British Government will be caught napping again.

"In saying this we do not in the least mean to imply that Sir John Custance could either have foreseen or prevented the astounding mid-Atlantic tragedies. Sir John, though barely thirty years of age, is an official in every way worthy of his high position, an organizer of exceptional ability and a pilot of practical experience. Press and public are perfectly well aware that it is owing to his personal exertions that our magnificent Transatlantic air-liners are no longer stricken down by the Night Terror of the immediate past. And in saying this much, we have both a suggestion and a request to make.

"The inner history of the piracies is only fully known to one man. It is a story, we understand, that puts the imagination of the boldest writer of fiction to shame. Such parts of it as have been made public hint at a story of absorbing interest behind. The bad old days of censorship and secrecy have vanished with the occasions that made them necessary. We suggest that a full and detailed 'story' of the first--and we trust the last--Air Pirate should be written, and given to the world. And we call upon that most popular public man, Sir John Custance, to do this for us. He alone knows everything."

At the time that it appeared I read the above to Charles Thumbwood, my little valet, as I finished breakfast, in my Half Moon Street chambers.

"Not _quite_ correct, Charles. You know almost as much about it as I do. To say nothing of a certain friend ..."

"I wouldn't say that, Sir John," said Charles, brushing my light overcoat. "Though I rode part of the course alongside of you; to say nothing of Mr. Danjuro." Thumbwood was a jockey before I took him into my service. "Are you going to write it all down, Sir John?"

"That depends on several things, and on one person especially. I must think it all over."

Think it over I did as I drove to my offices in Whitehall--the Scotland Yard of the Air--and I discussed it afterwards with a certain lady....

Which is how the following narrative came to be written, though I did not complete it until the best part of two years had elapsed.

II

I never did any flying during the Great War. I was too young, being only fifteen and at Eton when Peace was signed. But from the very earliest days that I can remember aviation fascinated me as nothing else could. My father, the first baronet, left me a moderate fortune. He died when I was eighteen, and instead of going to Oxford, I entered as a cadet in the R.F.C. It is not necessary to detail how, when I had earned my wings, I joined the civil side of flying and became a pilot-commander in the Transatlantic Service. I had a good deal of influence behind me, and, to cut a long story short, at twenty-eight I was Assistant, and at thirty Chief Commissioner of the British Air Police. I was answerable to Government alone, and, within its limits, my powers were absolute.

It was on a morning in late June, the 25th to be exact, when the wheels began to move. I date the start of everything from that morning. About one o'clock on the preceding night Thumbwood had waked me from refreshing sleep. A wireless message, in code, had been received at Whitehall. It was addressed to me personally, and was from the Controller of the White Star Air Line at Plymouth. My people at Whitehall, on night duty, thought it of sufficient importance to send on even at this hour.

As soon as I was thoroughly awake, and had done cursing Thumbwood, I read the message. It only said that a matter of the gravest importance required my personal presence at Plymouth, and would I come down at once.

Now considerable experience of the fussy great men who controlled the air-liner companies, which linked up England with all parts of the world, had made me somewhat sceptical of these urgent demands for my presence. More than once I had to explain that I was not at the beck and call of any commercial magnate, and if I had made myself disliked in certain quarters I had, at least, made my office respected.

Accordingly I scribbled instructions to the chief inspector on duty that he should send a wireless to Plymouth requesting further details. Then I went to sleep again.

As a matter of fact, I _was_ going to Plymouth the next morning in any case, though on private business. Sir Joshua Johnson, Controller of the White Star Line, did not, of course, know that. His midnight message was a coincidence.

I could have flown down from Whitehall in my fast police yacht in an hour, but, as it happened, I was going to train from Paddington. Sir

Joshua could wait until I turned up some time after lunch.

How well I remember the morning of my departure from town. The long departure platform at Paddington was crowded with well-dressed, happy-looking people, as I stood by the door of my reserved carriage in the Riviera Express--that superb train, with its curved roof, which runs to Plymouth without a stop.

Thumbwood, invaluable little man, filled the carriage with flowers, great bunches of white lilac and June roses, and the station-master, who came up for a chat, looked curiously at the bower my valet had made. The Chief Commissioner of Air Police was not wont to travel like that!

For my part, I was wildly exhilarated, and at the same time, as nervous as a boy making his first flight. To-day might prove one of the happiest or quite the most miserable of my life. I was going to put it to the test. Confound it, why didn't Connie come?

On this morning Miss Constance Shepherd, the young light-comedy actress, adored of London, and to me the rose of all the roses, was travelling down to Plymouth to catch the air-liner starting from that port to New York at eight-thirty this evening. And she had promised to travel with me!

Would she have done so, I kept on asking myself, if she didn't know quite well what I meant to say to her? Or was it just friendliness? I knew she liked me.

... Why didn't she come? Here it was, only eight minutes before the train started. As I searched the platform, with an eye that strove to appear calm and unconcerned, I saw faces that I knew--faces of

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