

Luna Britannia

by Meg Murray

As her husband tried to convince her to relocate to the moon, Millie sat patiently at the dining table inside their London home. Oscar sat across from her with his youthful eyes peering up through bushy eyebrows, seeming to emulate the expression of her beloved dog, Bobbi, who'd been laid to rest in Hyde Park's Pet Cemetery a year earlier.

"Oh, Oscar, dear! How do we know the colony will be safe for wives and children?"

Oscar stood up from the table. He stepped behind her chair, wrapped his thin arms around her narrow shoulders, and kissed the top of her head.

"I promise you, my love, a hospital has already been established and other British families are emigrating to the colony as we speak. The latest lunar report showed progress has been made building a small schoolhouse!"

"A school on the moon—can you imagine?" Millie's sense of adventure wasn't as keen as Oscar's, but she felt her heart quicken at the thought of being one of the first mothers of moon-born children.

"I can imagine a school, a theatre, and a comfortable cottage for us. All very conducive to raising our future offspring." Oscar knew her well, but she wondered if he inferred that her stress often issued from his own moods and worries, and not only from her struggle to conceive.

"My mother suggested a 'change of air,' but I don't think this is what she had in mind."

"It will be wonderful, Millie, undoubtedly. We must go. The discovery of a lunar lake is exactly the thing—my Lord, the very thing." Oscar dropped himself back into a chair, leaning forward with the urgency of his thoughts. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to combine hydroelectric power with photovoltaics. And to do it in the moon colony? Well, my name would be stamped in the history books."

Millie felt a tug in her chest as if the pull of the moon had already begun to lift her up and across the expanse of dark sky. As Oscar ran his fingers along his temples, she pondered if this could be the cure to his employment woes. She desperately wanted to help her husband find a state of contentment.

“I suppose it would mean I'd be out from under my mother's thumb,” she said with an artful smile as she rose from the table and offered him her hand.

“I thought that's why you married me?” Oscar stood and pulled Millie into a two-step spin, dancing her around the dining room. “Just to get away from your mother!”

“Oh don't tease me, you fool! I'm about to agree to your lofty plan.” She knew his mind was racing with thought of the innovations he was trying to implement into the London system. Her heart swelled with hope. “Oscar, my love, if you feel that this career opportunity will truly make you happy, then we must go.”

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The whirring of the steam-powered engines made it impossible for Oscar and Millie to converse during the first phase of their voyage to the moon. The ship creaked and vibrated while the couple sat strapped into the observation deck chairs along with the fifty other passengers and crew of the RMS Penumbra, the largest of the three Royal Moon Ships of the Lunar Star Line. It sparkled with sunlight reflecting off the photovoltaic panels needed to propel the ship after the steam engines boosted them into Earth's upper atmosphere.

They'd had three months to get their affairs in order and prepare for the relocation. Her mother was firmly set against it, but Millie supposed it was selfishness on her mother's part that led to her bitter send off: “I'd say ‘Bon Voyage’ if my heart wasn't so broken!”

Millie shook away the memory of her mother and gazed out the large windows of the ship. Every person on board—besides the captain and his immediate crew—faced the view of the Dover space port where a crowd of onlookers waved to the violently rising ship. Much like the sendoffs of ocean liners, except with steam-powered rocket boosters at the start. And a ship that

looked like a seafaring boat had been sawed in half and placed with its nose up.

The figures on the ground shrank, reminding Millie briefly of the view from the top of the Ferris wheel at Earl's Court. But the people continued to get smaller and she saw the edge of the land pummeled by the Channel's waves. The White Cliffs rose above the water like a row of shining teeth belonging to some great leviathan rising from the deep.

She felt lightheaded as she imagined having the aerial view of a seagull. Her seat trembled with the quaking of the ascending ship. She looked over at Oscar. Though the noise of a hundred roaring cyclo-rotors silenced him, she watched his mouth form the word 'fantastic' and break into a broad smile. The entire experience felt worth it to her in that moment.

There was a sudden jolt as the first of the steam turbine boosters broke away. She saw a red parachute open above the falling equipment and assumed it would be recovered from the Channel by one of the repurposed Royal Navy ships that lay dormant during this Pax Technologica, churning their paddlewheels like war horses stomping their hooves while Britain remained at peace with France. Somewhere in the city of Amiens, Jules Verne could look up to witness the figments of his imagination become real. Soon Millie watched both her homeland and the Continent fade out of sight.

The skyfarers passed through layer upon layer of clouds. Millie contemplated the path that one's soul might take upon death. She shuddered, not wishing to lose her corporeal form just yet. They rose above a final layer of thick clouds. In every direction, the bulbous white shapes replicated themselves cheerfully across the entire sky. She felt she could be looking into a clear, crisp lake on a summer day. The horizon appeared as stripes of gold and red, curving to the edges of the observation window. Above the bright line, the blackness loomed.

We shall cross this line soon to view the architecture of Heaven and defy God himself. Shall we survive?

The worst part began. Millie briefly wondered if furious ethereal beings were shaking the ship, trying to tear it apart before it could break through the firmament above Earth. She wished to reach out to Oscar, to hold his hand for comfort, but she could barely focus on his face with all of the vibration, let alone move her hand.

Please, Lord, if you see us through this... I will raise our children in your church. I'll shield them from the knowledge of... of my blasphemous heart. I'll be a devoted mother and wife.

Even as she attempted the prayer—something she hadn't done in many years—it felt meaningless. It brought her no strength as the rattling continued.

I must endure it on my own.

Before long, the ship broke through the edge of the atmosphere, settling into a calmer rhythm and sailing away from the planet.

Millie's eyes found Oscar's and they both quietly shed tears of joy and fear and love.

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The strange ability to drift through the ship presented new challenges for the women on board. Much to the dismay of some gentlemen passengers, many ladies had split the fabric in their walking skirts and fashioned ties around their knees and ankles to keep the clothing around each leg. The trend made the women appear clownish, and Millie hoped the moon colony would have sufficient seamstress supplies to meet their needs.

Handrails along the corridors of the ship provided the necessary means for passengers to return to their cabins from the common areas. They were free to roam about now; bodies floating everywhere as if the ship were full of ghosts.

Millie and Oscar spent much of the first day in their cabin, adjusting to the odd setting. They found taking their afternoon tea was quite impossible. The room contained snug lounge seats attached to the walls and complete with belts over the blankets to restrain the sleepers within. Oscar gazed out of the cabin's window at the distant stellar clusters and celestial orbs. While Millie shared some of her husband's enterprising spirit—and had genuinely looked forward to her first passage through the sky—she was also prone to traveler's sickness on ships of all sorts. It seemed that spaceships were no exception.

She closed her eyes and tightened her fingers around Oscar's forearm while she attempted to keep her dinner under control. The nausea was affecting her differently than it did on a sea voyage, and she began to suspect that there was more to her condition. It was perhaps too early to be certain, but she

dreamed of welcoming her first child soon after settling on the moon. The idea of delivering a baby in the moon colony still sounded daft, but of course, people living on the moon at all was a Vernian fantasy from her childhood that she never imagined would come to fruition. The new photovoltaic advancements were wondrous and terrifying prospects, delivering them to the moon colony in just three days when a trip of that distance would take many months by seafaring vessel.

Oscar squeezed her fingers to prompt her to open her eyes. He pointed to the window with a childlike expression. She leaned over him and gaped at the sight of the blue sphere floating in space beyond the trails of mist dissipating underneath their ship. The Penumbra's auxiliary light sails blossomed outside the cabin window, covering the impressive view of their former home, the planet Earth.

"Do you suppose the watchful eye of the Almighty is upon us?" he asked.

Millie gave a tepid smile in response, not courageous enough to let loose the answer in her mind: *No*.

Oscar floated away through the cabin to a small desk that sat bolted to a wall. He unclipped a package secured to the desktop and began to review his work. Millie marveled at the intellect of her partner, the entrepreneurial engineer who was always planning, always imagining what could be invented next. She didn't always know the terminology that he used when talking excitedly about his work, but he never made her feel inferior for her lack of understanding. There were plenty of men—and many of her former suitors—who spoke to members of her sex as if they were simple-minded.

Millie's stomach reeled. She unbelted from the reclined seat and her body lifted into the air as if possessed. She struggled to the opposite side of the cabin where their luggage was secured.

"Are you alright, my love?"

She shook her head. She unlatched the leather strap of her trunk and moved aside the packed toiletries to search in the bottles of herbs for the peppermint. She opened the small brown bottle and breathed the scent of the oil to ease her nausea. A bubble of the liquid escaped the dropper cap, and she quickly capped it again.

"Better now?"

"I will be."

Millie returned the brown bottle to the case and pushed the others back down as they began to float up out of the luggage. She noticed a small wool pouch levitating beside the collection. She glanced at Oscar sitting at the desk with his head resting in his hand as he poured over his technical drawings unfurled from their cylinder holder. She removed a blue tincture bottle from its protective pouch and discreetly held it up to the light, turning it slowly to see that there wasn't much left. He'd rarely needed to use the drug to calm himself since he'd finalized his employment transfer request. She returned the wool pouch to the luggage, but tucked the blue bottle into her bodice.

"Please prepare yourselves for the evening hours we will observe on this first of two nights in our journey to Luna Britannia," announced the voice of the captain of the RMS Penumbra. "We will conserve electric power starting in one hour and resume normal light levels nine hours hence."

Millie sat back in her first-class seat and secured the straps around her body, grateful for the peppermint scent calming her nausea. She watched Oscar put aside his work and return to his seat, his face filled with the promise of starting over in a new land. With the high price of passage, the couple had spent a good portion of his yearly salary on the first-class tickets. Millie's faith rested in Oscar's capable mind, but she hoped his moods would remain stable when he began his new work at the moon colony. Her hand covered the bump on her breastbone made by the small hidden bottle. She had second thoughts about taking it from the luggage, but hoped Oscar wouldn't notice its absence amidst the excitement of their voyage.

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The third and final day of the couple's migration began with Millie awakening to find Oscar had disappeared from their cabin. His blanket was folded neatly under the belt that kept them from floating while they slept on the space-faring ship. She wondered if he'd slept at all the night before. Studying and scratching on his drawings had consumed him the previous day so Millie had ventured out alone to explore the ship, but she became bored after circling the observation deck promenade more than a dozen times. She visited the sick bay and reported back to Oscar that the gentlemen physician on board had prescribed 'rest and plenty of cheese' as treatment for her possible gravity

sickness. She told neither man that she thought something else had brought on her chronic nausea.

Throughout the previous day, Oscar only left the cabin to take meals with her, and he'd seemed increasingly agitated in the evening. She'd fallen asleep immediately after a dinner of cheese and bacon, overwhelmingly tired on their tour through the heavens.

Across the room in which Oscar was now absent, the suitcase was ajar. Small items floated pell-mell around the cabin. She searched for the blue tincture bottle in her bodice; her husband's self-prescribed remedy for the stress of his vocation. She turned it upside down, watching the small volume of the remaining drug drip into the narrow bottleneck. She'd hidden it through the entire day and night.

Without warning, the cabin door opened and Oscar sailed into the room like an apparition. He flew parallel to the floor until he could catch a part of the furniture and pull himself close to Millie.

"What are you doing with that?" Oscar snatched the tincture bottle out of her hand.

"Oscar! You scared me." Her voice was sharper than she'd intended.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been looking for this."

"I thought maybe I should hold onto it for you. I know that it soothes you, but—" She steadied her nerves to avoid an argument in the thin-walled cabin. "I wish that you didn't need it. And I thought that travelling to the moon colony for this project would help you quit the drops."

He sighed while pocketing the bottle in his jacket. "I won't need these once the work begins, but I'll keep them just in case."

"Dear, I wish you'd tell me what has you so worried."

"But, Millie, my love, you don't need to take my worries upon yourself. I don't wish to burden you with them."

"Oscar," she objected, "maybe I can help you. Maybe I—"

A loud, metallic ripping sound interrupted her. The ship began to vibrate, and Millie's nausea returned in full, forcing her to bend at the waist while climbing back to her seat. Oscar pulled himself toward the window to investigate.

"Attention passengers," the captain's voice shouted from the ceiling. "We've encountered a minor issue in our approach to Luna Britannia. No need to be overly alarmed. But please return to your cabins and secure yourselves in

your seats posthaste. We shall begin our final descent within the quarter hour. Unfortunately, we will be landing without our full arsenal of deceleration panels. Take care to secure yourselves at once!”

“What do you see out there?” she asked, pulling her seatbelt tighter, her palms sweating.

“The ship is turning as we get closer to the moon. The photovoltaic panels have shifted. I believe they’re being repurposed for the landing—from gathering solar energy to somehow redirecting the steam to slow this vessel down.”

“Why do you sound so fascinated? Why aren’t you scared?” Her fears and worries about Oscar boiled up into her words as the discomfort of the shaking ship sent her into a panic.

“It *is* fascinating. Innovations like these have inspired me to advance my own work. It truly is the most amazing time to be alive.”

“We may not be alive much longer if this *goddamn* ship crashes.”

“Millie! There’s no need to be sacrilegious. Especially in this moment when our lives are in God’s hands.”

The ship rocked to the side causing him to tumble away from the window.

“Oscar, return to your *goddamn* seat right *goddamn* now!”

“What has gotten into you, my love?” He sailed toward her and fixed himself under the belt. Before she could answer him, a loud hiss of steam emanated from the outer wall of their cabin. She screamed. Oscar put his hand across her shoulders. “It’s alright. They’re beginning the descent a little early, that’s all. Stop screaming!”

“If we’re to die right now, there’s something I must tell you. But I’m afraid.”

“Whatever are you so distraught over, Millie?”

“I fear you may think me a heretic.”

“Better that than a madwoman.”

“It’s...well, I don’t believe in God. I did when I was younger, but little by little I realized that I didn’t. I couldn’t. I’ve tried praying. I’ve tried talking to angels. But it’s all been empty; false. My prayers are lies. When our Bobbi died, I watched his little canine soul leave his body, and it crushed me. After we went another year without a pregnancy, I knew I could never go back

to thinking God was always by my side. Even now, with our lives at risk, I sense nothing but the void of space surrounding us.”

“Well, that’s unsettling, yes, but—”

“And I’ve been terrified to say it out loud because I thought that you’d annul our marriage immediately. But now it’s too late with a child coming—if we even live through this.” She squeezed her eyes as the ship bounced violently and her stomach threatened to discharge its contents. The vessel lurched sideways at an angle that made Oscar appear higher in the room with the window below him. Through the noise of the steam engines working frantically to right the ship, Millie heard him stuttering a reply.

“Ch-child? Annulment? I would never. Never! A child? Are you sure? Nothing matters to me more than you. And our child.”

“But what kind of mother doesn’t believe in God? I really only have faith in you, but even that is wavering.”

“What? No, Millie, you mustn’t talk like that. We’ll work it out. I can guide our child through matters of faith. And we’ll find our path through your crisis. You need not despair.”

The air pressure in the cabin changed and she felt as if a giant invisible hand pushed on her chest.

“I fear we’ll not survive this,” she said, unsure if she meant the voyage or their relationship.

“Nonsense. The Lunar Star Line has made quarterly landings on the moon for a year. All successful.”

“Stop it, you fool,” she said through gritted teeth. “Can’t you stop trying to put things in a positive light for my sake? Just tell me that you’re scared. Tell me you’re worried. Talk to me!”

“You want me to tell you that I think the ship is going to crash?”

“No! I want you talk to me about your worries. In London. In Luna Britannia. On this ship.” She stared at him, desperate to let all the truth come out before they perished. “Why were you out all night? Why are you drowning your fears in that blue bottle?”

For a moment, Oscar didn’t answer and the rattling of the ship filled the pause, its metal parts struggling under the swift reduction of speed. His expression darkened.

“We have nothing left in our accounts,” he said. “The money’s gone. The house has been turned over to the bank. I’ve leveraged everything for this

voyage against my future earnings. The company man on board made sure to remind me of my debts last night.”

Millie felt frozen. The terrifying noises and vibrations of the cabin seemed to fade backward from her husband’s face. Her pounding heart was the only thing she felt as she heard her husband’s confession.

“This is our last chance,” he continued. “Going to the moon. Working on the lunar lake. I have to finish the implementation without the usual errors. Without time lost to experimentation and safety testing. I’m indebted to the company owners for the failures of my previous work.”

“But you’ve given them so much innovation. Your changes have made the system more efficient. Haven’t they all become rich off of your ideas?”

“They say I’ve cost more in damages from the research and development phase than the successful projects have ever made in profit,” he said with beads of sweat covering his forehead.

The shaking of the spaceship ceased. Millie blinked, becoming aware of her surroundings again. Another hiss of steam outside the window made her body jerk, but she saw that the ship was upright, calmly moving down toward the dusty moon surface. Steel beams extended outward, bent in the middle like insect legs. The landing gear was deployed, ready to alight upon the moon.

“We’re alive,” the couple said together with ragged breath. They looked at each other with relief and then with shame.

“I’m sorry I’ve made such a mess of our life,” Oscar said. “Can you forgive me?”

“There’s one condition.” She pointed to his jacket pocket. “Talk to me about your troubles—don’t disappear into that bottle—and I’ll talk to you about my worries as well.”

He pulled the tincture bottle out of his pocket. He unstrapped his seatbelt and smashed the bottle with his boot against the cabin floor. Shards of blue glass floated up and he quickly gathered them from the air, realizing the danger.

“You promise that you’re done with it?” She unlatched her own belt.

“I promise. Besides, unless there’s a sympathetic apothecary in the colony, I won’t be getting any more of the substance. It’s highly unlikely any botanists would be allowed to grow the intoxicating plant in Luna Britannia. I’ve heard there’s a prohibition on alcohol already.”

“So no champagne will greet us when we land?”

“Disappointing, I dare say.”

“I don’t need champagne. I don’t need first class tickets. I don’t need bank accounts filled with money. I only need you.” She took his hands in hers and stared into his unblinking eyes, which began to water.

“I’m going to need you more than ever,” he said. “You’re the rock I cling to in this stormy sea.”

“What if your rock will need an anchor of her own?” Millie asked. “To keep herself steady in a strange, new place. Will anything be familiar to us? How will we afford a child?”

“Don’t worry, my love. I will be your anchor. I promise. We will always have each other.”

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Millie and Oscar stepped from the RMS Penumbra onto a ramp that pulled the passengers along an enclosed walkway down to the surface level. The automatic walkway continued forward into a glass tunnel that connected the landing site to the bubble of the moon colony. They were propelled across the corridor, holding their luggage and each other tight. Millie gazed upward through the curved glass to the dark sky endlessly spotted with stars. She tried not to think of her theistic doubts. She thought instead of an existence on Luna Britannia; observing the motion of the planets and building a life supported by wondrous new technologies.

Made possible by the glorious luminary that is our Sun.

“Look.” Oscar pointed as the walkway brought them into the cavernous space of the colony bubble. Millie followed where his hand pointed and gasped. An oval shape of water in the distance was so perfectly still that it looked like a goddess’s mirror laying flat on the surface.

“The lunar lake,” she whispered.

“Our future,” he said. “What do you think?”

She rubbed her stomach where a flutter of movement in her abdomen startled her. She smiled at Oscar. “We can make this life work. We’ve survived this far.”

