

***LEWIS GRASSIC  
GIBBON***



***THREE  
GO BACK***

**Lewis Grassic Gibbon**

# **Three Go Back**

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# CHAPTER ONE.

## The wreck of “Magellan’s Cloud”

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A skyey monster, lapis and azure-blue, it sailed out of the heat-haze that all morning had been drifting westward from the Bay of Biscay. It startled the crew of the Rio tramp and there was a momentary scurry of grimy off-watches reaching the deck, and a great upward gape of astounded eyes and mouths. Then the second engineer, a knowledgeable man, voiced explanations.

“It’ll be the airship *Magellan’s Cloud* on her return voyage.”

The Third spat, not disparagingly, but because the fumes of the engine-room were still in his throat. “Where to?”

“Man, you’re unco’ ignorant. Noo York. She’s been lying off for weather at Paris nearly a week, Sparks says. Twenty o’ a crew and twenty passengers—they’ll be paying through the nose, I’ll warrant.... There’s Sparks gabbin’ at her.”

A subdued buzz and crackle. A tapping that presently ceased. High up against a cloudless sky, the airship quivered remoter in the Atlantic sunshine. The Third spat again, forgetfully.

“Pretty thing,” he said.

The Rio tramp chugged northeastward. One or two of the crew still stood on deck, watching the aerial voyageur blend with the August sunhaze and the bubble walls of seascape till it disappeared.

And that was the last the world ever saw of the *Magellan’s Cloud*.

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Clair Stranlay could not forget her fiancé who had died on the wire outside Mametz.

A series of chance encounters and casual conversations overhead had filled out in tenebrous vignettes each letter of the cryptic notice, Killed in Action. He had died very slowly and reluctantly, being a boy and anxious to live, and unaware that civilization has its prices.... And at intervals, up into the coming of the morning, they had heard him calling in delirium: "*Clair! Oh, Clair!*"

Fourteen years ago. And still a look, a book, a word could set in motion the little disks of memory in her mind, and his voice, in its own timbre and depth and accent, would come ringing to her across the years in that cry of agony.... She thought, stirring from the verge of sleep in her chair of the *Magellan's* deserted passengers' lounge, "What on earth made me think of that now?"

"... No, madam, quite definitely I've nothing to say about my deportation from Germany."

"Oh, please, Doctor Sinclair, do give your side of the case. Just a part. I'm Miss Kemp of the C. U. P., you know."

"I've nothing to say. And I'll be obliged if you'll stop pestering me."

"Oh, very well."

An angry staccato of heel taps broke out and approached. Clair, deep in her basket-chair, saw the doorway to the swinging galley blind for a moment its glimpse of ultramarine skyscape. Miss Kemp, short, sandy, stocky, stood with flushed face, biting her lips inelegantly. Then, catching sight of Clair, she came across the cabin. Clair thought, with an inward groan, "Oh, my good God, now I am in for it."

She closed her eyes, as if dozing. Unavailing. The near basket-chair creaked under the ample, svelte-molded padding of Miss Kemp.

"Hear me try the beast? You're not asleep, are you?... Hear his answers? But I'll give him a write-up that'll make

him and his precious league squirm, though. Dirty deportee."

"Dirty what?" Clair opened reluctant eyes.

"Deportee. Haven't you heard of him?"

"Quite likely. Who is he?"

"Why, Keith Sinclair, the agitator who's been traveling about Europe organizing the League of Militant Pacifists. Says that another war's inevitable with the present drift of things."

"Sounds logical." Clair thought: "And I hope I sound bored enough.... No result? Oh, well." Aloud: "And what happened?"

"Haven't you heard? He was kicked out of Italy a month ago and deported from Germany last week."

"What fun! And where's he going now?"

"Beast. To jail, I hope. Returning to America in a hurry to attend some demonstration in Boston." Miss Kemp's chair creaked its relief as she rose. "Hear that Sir John Mullaghan's on board?"

"Never heard of him at all."

"Oh, you *must* have. Awfully important. Conservative M. P. Head of the armaments people. I'm off to get his opinion of the trip. Rather amusing, you know; he and Sinclair have met before."

"Have they?"

"Didn't you hear? Awful shindy. Sir John was making a speech at some place in Berlin. Said there would always be wars and that honest men prepared for them. Sinclair stood up in the audience and interrupted and started a speech of his own. Police had to interfere, and that led to his deportation. Sinclair's, I mean. Wonder if Sir John knows he's on board the *Magellan*?"

"I haven't heard."

"Will be a scoop if they say anything when they meet! Did you hear—oh, there's Sir John crossing to the steering cabin. I'll get him now."

Clair cautiously raised the eyelids below her penciled brows. Like talking to the bound files of the *News-Chronicle*. The lounge was empty, the passengers in their cabins or on the galleries. Miss Kemp's high-heeled footfalls receded.... Blessed relief.

That article in *Literary Portraits* Miss Kemp had written about her, had been sheer claw, Clair remembered.

### BEST-SELLER FROM THE SLUMS

Miss Clair Stranlay, whose real name is Elsie Moggs ... born in a tenement house in Battersea ... best-seller in England and America....

Most of it true enough, of course. Except for the Elsie Moggs bit. A bad mixup that on Miss Kemp's part when searching out antecedents in Thrush Road. She'd missed the story of how fond Stranlay *mère* had been of novelettes—even to the extent of christening her daughter out of one of them....

Romance! Romance that had beckoned so far away beyond the kindly poverty of Thrush Road!

"My dear girl, you came on this voyage for rest, not reminiscence."

But not even the *Magellan's* soothing motion could recapture that drowsiness from which the sound of Miss Kemp's attempted interviewing had evicted her. She thought, with a laggard curiosity, "Wonder if the Sinclair man is the one with the beard and false front who ate so hard at lunch? Throat-cutting is probably hungry work. Let's look."

And, as idly as that, she was afterward to reflect, she stood up and strolled out of the *Magellan's* lounge and out of the twentieth century.

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Below her, trellis-work of wood and aluminum and, in the interstices, the spaces of the sun-flooded ocean. The beat of the engines astern sounded remote and muffled. There was not a cloud.

Then, raising her eyes, she saw Keith Sinclair for the first time. He turned with blown hair at the moment, glancing at her uninterestedly, looked away, looked back again.

He saw a woman who might have been anything from twenty-five to thirty years of age, and who, as a matter of data, was thirty-three. She was taller than most men liked, with that short-cut, straight brown hair which has strands and islets of red in it. And indeed, that red spread to her eyelashes, which were very long, though Sinclair did not discover this until afterward, and to her eyes, which had once been blue before the gold-red came into them. Nose and chin, said Sinclair's mind methodically, very good, both of them. She can breathe, which is something. Half the women alive suffer from tonsillitis. But that mouth ... And he definitely disapproved of the pursed, long-lipped mouth in the lovely face—the mouth stained scarlet.

"Weather keeping up," said Clair helpfully.

He said, "Yes."

She thought, "My dear man, I don't want to interview you. Only to collect you as a comic character. Sorry you haven't that beard."

Nearly six feet three inches in height, too long in the leg and too short in the body. All his life, indeed, there had been something of the impatient colt in his appearance. He had a square head and gray eyes set very squarely in it; high cheek-bones, black hair, and the bleached white hands of his craft. Those hands lay on the gallery railing now.

"Wish I could go and smoke somewhere," said Clair.

"So do I."

"A little ambiguous."

He stared rudely.

Clair said suddenly, "Goodness!"

Startled, they both raised their heads.

The metal stays below their feet had swung upward and downward, with a soggy swish of imprisoned lubricant. The whole airship had shuddered and for a moment had seemed to pause, so to speak, in its stride. Sinclair leaned over the gallery railing.

"Hell, look at the sea."

Clair looked. The Atlantic was boiling. Innumerable maelstroms were rising from the depths, turning even in that distance below them from bluegreen to white, creamed white, and then, in widening ripples, to dark chocolate. Clair felt a prick of interest in the performance.

"What's causing it?"

The American was silent for a moment, regarding the Atlantic with a scowl of surprise. He said, "Impossible."

"What is?"

"I said impossible." He brushed past her toward the doorway of the lounge. Paused. "See the dark chocolate?"

Clair nodded, regarding him with a faint amusement.

"Well, don't you see it must have come from the bottom?"

"So it must." She peered down again. "And it's deep here, isn't it?"

"Perhaps a couple of miles." He disappeared.

News of the submarine earthquake spread quickly enough. Passengers crowded the galleries.

"The chocolate's dying away," said Clair Stranlay.

So it was. The Atlantic had resumed its natural hue. The maelstroms had vanished, or the airship had passed beyond the locality where they still uprose. For, after that first shudder, the *Magellan's Cloud* had held on her way unfalteringly. The snapshotter beside Clair wrinkled a puzzled brow.

"Very strange. I could have sworn there was a ship down there to the south only a minute or so ago. It's disappeared.... Quick going."

The airship beat forward into the waiting evening. Sky and sea were as before. But presently there gathered in the west such polychrome splendor of sunset as the *Magellan's* commander, who had crossed the Atlantic many times by ship, had never before observed.

And suddenly, inexplicably, it grew amazingly cold.

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The airship's wireless operator fumed over dials and board, abandoned the instrument, went out into the miniature crow's nest that overhung his cabin, glanced about him and beat his hands together in the waft of icy air that chilled them.

"Damn funny," he commented.

He went back to his cabin and rang up the *Magellan's* commander. The latter had donned the only overcoat he had brought on board and was discussing the weather with the navigator when the wireless operator's voice spoke in his ear.

"Is that you, sir?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but it seems impossible to send that message."

"Eh?"

"I thought there was some fault in the set. I've been sitting here for the last two and a half hours trying to tap in on France or a ship. There's no message come through. I've sent out yours, but there's been no reply."

The commander was puzzled. "That's strange, Gray. Sure your instrument is functioning all right?"

"Certain, sir. I've broadcast to the receiving apparatus in the passengers' lounge and they heard perfectly."

"Damn funny. Get it right as soon as you can, will you?"

"But ... right, sir."

The commander put down the telephone and turned to give the news to the navigator. They were in the steering

cage and it was just after eight o'clock. But the navigator, instead of standing by with his usual stolid lack of expression was at the far end of the cage, staring upward.

"Gray says the infernal wireless has gone out of order. Bright lookout if we go into fog over the banks.... Hello, anything wrong?"

"Come here, Commodore."

The commander crossed to the navigator's side. The latter pointed up to a darkling sky which, ever since the sudden fall of temperature, had been adrift with a multitude of cloudlets.

"Look. Up there."

"Only the moon. Well?"

"Well, it's only the twenty-second. The new moon, in its first quarter, isn't due till the twenty-seventh. And that one's gibbous."

"Good Christopher!"

They both stared at the sky through the lattice of airship wire, amazed, half-convinced that some trick was being played upon them. From behind the clouds the moon was indeed emerging, round and wind-flushed and full. It sailed the sky serenely, five days ahead of time, taking stock of this other occupant of its firmament. The *Magellan's* commander brought his glasses to bear on it. It appeared to be the same moon.

"But it's impossible. The calendar must be wrong."

"The only thing possibly wrong is the date. And it's not—as of course we know. Look, here's to-day's *Matin*."

He showed it. It was dated the twenty-second of August, 1932.

The airship *Magellan's Cloud* beat forward into the growing radiance of moonlight which had mysteriously obliterated the last traces of day.

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Looking out from his cabin window as he prepared to undress and go to bed, the American, Keith Sinclair, was startled. He was aware that it had grown intensely cold, as indeed was every soul on board the *Magellan's Cloud*, whether on duty or in bed. But now his gaze revealed to him the fact that the airship's hull was silvered with frost in the moonlight. Frost at this altitude in August?

For a moment he accepted the moonlight. And then standing in the soft *hush-hush* of the flexible airship walls, realization of the impossibility of that moon came on him, as it had done on the navigator.

"Now how the devil did you come to be there?"

The moon, sailing a sky that was now quite clear, cloudless and starless, made no answer. The notorious deportee whistled a little, remembering a Basque story heard from his mother—of how the sun one morning had risen in the semblance of the moon.... But that didn't help. It wasn't nearly morning yet. And it was an indubitable moon.

Still whistling, he felt his pulse and, as an afterthought, took his temperature. Both were normal. Meanwhile, the cold increased. Sinclair pulled open his cabin door.

"Look up the navigator again. He had precious little explanation of that submarine earthquake, but the moon's beyond ignoring."

But, crossing the lounge, a glimpse of the dark seascape beyond the open door drew him out on the passengers' gallery. There it was even colder, though there was no gale. The ship was traveling at a low altitude. Below, smooth, vast and unhurrying, the rollers of the Atlantic passed out of the near sheen of moonlight into the dimness astern.... Abruptly Sinclair became aware that the gallery had another occupant.

Clair Stranlay: in pajamas, slippers and wrap. Intent on the night and the sea. The American groped along the hand-rail toward her.

"Feel ill?"

She started. "What? Doctor Sinclair, isn't it? I'm quite well."

"You'll be down with pneumonia if you stay here."

"Don't think so. I do winter bathing and icy baths. What's happened?"

"The cold?"

"Yes."

"Early bergs down from the north, I suppose."

"But it's not nearly the season yet."

He had seen something in the moonlight below them.

Out of the deserted Atlantic was emerging what appeared to be an immense berg—a sailing of cragged, shapeless grayness upon the water. The moonlight struck wavering bands of radiance from it, and for a moment, in some trick of refraction, it glowed a pearled blue as though lighted from within. It passed underfoot, and as it passed a beam of light shot down from the navigating cabin, played upon it, passed, returned, hesitated, hovered, was abruptly extinguished.

But not so quickly that the two occupants of the passengers' gallery failed to see an accretion such as no iceberg ever bore. For beyond the berg had showed up a long, sandy beach, and beyond that the vague suggestion, of a flat and comberwashed island.

Sinclair swore, unimpassioned. "I'm going to find out about this. Are we making for the Pole?"

Clair, something to her own amusement, found herself shaking with excitement. "But what could it have been? There are no islands on the France-New York track."

"We've just seen one. I'm going to find out what the navigating cabin knows about it. Unless we're Pole-bound—and that's nonsense—the submarine earthquake may have thrown it up."

"It must have done other things as well, then." Clair began to stamp her feet to warmth. The rest of her felt only the glow of well-being that falling temperatures nowadays

gifted her unfailingly as guerdon for much braving of wintry dips. "Haven't you noticed something entirely missing from the sea—even though this is the crowded season?"

"What?" He sounded impatient.

"Ship-lights. Not one has shown up since sunset."

"Who said so?"

"One of the riggers I spoke to just now."

She saw, dimly, his puzzled scowl.

"The submarine quake we saw couldn't have affected shipping. It was quite localized. If it had caused great damage the wireless bulletins they post in the lounge would have told us."

The same thought occurred to them simultaneously. Clinging to the hand-rail, she followed Sinclair into the cabin. The case with wireless transcriptions was hung against the farther wall. They crossed to it, looked at it and then looked at each other.

No notices had been posted since five.

"Look here, Miss—"

"Stranlay."

"Miss Stranlay, I'm going to find out about things. Something extraordinary seems to have happened. But if any of the other passengers come out, don't alarm them."

"I alarm people only in my books."

"Oh! Do you write?"

"Novels."

"Oh! I'd go to bed if I were you. I'll tap on your cabin door and let you know what I hear."

Passing through the hull, he stopped at a window and himself noted another happening.

The moonlight was pouring lengthwise into the long hull of *Magellan's Cloud*, not striking due in front, as a moment before.

The airship had turned southward.

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Clair Stranlay arrived in her cabin, and, looking out at the far moon-misted horizon of the Atlantic, she thought:

“He’d never heard of me! Publicity, where are thy charms?... Any more than I of him. But how desperately important folk we are to ourselves!”

A spear-beam of white moonlight splashed on her shoulder and she raised her head, and looked at it. She put up her hand.

“The blessed thing feels almost cold.”

Something quite extraordinary had happened to the *Magellan’s Cloud*. But what? Delay it much reaching New York?

“Oh, my good God!” sighed Clair, getting into bed.

For, escaping England and boredom to go and lecture in America, the awfulness of the ennui, hitherto concealed, that lay awaiting her appalled her. The shore. Miles and miles of ferroconcrete, macadam, pelting rush and automobilist slither. Packing of clothes. Custom shed. Forms. Beefy officials. Forms. Literary gatherings. And rows and rows of eyes set in faces more like those of paralytic codfish than human beings.

And, thinking of them, Clair’s mind-mask of insouciance, brittle and bright, quivered and almost showered her soul with its flakes. Sometimes, indeed, it cracked and fell about her entirely, and she’d hear that boy on the wire outside Mametz, and her desperate distaste for her work, her life and her century crescendoed in her heart....

“Oh, forget it. The mess of our lives! Civilization! Ragged automatons or lopsided slitherers.”

But here Clair Stranlay found the blessedness of sleep now close upon her. Her body had lost its surface cold. She curled up her toes a little under the quilt—they were even, uncramped and shapely toes—and sighed a little, and fell fast asleep—and was shot out of sleep five minutes later by a knock at the door of her cabin.

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"Yes, come in," she called, good-tempered even then: good temper had dogged her through life. Was it morning already and had they sighted New York?

But there was no daylight, only moonlight, entering the cabin window. She reached up to the switch and in the pallor of electric light looked at the American. Keith Sinclair, shutting the door, thought, "Pretty thing."

"About what's happened, Miss Stranlay—Can I sit down?"

"Why, yes," said Clair, blinking her eyes. "There's a chair."

The American sat down. His high-cheeked-boned face was dourly thoughtful. "We're in this together in a fashion, I suppose, seeing we were the first to see the submarine quake. Well—the commander refused to talk sense. Scared I will alarm the others, I suppose. But he has to admit that no wireless messages have been received since the time of the submarine disturbance, though the apparatus of the *Magellan* appears to be perfectly in order. Also, he's turned the airship south."

"South?" Clair's hands dropped from her neck at that. "Then we're not making New York?"

"We're not," grimly. "We'll be lucky if we fetch up in Brazil at this rate."

"Thank God," said Clair.

"Eh?"

"Nothing. Not particularly anxious to reach New York. The codfish can wait.... Sorry, I'm still half asleep. Nice of you to come and tell me the news. Why has the *Magellan* turned south, then, and what does the captain say about that island with the berg we saw from the gallery?"

"Turned south because he's scared about the effect of the continued cold on the airship's envelope. I don't wonder, either. I met your garrulous rigger just now and he says we're carrying tons of ice. As for the island—the navigator says we're mistaken."

"Astigmatism or too much liquor?"

He grinned—a softening relaxation. “Neither in his case and both in ours, he seems to think. Truth of the matter is that the crew is as puzzled as we are, but they think if the passengers knew they’d blame them for all these extraordinary phenomena. There’s another thing, Miss Stranlay, which you didn’t notice. The most serious of the lot. It’s the moon.”

“What has it done?”

“Arrived five days ahead of time. There shouldn’t be a full moon for another fortnight; there shouldn’t be a moon at all just now.”

“But—that is the moon.”

He looked through the cabin window at it. “It is.” He rubbed his chin impatiently. “And it isn’t.... Eh?”

“I said, clear as mud.”

“Oh! It’s a thing not easy to explain.” He stood up. “But I’ve a telescope with me—probably the most powerful magnifier on the *Magellan*—and I’ve had a peek at the moon through it. Just a minute.”

He was back in less. He opened the cabin window and poised the telescope on the ledge. Clair sat forward and looked through it.

“Keep both eyes open,” advised the American.

So she did, and for a moment was blinded in consequence. The moon was sinking. Stars were appearing pallidly. Clair gazed across space.

“Nothing very different, is it? I’ve looked at it through the big glass at Mount Wilson. Why—the nose!”

The Man in the Moon lacked a nose. Clair turned her face to Sinclair’s moon-illuminated one. He nodded.

“Exactly. That mountain range on the moon is missing. Something is happening up there.”

She thought for a moment, caught a glimpse of a possible explanation. “Then—the tides are caused by the moon. Mayn’t the submarine earthquake have been caused by the change in the moon?”

“Perhaps. I’m not an astronomer. But something abnormal has happened to the moon—both to her surface and her rate of revolution. The submarine earthquake we witnessed may have been the result. Probably it’s had other effects in the far north—God knows what.”

“And the wireless interruptions due to the same cause?” Clair Stranlay lowered the telescope from her cabin-window in the *Magellan*. “Most interesting thing I’ve seen for years. Pity we’ve explained it all so nicely.”

But, as they were later to learn, they were very far indeed from having explained it.

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And presently, while Clair slept again and Sinclair tried to sleep and the commander sat peering at an almanac, and the navigator peered into the west—a pale shimmer of daylight arose in the east, lighting the surface of that strange Atlantic, flowing liquid almost as the Atlantic itself till it touched the southward-hasting, high-slung cars of the *Magellan’s Cloud*. A moment it lingered (as if puzzled) on that floating monster of the wastes, and then, abruptly, was snuffed out.

And the navigator from his gallery was shouting urgent directions into the engine-room telephone.

It is doubtful if they ever reached the engineers. For at that moment the nose of the *Magellan*, driving south at the rate of eighty miles an hour, rustled and crumpled up with a thin crack of metallic sheathing. The whole airship sang in every strut and girder, and, quivering like a stunned bird, still hung poised against the mountain range that had arisen out of the darkness.

The drumming roar roused to frantic life everyone on board, asleep or awake. Most of the passengers probably succeeded in leaving their beds, if not their cabins. On the lurching floors of these they may have caught horrified glimpses of the next moment’s happening.