

# LUCIFUGOUS

(March, 1899)

THE ZEPPELIN *HANS GLÜCKER* left Calais at 9:15 in the evening on a cold night in March, 1899, bound for New Amsterdam, the jewel of British North America. Don Sebastien de Ulloa, known to the Continent as the great detective, passed his departure on the promenade, watching the city lights recede through blurring isinglass. He amused himself by taking inventory of his fellow passengers while enjoying the aroma of a fairly good cognac.

The *Hans Glückler* was nearly empty, aside from cargo. So empty, in fact, that Sebastien wondered if she would not have delayed her Atlantic voyage for want of passengers if she were not also a mail dispatch and carrying diplomatic papers. Her capacity was over sixty, but this trip she bore only fourteen.

The longest-term travelers were a couple who had been with the airship since Shanghai, Mr. Cui Jioahua and his wife, Zhang Xiaoming. They had passage as far as the Spanish settlement of San Diego, on the west coast of North America, where they intended to join family—if the intersection of their limited Arabic and German and Sebastien's equally flawed Cantonese could be trusted.

It seemed a tremendous journey, but the trans-Siberian and then trans-Atlantic route by airship was actually faster and more secure than the month one might expect to spend on a steamer east across the Pacific. Mr. Cui was willing to risk his household furnishings to the pirates infesting the Windward Isles, but, being of a practical bent, he was not willing to risk his own life or that of his lovely wife.

Another six comprised a touring group of five Colonials and one European that had been with the *Hans Glückler* since Ukraine. The touring group, which had boarded in Kyiv after traveling by rail from Moscow, were all plainly well-acquainted already, and what with one casually overheard conversation and another, Sebastien had pieced together a good deal about them. The eldest passenger, though by a few years only, was Madame Pontchartrain, a stout, gray-eyed matron enroute to her family's estate in French Mississippi by way of New Amsterdam. She accompanied a young Colonial

relative of apparently impeccable breeding and small estate, a Mademoiselle LeClere, who said she was travelling home to Nouvelle Orleans. The resemblance between them was strong enough that Sebastien thought Madame Pontchartrain must have been a very great beauty in her youth. He also thought them lucky that the *Hans Glücker's* route—new the previous September—spared them a trip by rail across the interior of the North American continent. Various treaties with the Native nations would have made it possible, but far more rigorous and perilous than a modern journey by air.

Next was Oczkar Korvin, an aristocratic Hungarian with hair as dark as Sebastien's and an equally patrician bearing. A platinum chain leashed his pocket watch, and though he had the sallow Habsburg coloring, he was undisfigured by the famous deformed jaw. A collateral branch, no doubt.

The loveliest of the group was also the most famous. She traveled with an entourage and claimed three cabins. Dressed outrageously in a man's suit and cravat, Lillian Meadows, the American moving picture star, crossed her ankle over her knee and smoked Virginia cigarettes in a long tortoiseshell-and-jet holder, gesturing extravagantly with fingers studded with sapphires and diamonds. She was returning to Atlanta—where the studios were—from a European junket. Her white-blonde hair had been arranged in delicate waves around jeweled pins, and the English couple—who like Sebastien had boarded at Calais—avoided her.

One of her traveling companions was a man nearly as beautiful as she was, and also blond. He wore his darker gold hair slicked back against his skull, a handlebar moustache accentuating planed cheekbones and a defined jaw. His name was Virgil Allen, and he was a wealthy farmer's son from South Carolina, and a playboy by reputation.

The other was a woman, the Boston authoress Phoebe Smith. She a fair-haired, bespectacled, sensible small woman with a stubborn tilt to her head, straight-spined in widow's black that did not suit her, her hands usually folded before her. She carried a little bag with a black paper-bound notepad and fountain-pen, and every so often she would take them up and scribble a line.

A further six passengers had boarded at Calais. Two were Sebastien and his companion, Jack Priest, who presented every appearance of being a young man of excellent family. In truth, his breeding was no better than Sebastien's. But—also like Sebastien's—his education was unparalleled, and a work in constant progress. He was seventeen years old and looked fifteen, with delicate bones and tousled fair hair like a girl's.

Three and four were Michiel and Steven van Dijk, Dutch businessmen travelling only as far as New Amsterdam, where even under English colonial rule there was still a thriving Dutch community. Michiel was the elder, forty-ish, round-cheeked under graying, wavy fair hair, and plump without seeming heavy—as light on his feet as if he was filled with the same hydrogen that bore up the dirigible. Steven—pronounced *stay-van*—was taller and younger and also plump, his dark hair cropped short, his cheeks usually flushed and his eyes glittering with good cheer. He kept a green miniature parrot in his cabin, or occasionally on his shoulder, and Jack was instantly enamored of them both.

And the final two—the ones who seemed determined to avoid all of the Colonials, both the British colonials and the Frenchwomen—were a couple in their twenties. Hollis and Beatrice Leatherby were Londoners moving house to take advantage of a political appointment in the Pennsylvania colony, where an ambitious young man could advance faster than in Albion. She was darkly lovely while he was a freckled redhead: a striking pair.

Sebastien learned those things easily enough. Observation was a long-honed habit, though he intended merely a minor distraction for the hours until he could decently be seen to retire. The journey overland had not been easy and Jack had been delayed, only joining him in Calais that afternoon. Sebastien could not afford to be seen in good light until they had had a few minutes alone.

And so, from his solitary post at the dark end of the promenade, away from the too-revealing electric lights, Sebastien observed the other passengers and watched Jack.

Jack held court forward along the promenade, his admirers a potential source of amusement or inconvenience. He was drinking champagne rather than liquor, but his laughter told Sebastien enough about his conversation with Steven van Dijk and the Leatherbys to swamp that raft of faint reassurance in a sea of potential tribulations. He *would* flirt. And right now he was flirting with Mrs. Leatherby, immediately under her husband's oblivious eye—and sparing a little charm for van Dijk, as well.

Sebastien cupped his glass before his face, and pretended to taste the cognac. The sharp, drowning scent was good. It blunted his hunger, which threatened to grow overwhelming, and the snifter gave him something to occupy hands that wanted to tremble with desire.

The social dance was not distracting him tonight. He could feel it in the cut-glass edge on his senses, the heaviness of limbs that would transform

into mercurial quickness when he required it. Too much more and his restraint would fail. He'd waited too long.

Discipline was always a matter of degree to such as Sebastien, and it had required a certain subterfuge and sleight of hand to free himself of old friends and allies. That alone had consumed days. His court would be displeased when they came to understand that he had abandoned them. He would be missed, and their protests would have carried the day if he had paused to listen; Sebastien de Ulloa was notoriously too soft-hearted. But he could not remain in Europe. It held no savor for him now, and boredom and sorrow were ever more dangerous adversaries than any merely human agency.

There was some risk in travelling in secret, in shedding his court. He should have left Jack, too...but Jack would almost certainly leave *him*, soon enough (as his proteges always did) and he couldn't travel without an entourage. The rail journey from Helsinki to Calais alone had taxed his strength and ingenuity. But he had needed to be free of Europe, so full of secrets and history, and all of Evie's friends.

He closed his eyes. His restraint would hold through this endless, tiresome evening, and then he would have what he needed. Jack would take care of him. And once he came to the Colonies—well. If he could not make a new beginning in America, then he would find an end.

He opened his eyes again, watching Jack tease and flirt and please himself. Meanwhile, someone was slipping up on him, and Sebastien was meant not to notice. The warm scent of her skin carried over the cognac, though, even if he hadn't observed her movements or heard the scuff of her shoes on the deck. Still, he pretended oblivion, because it amused him to.

It was Mrs. Smith, the blonde American novelist, and he feigned startlement when she touched his arm.

"So intent," she said. "What is it that you see, I wonder?"

Sebastien tipped his untasted glass at Hollis Leatherby. "More than he does, in any case."

She bore a red wine cupped in her hand, the stem falling between her fingers, as if she meant to warm the contents with her palm the same way Sebastien could not manage to warm his cognac. She smiled, her glasses lifting as the bridge of her nose crinkled. "Are you certain?"

"My dear lady," Sebastien said, "I am certain of nothing. But I will speculate. And my first speculation concerns a charming American, yes? And her agenda in approaching a sullen stranger at a remarkably boring cocktail party."

“You’re a striking man. A mysterious Continental stranger. With a certain notoriety. That’s supposed to be enough, isn’t it?”

Sebastien shook his head, amused. It had been some time, admittedly, but when last he’d consulted a looking glass, he had been of slightly better than average height (for a modern man) and somewhat swarthy complexion—convenient, as it concealed his frequent pallor—with dark hair, thin lips, and a hooked nose. He had no reason to believe much had changed since then. Passable, certainly; his court had never complained of his ugliness. But *striking* was quite plainly in the eye of the beholder.

“At least you didn’t call me *handsome*,” he replied. “Jack would never let me hear the end of it. But come, now—don’t we both prefer honesty, Mrs. Smith?”

She sipped, then swirled the fluid in her glass to release the aromas, and considered him. “Will you treat a lady novelist to a demonstration of your storied powers?”

*Ab.* Well, that neatly explained why she had sought his darkened, solitary corner. He was *material*.

And Jack had noticed that Sebastien had company. He caught Sebastien’s eye over Beatrice Leatherby’s head, offering a little smile that whispered *you’ll pay later*, then turned back to Steven van Dijk and the five-inch-long grass-green bird who perched on Steven’s forefinger, eyeing Jack as if his nose might be some sort of undiscovered delicacy.

Well, Sebastien would cheerfully abet anyone’s quest for a continuing education, especially a smart young woman’s. He reminded himself to breathe and said, “On whom shall I inform? And are you in the mood for gossip, dear lady, or for parlor games?”

“At all costs, gossip.”

He turned from her quirk of smile and cast his eye over the other passengers. During Sebastien’s brief distraction, the Captain—Konrad Hoak—had extricated himself from conversation with Oczkar Korvin and Michiel van Dijk and joined Jack’s group, pretending a fascination with the parrot to cover a fascination with Beatrice Leatherby. Curiously, Hollis Leatherby seemed far more cognizant of the Captain’s flirtation than of Jack’s—or perhaps there was simply more of concern in a grown man’s attentions to one’s wife than those of a fresh-faced lad, no matter how pretty.

In any case, a frown tugged the corners of Leatherby’s mouth as he excused himself, added his wife’s empty glass to his own, and made his way down the promenade stairs toward the rolling bar in the dining room. He