

# A Victorian Lady Visits Space

Lucinda Ryan

‘I think I’m ready to go down now, please.’

The Balloon Man looked at me. I will do my utmost to achieve your command Madam, however, there may be some delay in its execution. We are, as you may have noticed, in Space.’

Such a preposterous thing to say! The sky around us was so recently devoid of clouds and birds as we rose higher and higher from our view of the ground below. Now, it had suddenly become inky black with smudges of purple and sapphire at odd places where clouds would normally be, and a large rocky haze enveloping a blue lake-like sphere hung below us.

And I had thought it was only the sudden arrival of nightfall. ~~Behind me The Balloon Man had lit the small lamp~~ reserved for such journeys in which the traveller could expect the absence of daylight. He then began to busy himself with a little teapot and cup.

‘Earl Grey, Madam?’

I raised my eyebrows.

He chuckled. ‘Oh yes – our little trick in the balloon business. See, we boil the water from the —’

I scoffed. ‘Tea? At this hour? My dear man, it is nearly six o’clock. We should be drinking wine by now not tea.’

The Balloon Man gave me a little bow, and in a supposed effort to retain my good custom, gestured into the lagoonish abyss beyond.

‘If you look below, Madam, you will be able to perceive Planet Earth, as it were.’

Although I had tired of the scenic views long ago, I obliged him by bending over the wicker edge of the basket and peering down towards the green and blue mass before me.

‘Indeed... Ah yes, I think I can see the corner of Spain down there. How fascinating! You know, we had a very large globe in the nursery growing up, and it was painted in such pretty colours of turquoise and pale green. I rather think I preferred that design over the azures and emeralds of the real thing – very last season,’ I added with a sidelong look at my companion.

He raised his eyebrows in agreement and passed me my tea. We sipped in silence for some time, long enough for us to drift away from the Earth and set out into the spangled void ahead. I amused myself for a while by taking off my glove and laughing at how it sat unsupported in the air around me. I continued to laugh at how the tea in the open pot had begun to float away in small milky bubbles. The Balloon Man permitted this entertainment to occur

only once, before he whisked the rest of the tea things away into a large tin chest that was nailed to floor of the basket. He passed me a satin sash to be held onto 'in the case of floating overboard.'

There then appeared something bright and fiery in the distance, seemingly approaching us at a rather rapid pace.

'I say, is that the Sun?' I asked, shielding my eyes with one hand and holding onto my hat with the other. My hat had been determined to leave my head all evening.

The Balloon Man suddenly lunged for a peculiar rod-like instrument with what appeared to be a bit of bread on the end. 'No, Madam, 'tis a comet,' he puffed, stretching the rod overboard as the white-hot thing streaked towards us. 'But look sharp there – our supper has arrived.'

And he dipped the bread into the tail of the comet just in time for it to be toasted nicely, before it then streaked on past our basket and into the vast darkness.

'Oh, bravo!' I laughed, clapping my hands. 'That was a very nifty trick you just did there.'

'Tis merely a Ballooneer's duty, Madam,' he said, tipping his cap politely as he rummaged around in the tin chest for some butter and jam.

'Oh!' I cried suddenly, having thoroughly lost track of the time since the tea-making episode. 'Tell me, do you think we shall arrive back in time for dinner tonight? The Edgarsons are joining us, you see, and Cook has been making quite the effort in the kitchen.'

The Balloon Man turned to me, handing me a daintily buttered piece of toast on a blue-and-white-striped plate.

‘I shall begin the descent momentarily, Madam,’ he answered with a small nod. He gestured toward the tin chest, on which he had spread a silk cloth and some cushions, and I seated myself with my small meal.

‘I’m most grateful for your efforts, Sir,’ I said happily as we drifted back toward our home planet. ‘I’ve had the most marvellous time, but one can’t go floating around in a balloon forever, you know. Besides, I’ve been so looking forward to this dinner all week, I’ve scarcely been able to breathe!’

My companion glanced at me and smiled indulgently. ‘Well, you needn’t concern yourself with that little trouble anymore. We haven’t been breathing for some time, you see.’ And he turned back to the knot of ropes he’d been muddling with.

‘Oh,’ I answered, looking down at my plate. The basket began to rumble as we entered the strange, rocky halo encircling the Earth. ‘Well, at least I won’t have to worry about breathing in Sir Edgarson’s cigar smoke when I arrive home,’ I added. I looked up in time to see our indigo surroundings merge with our own blue sky. ‘It fills up the Retiring Room with the most awful stench, I tell you!’

‘Indeed, Madam,’ said The Balloon Man, sitting down opposite me and putting his hat on.

We munched on our toast in silence.

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**Lucinda Ryan** is an aspiring writer and creative living on Wurundjeri land. She is currently working on a middle grade manuscript and has enjoyed being part of the marketing team for the anthology. Lucinda would like to thank her wonderful teachers, peers and family for their wisdom and support.