

Chapter XI

THE WIDE PACIFIC

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had quite made up their minds to escape. If they had not had to deal with the eight particularly vigorous men who composed the crew of the aeronef they might have tried to succeed by main force. But as they were only two--for Frycollin could only be considered as a quantity of no importance--force was not to be thought of. Hence recourse must be had to strategy as soon as the "Albatross" again took the ground. Such was what Phil Evans endeavored to impress on his irascible colleague, though he was in constant fear of Prudent aggravating matters by some premature outbreak.

In any case the present was not the time to attempt anything of the sort. The aeronef was sweeping along over the North Pacific. On the following morning, that of June 16th, the coast was out of sight. And as the coast curves off from Vancouver Island up to the Aleutians--belonging to that portion of America ceded by Russia to the United States in 1867--it was highly probable that the "Albatross" would cross it at the end of the curve, if her course remained unchanged.

How long the night appeared to be to the two friends! How eager they

were to get out of their cabins! When they came on deck in the morning the dawn had for some hours been silvering the eastern horizon. They were nearing the June solstice, the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, when there is hardly any night along the sixtieth parallel.

Either from custom or intention Robur was in no hurry to leave his deck-house, When he came out this morning he contented himself with bowing to his two guests as he passed them in the stern of the aeronef.

And now Frycollin ventured out of his cabin. His eyes red with sleeplessness, and dazed in their look, he tottered along, like a man whose foot feels it is not on solid ground. His first glance was at the suspensory screws, which were working with gratifying regularity without any signs of haste. That done, the Negro stumbled along to the rail, and grasped it with both hands, so as to make sure of his balance. Evidently he wished to view the country over which the "Albatross" was flying at the height of seven hundred feet or more.

At first he kept himself well back behind the rail. Then he shook it to make sure it was firm; then he drew himself up; then he bent forward; then he stretched out his head. It need not be said that while he was executing these different maneuvers he kept his eyes shut. At last he opened them.

What a shout! And how quickly he fled! And how deeply his head sank back into his shoulders! At the bottom of the abyss he had seen the immense ocean. His hair would have risen on end--if it had not been wool.

"The sea! The sea!" he cried. And Frycollin would have fallen on the deck had not the cook opened his arms to receive him.

This cook was a Frenchman, and probably a Gascon, his name being Francois Tapage. If he was not a Gascon he must in his infancy have inhaled the breezes of the Garonne. How did this Francois Tapage find himself in the service of the engineer? By what chain of accidents had he become one of the crew of the "Albatross?" We can hardly say; but in any case he spoke English like a Yankee. "Eh, stand up!" he said, lifting the Negro by a vigorous clutch at the waist.

"Master Tapage!" said the poor fellow, giving a despairing look at the screws.

"At your service, Frycollin."

"Did this thing ever smash?"

"No, but it will end by smashing."

"Why? Why?"

"Because everything must end.

"And the sea is beneath us!"

"If we are to fall, it is better to fall in the sea."

"We shall be drowned."

"We shall be drowned, but we shall not be smashed to a jelly."

The next moment Frycollin was on all fours, creeping to the back of his cabin.

During this day the aeronef was only driven at moderate speed. She seemed to skim the placid surface of the sea, which lay beneath.

Uncle Prudent and his companion remained in their cabin, so that they did not meet with Robur, who walked about smoking alone or talking to the mate. Only half the screws were working, yet that was enough to keep the apparatus afloat in the lower zones of the atmosphere.

The crew, as a change from the ordinary routine, would have endeavored to catch a few fish had there been any sign of them; but all that could be seen on the surface of the sea were a few of those yellow-bellied whales which measure about eighty feet in length.

These are the most formidable cetaceans in the northern seas, and

whalers are very careful in attacking them, for their strength is prodigious. However, in harpooning one of these whales, either with the ordinary harpoon, the Fletcher fuse, or the javelin-bomb, of which there was an assortment on board, there would have been danger to the men of the "Albatross."

But what was the good of such useless massacre? Doubtless to show off the powers of the aeronef to the members of the Weldon Institute. And so Robur gave orders for the capture of one of these monstrous cetaceans.

At the shout of "A whale! A whale!" Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans came out of their cabin. Perhaps there was a whaler in sight! In that case all they had to do to escape from their flying prison was to jump into the sea, and chance being picked up by the vessel.

The crew were all on deck. "Shall we try, sir?" asked Tom Turner.

"Yes," said Robur.

In the engine-room the engineer and his assistant were at their posts ready to obey the orders signaled to them. The "Albatross" dropped towards the sea, and remained, about fifty feet above it.

There was no ship in sight--of that the two colleagues soon assured themselves--nor was there any land to be seen to which they could

swim, providing Robur made no attempt to recapture them.

Several jets of water from the spout holes soon announced the presence of the whales as they came to the surface to breathe. Tom Turner and one of the men were in the bow. Within his reach was one of those javelin-bombs, of Californian make, which are shot from an arquebus and which are shaped as a metallic cylinder terminated by a cylindrical shell armed with a shaft having a barbed point. Robur was a little farther aft, and with his right hand signaled to the engineers, while with his left, he directed the steersman. He thus controlled the aeronef in every way, horizontally and vertically, and it is almost impossible to conceive with what speed and precision the "Albatross" answered to his orders. She seemed a living being, of which he was the soul.

"A whale! A whale!" shouted Tom Turner, as the back of a cetacean emerged from the surface about four cable-lengths in front of the "Albatross."

The "Albatross" swept towards it, and when she was within sixty feet of it she stopped dead.

Tom Turner seized the arquebus, which was resting against a cleat on the rail. He fired, and the projectile, attached to a long line, entered the whale's body. The shell, filled with an explosive compound, burst, and shot out a small harpoon with two branches,

which fastened into the animal's flesh.

"Look out!" shouted Turner.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, much against their will, became greatly interested in the spectacle.

The whale, seriously wounded, gave the sea such a slap with his tail, that the water dashed up over the bow of the aeronef. Then he plunged to a great depth, while the line, which had been previously wetted in a tub of water to prevent its taking fire, ran out like lightning.

When the whale rose to the surface he started off at full speed in a northerly direction.

It may be imagined with what speed the "Albatross" was towed in pursuit. Besides, the propellers had been stopped. The whale was let go as he would, and the ship followed him. Turner stood ready to cut the line in case a fresh plunge should render this towing dangerous.

For half an hour, and perhaps for a distance of six miles, the "Albatross" was thus dragged along, but it was obvious that the whale was tiring. Then, at a gesture from Robur the assistant engineers started the propellers astern, so as to oppose a certain resistance to the whale, who was gradually getting closer.

Soon the aeronef was gliding about twenty-five feet above him. His

tail was beating the waters with incredible violence, and as he turned over on his back an enormous wave was produced.

Suddenly the whale turned up again, so as to take a header, as it were, and then dived with such rapidity that Turner had barely time to cut the line.

The aeronef was dragged to the very surface of the water. A whirlpool was formed where the animal had disappeared. A wave dashed up on to the deck as if the aeronef were a ship driving against wind and tide.

Luckily, with a blow of the hatchet the mate severed the line, and the "Albatross," freed from her tug, sprang aloft six hundred feet under the impulse of her ascensional screws. Robur had maneuvered his ship without losing his coolness for a moment.

A few minutes afterwards the whale returned to the surface--dead. From every side the birds flew down on to the carcass, and their cries were enough to deafen a congress. The "Albatross," without stopping to share in the spoil, resumed her course to the west.

In the morning of the 17th of June, at about six o'clock, land was sighted on the horizon. This was the peninsula of Alaska, and the long range of breakers of the Aleutian Islands.

The "Albatross" glided over the barrier where the fur seals swarm

for the benefit of the Russo-American Company. An excellent business is the capture of these amphibians, which are from six to seven feet long, russet in color, and weigh from three hundred to four hundred pounds. There they were in interminable files, ranged in line of battle, and countable by thousands.

Although they did not move at the passage of the "Albatross," it was otherwise with the ducks, divers, and loons, whose husky cries filled the air as they disappeared beneath the waves and fled terrified from the aerial monster.

The twelve hundred miles of the Behring Sea between the first of the Aleutians and the extreme end of Kamtschatka were traversed during the twenty-four hours of this day and the following night. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans found that here was no present chance of putting their project of escape into execution. Flight was not to be thought of among the deserts of Eastern Asia, nor on the coast of the sea of Okhotsk. Evidently the "Albatross" was bound for Japan or China, and there, although it was not perhaps quite safe to trust themselves to the mercies of the Chinese or Japanese, the two friends had made up their minds to run if the aeronef stopped.

But would she stop? She was not like a bird which grows fatigued by too long a flight, or like a balloon which has to descend for want of gas. She still had food for many weeks and her organs were of marvelous strength, defying all weakness and weariness.

During the 18th of June she swept over the peninsula of Kamtschatka, and during the day there was a glimpse of Petropaulovski and the volcano of Kloutschew. Then she rose again to cross the Sea of Okhotsk, running down by the Kurile Isles, which seemed to be a breakwater pierced by hundreds of channels. On the 19th, in the morning, the "Albatross" was over the strait of La Perouse between Saghalien and Northern Japan, and had reached the mouth of the great Siberian river, the Amoor.

Then there came a fog so dense that the aeronef had to rise above it. At the altitude she was there was no obstacle to be feared, no elevated monuments to hinder her passage, no mountains against which there was risk of being shattered in her flight. The country was only slightly varied. But the fog was very disagreeable, and made everything on board very damp.

All that was necessary was to get above this bed of mist, which was nearly thirteen hundred feet thick, and the ascensional screws being increased in speed, the "Albatross" was soon clear of the fog and in the sunny regions of the sky. Under these circumstances, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans would have found some difficulty in carrying out their plan of escape, even admitting that they could leave the aeronef.

During the day, as Robur passed them he stopped for a moment, and

without seeming to attach any importance to what he said, addressed them carelessly as follows: "Gentlemen, a sailing-ship or a steamship caught in a fog from which it cannot escape is always much delayed. It must not move unless it keeps its whistle or its horn going. It must reduce its speed, and any instant a collision may be expected. The "Albatross" has none of these things to fear. What does fog matter to her? She can leave it when she chooses. The whole of space is hers." And Robur continued his stroll without waiting for an answer, and the puffs of his pipe were lost in the sky.

"Uncle Prudent," said Phil Evans, "it seems that this astonishing "Albatross" never has anything to fear."

"That we shall see!" answered the president of the Weldon Institute.

The fog lasted three days, the 19th, 20th, and 21st of June, with regrettable persistence. An ascent had to be made to clear the Japanese mountain of Fujiyama. When the curtain of mist was drawn aside there lay below them an immense city, with palaces, villas, gardens, and parks. Even without seeing it Robur had recognized it by the barking of the innumerable dogs, the cries of the birds of prey, and above all, by the cadaverous odor which the bodies of its executed criminals gave off into space.

The two colleagues were out on the deck while the engineer was taking his observations in case he thought it best to continue his course

through the fog.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I have no reason for concealing from you that this town is Tokyo, the capital of Japan."

Uncle Prudent did not reply. In the presence of the engineer he was almost choked, as if his lungs were short of air.

"This view of Tokyo," continued Robur, "is very curious."

"Curious as it may be--" replied Phil Evans.

"It is not as good as Peking?" interrupted the engineer.

"That is what I think, and very shortly you shall have an opportunity of judging."

Impossible to be more agreeable!

The "Albatross" then gliding southeast, had her course changed four points, so as to head to the eastward.