

## Chapter XII

### THROUGH THE HIMALAYAS

During the night the fog cleared off. There were symptoms of an approaching typhoon--a rapid fall of the barometer, a disappearance of vapor, large clouds of ellipsoid form clinging to a copper sky, and, on the opposite horizon, long streaks of carmine on a slate-colored field, with a large sector quite clear in the north. Then the sea was smooth and calm and at sunset assumed a deep scarlet hue.

Fortunately the typhoon broke more to the south, and had no other result than to sweep away the mist which had been accumulating during the last three days.

In an hour they had traversed the hundred and twenty-five miles of the Korean strait, and while the typhoon was raging on the coast of China, the "Albatross" was over the Yellow Sea. During the 22nd and 23rd she was over the Gulf of Pechelee, and on the 24th she was ascending the valley of the Peiho on her way to the capital of the Celestial Empire.

Leaning over the rail, the two colleagues, as the engineer had told them, could see distinctly the immense city, the wall which divides

it into two parts--the Manchu town, and the Chinese town--the twelve suburbs which surround it, the large boulevards which radiate from its center, the temples with their green and yellow roofs bathed in the rising sun, the grounds surrounding the houses of the mandarins; then in the middle of the Manchu town the eighteen hundred acres of the Yellow town, with its pagodas, its imperial gardens, its artificial lakes, its mountain of coal which towers above the capital; and in the center of the Yellow town, like a square of Chinese puzzle enclosed in another, the Red town, that is the imperial palace, with all the peaks of its outrageous architecture.

Below the "Albatross" the air was filled with a singular harmony. It seemed to be a concert of Aeolian harps. In the air were a hundred kites of different forms, made of sheets of palm-leaf, and having at their upper end a sort of bow of light wood with a thin slip of bamboo beneath. In the breath of the wind these slips, with all their notes varied like those of a harmonicon, gave forth a most melancholy murmuring. It seemed as though they were breathing musical oxygen.

It suited Robur's whim to run close up to this aerial orchestra, and the "Albatross" slowed as she glided through the sonorous waves which the kites gave off through the atmosphere.

But immediately an extraordinary effect was produced amongst the innumerable population. Beatings of the tomtoms and sounds of other formidable instruments of the Chinese orchestra, gun reports by the

thousand, mortars fired in hundreds, all were brought into play to scare away the aeronef. Although the Chinese astronomers may have recognized the aerial machine as the moving body that had given rise to such disputes, it was to the Celestial million, from the humblest tankader to the best-buttoned mandarin, an apocalyptic monster appearing in the sky of Buddha.

The crew of the "Albatross" troubled themselves very little about these demonstrations. But the strings which held the kites, and were tied to fixed pegs in the imperial gardens, were cut or quickly hauled in; and the kites were either drawn in rapidly, sounding louder as they sank, or else fell like a bird shot through both wings, whose song ends with its last sigh.

A noisy fanfare escaped from Tom Turner's trumpet, and drowned the final notes of the aerial concert. It did not interrupt the terrestrial fusillade. At last a shell exploded a few feet below the "Albatross," and then she mounted into the inaccessible regions of the sky.

Nothing happened during the few following days of which the prisoners could take advantage. The aeronef kept on her course to the southwest, thereby showing that it was intended to take her to India. Twelve hours after leaving Peking, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans caught a glimpse of the Great Wall in the neighborhood of Chen-Si. Then, avoiding the Lung Mountains, they passed over the valley of the

Hoangho and crossed the Chinese border on the Tibet side.

Tibet consists of high table-lands without vegetation, with here and there snowy peaks and barren ravines, torrents fed by glaciers, depressions with glittering beds of salt, lakes surrounded by luxurious forests, with icy winds sweeping over all.

The barometer indicated an altitude of thirteen thousand feet above the level of the sea. At that height the temperature, although it was in the warmest months of the northern hemisphere, was only a little above freezing. This cold, combined with the speed of the "Albatross," made the voyage somewhat trying, and although the friends had warm traveling wraps, they preferred to keep to their cabin.

It need hardly be said that to keep the aeronef in this rarefied atmosphere the suspensory screws had to be driven at extreme speed. But they worked with perfect regularity, and the sound of their wings almost acted as a lullaby.

During this day, appearing from below about the size of a carrier pigeon, she passed over Garlock, a town of western Tibet, the capital of the province of Cari Khorsum.

On the 27th of June, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans sighted an enormous barrier, broken here and there by several peaks, lost in the snows

that bounded the horizon.

Leaning against the fore-cabin, so as to keep their places notwithstanding the speed of the ship, they watched these colossal masses, which seemed to be running away from the aeronef.

"The Himalayas, evidently," said Phil Evans; "and probably Robur is going round their base, so as to pass into India."

"So much the worse," answered Uncle Prudent. "On that immense territory we shall perhaps be able to--"

"Unless he goes round by Burma to the east, or Nepal to the west."

"Anyhow, I defy him to go through them."

"Indeed!" said a voice.

The next day, the 28th of June, the "Albatross" was in front of the huge mass above the province of Zang. On the other side of the chain was the province of Nepal. These ranges block the road into India from the north. The two northern ones, between which the aeronef was gliding like a ship between enormous reefs are the first steps of the Central Asian barrier. The first was the Kuen Lung, the other the Karakorum, bordering the longitudinal valley parallel to the Himalayas, from which the Indus flows to the west and the

Brahmapootra to the east.

What a superb orographical system! More than two hundred summits have been measured, seventeen of which exceed twenty-five thousand feet. In front of the "Albatross," at a height of twenty-nine thousand feet, towered Mount Everest. To the right was Dhawalagiri, reaching twenty-six thousand eight hundred feet, and relegated to second place since the measurement of Mount Everest.

Evidently Robur did not intend to go over the top of these peaks; but probably he knew the passes of the Himalayas, among others that of Ibi Ganim, which the brothers Schlagintweit traversed in 1856 at a height of twenty-two thousand feet. And towards it he went.

Several hours of palpitation, becoming quite painful, followed; and although the rarefaction of the air was not such as to necessitate recourse being had to the special apparatus for renewing oxygen in the cabins, the cold was excessive.

Robur stood in the bow, his sturdy figure wrapped in a great-coat. He gave the orders, while Tom Turner was at the helm. The engineer kept an attentive watch on his batteries, the acid in which fortunately ran no risk of congelation. The screws, running at the full strength of the current, gave forth a note of intense shrillness in spite of the trifling density of the air. The barometer showed twenty-three thousand feet in altitude.

Magnificent was the grouping of the chaos of mountains! Everywhere were brilliant white summits. There were no lakes, but glaciers descending ten thousand feet towards the base. There was no herbage, only a few phanerogams on the limit of vegetable life. Down on the lower flanks of the range were splendid forests of pines and cedars. Here were none of the gigantic ferns and interminable parasites stretching from tree to tree as in the thickets of the jungle. There were no animals--no wild horses, or yaks, or Tibetan bulls. Occasionally a scared gazelle showed itself far down the slopes. There were no birds, save a couple of those crows which can rise to the utmost limits of the respirable air.

The pass at last was traversed. The "Albatross" began to descend. Coming from the hills out of the forest region there was now beneath them an immense plain stretching far and wide.

Then Robur stepped up to his guests, and in a pleasant voice remarked, "India, gentlemen!"