

## Chapter XIII

### OVER THE CASPIAN

The engineer had no intention of taking his ship over the wondrous lands of Hindustan. To cross the Himalayas was to show how admirable was the machine he commanded; to convince those who would not be convinced was all he wished to do.

But if in their hearts Uncle Prudent and his colleague could not help admiring so perfect an engine of aerial locomotion, they allowed none of their admiration to be visible. All they thought of was how to escape. They did not even admire the superb spectacle that lay beneath them as the "Albatross" flew along the river banks of the Punjab.

At the base of the Himalayas there runs a marshy belt of country, the home of malarious vapors, the Terai, in which fever is endemic. But this offered no obstacle to the "Albatross," or, in any way, affected the health of her crew. She kept on without undue haste towards the angle where India joins on to China and Turkestan, and on the 29th of June, in the early hours of the morning, there opened to view the incomparable valley of Cashmere.

Yes! Incomparable is this gorge between the major and the minor

Himalayas--furrowed by the buttresses in which the mighty range dies out in the basin of the Hydaspes, and watered by the capricious windings of the river which saw the struggle between the armies of Porus and Alexander, when India and Greece contended for Central Asia. The Hydaspes is still there, although the two towns founded by the Macedonian in remembrance of his victory have long since disappeared.

During the morning the aeronef was over Serinuggur, which is better known under the name of Cashmere. Uncle Prudent and his companion beheld the superb city clustered along both banks of the river; its wooden bridges stretching across like threads, its villas and their balconies standing out in bold outline, its hills shaded by tall poplars, its roofs grassed over and looking like molehills; its numerous canals, with boats like nut-shells, and boatmen like ants; its palaces, temples, kiosks, mosques, and bungalows on the outskirts; and its old citadel of Hari-Pawata on the slope of the hill like the most important of the forts of Paris on the slope of Mont Valerien.

"That would be Venice," said Phil Evans, "if we were in Europe."

"And if we were in Europe," answered Uncle Prudent, "we should know how to find the way to America."

The "Albatross" did not linger over the lake through which the river

flows, but continued her flight down the valley of the Hydaspes.

For half an hour only did she descend to within thirty feet of the river and remained stationary. Then, by means of an india-rubber pipe, Tom Turner and his men replenished their water supply, which was drawn up by a pump worked by the accumulators. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans stood watching the operation. The same idea occurred to each of them. They were only a few feet from the surface of the stream. They were both good swimmers. A plunge would give them their liberty; and once they had reached the river, how could Robur get them back again? For his propellers to work, he must keep at least six feet above the ground.

In a moment all the chances pro and con were run over in their heads. In a moment they were considered, and the prisoners rushed to throw themselves overboard, when several pairs of hands seized them by the shoulders.

They had been watched; and flight was utterly impossible.

This time they did not yield without resisting. They tried to throw off those who held them. But these men of the "Albatross" were no children.

"Gentlemen," said the engineer, "when people, have the pleasure of traveling with Robur the Conqueror, as you have so well named him, on

board his admirable "Albatross," they do not leave him in that way. I may add you never leave him."

Phil Evans drew away his colleague, who was about to commit some act of violence. They retired to their cabin, resolved to escape, even if it cost them their lives.

Immediately the "Albatross" resumed her course to the west. During the day at moderate speed she passed over the territory of Cabulistan, catching a momentary glimpse of its capital, and crossed the frontier of the kingdom of Herat, nearly seven hundred miles from Cashmere.

In these much-disputed countries, the open road for the Russians to the English possessions in India, there were seen many columns and convoys, and, in a word, everything that constitutes in men and material an army on the march. There were heard also the roar of the cannon and the crackling of musketry. But the engineer never meddled with the affairs of others where his honor or humanity was not concerned. He passed above them. If Herat as we are told, is the key of Central Asia, it mattered little to him if it was kept in an English or Muscovite pocket. Terrestrial interests were nothing to him who had made the air his domain.

Besides, the country soon disappeared in one of those sandstorms which are so frequent in these regions. The wind called the "tebbad"

bears along the seeds of fever in the impalpable dust it raises in its passage. And many are the caravans that perish in its eddies.

To escape this dust, which might have interfered with the working of the screws, the "Albatross" shot up some six thousand feet into a purer atmosphere.

And thus vanished the Persian frontier and the extensive plains. The speed was not excessive, although there were no rocks ahead, for the mountains marked on the map are of very moderate altitude. But as the ship approached the capital, she had to steer clear of Demavend, whose snowy peak rises some twenty-two thousand feet, and the chain of Elbruz, at whose foot is built Teheran.

As soon as the day broke on the 2nd of July the peak of Demavend appeared above the sandstorm, and the "Albatross" was steered so as to pass over the town, which the wind had wrapped in a mantle of dust.

However, about six o'clock her crew could see the large ditches that surround it, and the Shah's palace, with its walls covered with porcelain tiles, and its ornamental lakes, which seemed like huge turquoises of beautiful blue.

It was but a hasty glimpse. The "Albatross" now headed for the north, and a few hours afterwards she was over a little hill at the northern angle of the Persian frontier, on the shores of a vast extent of

water which stretched away out of sight to the north and east.

The town was Ashurada, the most southerly of the Russian stations.

The vast extent of water was a sea. It was the Caspian.

The eddies of sand had been passed. There was a view of a group of European houses rising along a promontory, with a church tower in the midst of them.

The "Albatross" swooped down towards the surface of the sea. Towards evening she was running along the coast--which formerly belonged to Turkestan, but now belongs to Russia--and in the morning of the 3rd of July she was about three hundred feet above the Caspian.

There was no land in sight, either on the Asiatic or European side.

On the surface of the sea a few white sails were bellying in the breeze. These were native vessels recognizable by their peculiar rig--kesebeys, with two masts; kayuks, the old pirate-boats, with one mast; teimils, and smaller craft for trading and fishing. Here and there a few puffs of smoke rose up to the "Albatross" from the funnels of the Ashurada steamers, which the Russians keep as the police of these Turcoman waters.

That morning Tom Turner was talking to the cook, Tapage, and to a question of his replied, "Yes; we shall be about forty-eight hours over the Caspian."

"Good!" said the cook; "Then we can have some fishing."

"Just so."

They were to remain for forty-eight hours over the Caspian, which is some six hundred and twenty-five miles long and two hundred wide, because the speed of the "Albatross" had been much reduced, and while the fishing was going on she would be stopped altogether.

The reply was heard by Phil Evans, who was then in the bow, where Frycollin was overwhelming him with piteous pleadings to be put "on the ground."

Without replying to this preposterous request, Evans returned aft to Uncle Prudent; and there, taking care not to be overheard, he reported the conversation that had taken place.

"Phil Evans," said Uncle Prudent, "I think there can be no mistake as to this scoundrel's intention with regard to us."

"None," said Phil Evans. "He will only give us our liberty when it suits him, and perhaps not at all."

"In that case we must do all we can to get away from the 'Albatross'."

"A splendid craft, she is, I must admit."

"Perhaps so," said Uncle Prudent; "but she belongs to a scoundrel who detains us on board in defiance of all right. For us and ours she is a constant danger. If we do not destroy her--"

"Let us begin by saving ourselves" answered Phil Evans; "we can see about the destruction afterwards."

"Just so," said Uncle Prudent. "And we must avail ourselves of every chance that comes, along. Evidently the "Albatross" is going to cross the Caspian into Europe, either by the north into Russia or by the west into the southern countries. Well, no matter where we stop, before we get to the Atlantic, we shall be safe. And we ought to be ready at any moment."

"But," asked Evans, "how are we to get out?"

"Listen to me," said Uncle Prudent. "It may happen during the night that the "Albatross" may drop to within a few hundred feet of the ground. Now there are on board several ropes of that length, and, with a little pluck we might slip down them--"

"Yes," said Evans. "If the case is desperate I don't mind--"

"Nor I. During the night there's no one about except the man at the



wheel. And if we can drop one of the ropes forward without being seen or heard--"

"Good! I am glad to see you are so cool; that means business. But just now we are over the Caspian. There are several ships in sight. The "Albatross" is going down to fish. Cannot we do something now?"

"Sh! They are watching us much more than you think," said Uncle Prudent. "You saw that when we tried to jump into the Hydaspes."

"And who knows that they don't watch us at night?" asked Evans.

"Well, we must end this; we must finish with this "Albatross" and her master."

It will be seen how in the excitement of their anger the colleagues--Uncle Prudent in particular--were prepared to attempt the most hazardous things. The sense of their powerlessness, the ironical disdain with which Robur treated them, the brutal remarks he indulged in--all contributed towards intensifying the aggravation which daily grew more manifest.

This very day something occurred which gave rise to another most regrettable altercation between Robur and his guests. This was provoked by Frycollin, who, finding himself above the boundless sea, was seized with another fit of terror. Like a child, like the Negro

he was, he gave himself over to groaning and protesting and crying, and writhing in a thousand contortions and grimaces.

"I want to get out! I want to get out! I am not a bird! Boohoo! I don't want to fly, I want to get out!"

Uncle Prudent, as may be imagined, did not attempt to quiet him. In fact, he encouraged him, and particularly as the incessant howling seemed to have a strangely irritating effect on Robur.

When Tom Turner and his companions were getting ready for fishing, the engineer ordered them to shut up Frycollin in his cabin. But the Negro never ceased his jumping about, and began to kick at the wall and yell with redoubled power.

It was noon. The "Albatross" was only about fifteen or twenty feet above the water. A few ships, terrified at the apparition, sought safety in flight.

As may be guessed, a sharp look-out was kept on the prisoners, whose temptation to escape could not but be intensified. Even supposing they jumped overboard they would have been picked up by the india-rubber boat. As there was nothing to do during the fishing, in which Phil Evans intended to take part, Uncle Prudent, raging furiously as usual, retired to his cabin.

The Caspian Sea is a volcanic depression. Into it flow the waters of the Volga, the Ural, the Kour, the Kouma, the Jemba, and others. Without the evaporation which relieves it of its overflow, this basin, with an area of 17,000 square miles, and a depth of from sixty to four hundred feet, would flood the low marshy ground to its north and east. Although it is not in communication with the Black Sea or the Sea of Aral, being at a much lower level than they are, it contains an immense number of fish--such fish, be it understood, as can live in its bitter waters, the bitterness being due to the naphtha which pours in from the springs on the south.

The crew of the "Albatross" made no secret of their delight at the change in their food the fishing would bring them.

"Look out!" shouted Turner, as he harpooned a good-size fish, not unlike a shark.

It was a splendid sturgeon seven feet long, called by the Russians beluga, the eggs of which mixed up with salt, vinegar, and white wine form caviar. Sturgeons from the river are, it may be, rather better than those from the sea; but these were welcomed warmly enough on board the "Albatross."

But the best catches were made with the drag-nets, which brought up at each haul carp, bream, salmon, saltwater pike, and a number of medium-sized sterlets, which wealthy gourmets have sent alive to

Astrakhan, Moscow, and Petersburg, and which now passed direct from their natural element into the cook's kettle without any charge for transport.

An hour's work sufficed to fill up the larders of the aeronef, and she resumed her course to the north.

During the fishing Frycollin had continued shouting and kicking at his cabin wall, and making a tremendous noise.

"That wretched nigger will not be quiet, then?" said Robur, almost out of patience.

"It seems to me, sir, he has a right to complain," said Phil Evans.

"Yes, and I have a right to look after my ears," replied Robur.

"Engineer Robur!" said Uncle Prudent, who had just appeared on deck.

"President of the Weldon Institute!"

They had stepped up to one another, and were looking into the whites of each other's eyes. Then Robur shrugged his shoulders. "Put him at the end of a line," he said.

Turner saw his meaning at once. Frycollin was dragged out of his

cabin. Loud were his cries when the mate and one of the men seized him and tied him into a tub, which they hitched on to a rope--one of those very ropes, in fact, that Uncle Prudent had intended to use as we know.

The Negro at first thought he was going to be hanged. Not he was only going to be towed!

The rope was paid out for a hundred feet and Frycollin found himself hanging in space.

He could then shout at his ease. But fright contracted his larynx, and he was mute.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans endeavored to prevent this performance. They were thrust aside.

"It is scandalous! It is cowardly!" said Uncle Prudent, quite beside himself with rage.

"Indeed!" said Robur.

"It is an abuse of power against which I protest."

"Protest away!"

"I will be avenged, Mr. Robur."

"Avenge when you like, Mr. Prudent."

"I will have my revenge on you and yours."

The crew began to close up with anything but peaceful intentions.

Robur motioned them away.

"Yes, on you and yours!" said Uncle Prudent, whom his colleague in vain tried to keep quiet.

"Whenever you please!" said the engineer.

"And in every possible way!"

"That is enough now," said Robur, in a threatening tone. "There are other ropes on board. And if you don't be quiet I'll treat you as I have done your servant!"

Uncle Prudent was silent, not because he was afraid, but because his wrath had nearly choked him; and Phil Evans led him off to his cabin.

During the last hour the air had been strangely troubled. The symptoms could not be mistaken. A storm was threatening. The electric saturation of the atmosphere had become so great that about half-past

two o'clock Robur witnessed a phenomenon that was new to him.

In the north, whence the storm was traveling, were spirals of half-luminous vapor due to the difference in the electric charges of the various beds of cloud. The reflections of these bands came running along the waves in myriads of lights, growing in intensity as the sky darkened.

The "Albatross" and the storm were sure to meet, for they were exactly in front of each other.

And Frycollin? Well! Frycollin was being towed--and towed is exactly the word, for the rope made such an angle, with the aeronef, now going at over sixty knots an hour, that the tub was a long way behind her.

The crew were busy in preparing for the storm, for the "Albatross" would either have to rise above it or drive through its lowest layers. She was about three thousand feet above the sea when a clap of thunder was heard. Suddenly the squall struck her. In a few seconds the fiery clouds swept on around her.

Phil Evans went to intercede for Frycollin, and asked for him to be taken on board again. But Robur had already given orders to that effect, and the rope was being hauled in, when suddenly there took place an inexplicable slackening in the speed of the screws.

The engineer rushed to the central deck-house. "Power! More power!" he shouted. "We must rise quickly and get over the storm!"

"Impossible, sir!"

"What is the matter?"

"The currents are troubled! They are intermittent!" And, in fact, the "Albatross" was falling fast.

As with the telegraph wires on land during a storm, so was it with the accumulators of the aeronef. But what is only an inconvenience in the case of messages was here a terrible danger.

"Let her down, then," said Robur, "and get out of the electric zone! Keep cool, my lads!"

He stepped on to his quarter-deck and his crew went to their stations.

Although the "Albatross" had sunk several hundred feet she was still in the thick of the cloud, and the flashes played across her as if they were fireworks. It seemed as though she was struck. The screws ran more and more slowly, and what began as a gentle descent threatened to become a collapse.



In less than a minute it was evident they would get down to the surface of the sea. Once they were immersed no power could drag them from the abyss.

Suddenly the electric cloud appeared above them. The "Albatross" was only sixty feet from the crest of the waves. In two or three seconds the deck would be under water.

But Robur, seizing the propitious moment, rushed to the central house and seized the levers. He turned on the currents from the piles no longer neutralized by the electric tension of the surrounding atmosphere. In a moment the screws had regained their normal speed and checked the descent; and the "Albatross" remained at her slight elevation while her propellers drove her swiftly out of reach of the storm.

Frycollin, of course, had a bath--though only for a few seconds. When he was dragged on deck he was as wet as if he had been to the bottom of the sea. As may be imagined, he cried no more.

In the morning of the 4th of July the "Albatross" had passed over the northern shore of the Caspian.