

## Chapter XIV

### THE AERONEF AT FULL SPEED

If ever Prudent and Evans despaired on escaping from the "Albatross" it was during the two days that followed. It may be that Robur considered it more difficult to keep a watch on his prisoners while he was crossing Europe, and he knew that they had made up their minds to get away.

But any attempt to have done so would have been simply committing suicide. To jump from an express going sixty miles an hour is to risk your life, but to jump from a machine going one hundred and twenty miles an hour would be to seek your death.

And it was at this speed, the greatest that could be given to her, that the "Albatross" tore along. Her speed exceeded that of the swallow, which is one hundred and twelve miles an hour.

At first the wind was in the northeast, and the "Albatross" had it fair, her general course being a westerly one. But the wind began to drop, and it soon became impossible for the colleagues to remain on the deck without having their breath taken away by the rapidity of the flight. And on one occasion they would have been blown overboard if they had not been dashed up against the deck-house by the pressure

of the wind.

Luckily the steersman saw them through the windows of his cage, and by the electric bell gave the alarm to the men in the fore-cabin.

Four of them came aft, creeping along the deck.

Those who have been at sea, beating to windward in half a gale of wind, will understand what the pressure was like. But here it was the "Albatross" that by her incomparable speed made her own wind.

To allow Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans to get back to their cabin the speed had to be reduced. Inside the deck-house the "Albatross" bore with her a perfectly breathable atmosphere. To stand such driving the strength of the apparatus must have been prodigious. The propellers spun round so swiftly that they seemed immovable, and it was with irresistible power that they screwed themselves through the air.

The last town that had been noticed was Astrakhan, situated at the north end of the Caspian Sea. The Star of the Desert--it must have been a poet who so called it--has now sunk from the first rank to the fifth or sixth. A momentary glance was afforded at its old walls, with their useless battlements, the ancient towers in the center of the city, the mosques and modern churches, the cathedral with its five domes, gilded and dotted with stars as if it were a piece of the sky, as they rose from the bank of the Volga, which here, as it joins the sea, is over a mile in width.

Thenceforward the flight of the "Albatross" became quite a race through the heights of the sky, as if she had been harnessed to one of those fabulous hippogriffs which cleared a league at every sweep of the wing.

At ten o'clock in the morning, of the 4th of July the aeronef, heading northwest, followed for a little the valley of the Volga. The steppes of the Don and the Ural stretched away on each side of the river. Even if it had been possible to get a glimpse of these vast territories there would have been no time to count the towns and villages. In the evening the aeronef passed over Moscow without saluting the flag on the Kremlin. In ten hours she had covered the twelve hundred miles which separate Astrakhan from the ancient capital of all the Russias.

From Moscow to St. Petersburg the railway line measures about seven hundred and fifty miles. This was but a half-day's journey, and the "Albatross," as punctual as the mail, reached St. Petersburg and the banks of the Neva at two o'clock in the morning.

Then came the Gulf of Finland, the Archipelago of Abo, the Baltic, Sweden in the latitude of Stockholm, and Norway in the latitude of Christiania. Ten hours only for these twelve hundred miles! Verily it might be thought that no human power would henceforth be able to check the speed of the "Albatross," and as if the resultant of her

force of projection and the attraction of the earth would maintain her in an unvarying trajectory round the globe.

But she did stop nevertheless, and that was over the famous fall of the Rjukanfos in Norway. Gousta, whose summit dominates this wonderful region of Tellermarken, stood in the west like a gigantic barrier apparently impassable. And when the "Albatross" resumed her journey at full speed her head had been turned to the south.

And during this extraordinary flight what was Frycollin doing? He remained silent in a corner of his cabin, sleeping as well as he could, except at meal times.

Tapage then favored him with his company and amused himself at his expense. "Eh! eh! my boy!" said he. "So you are not crying any more? Perhaps it hurt you too much? That two hours hanging cured you of it? At our present rate, what a splendid air-bath you might have for your rheumatics!"

"It seems to me we shall soon go to pieces!"

"Perhaps so; but we shall go so fast we shan't have time to fall!

That is some comfort!"

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

To tell the truth, and not to exaggerate like Tapage, it was only reasonable that owing to the excessive speed the work of the suspensory screws should be somewhat lessened. The "Albatross" glided on its bed of air like a Congreve rocket.

"And shall we last long like that?" asked Frycollin.

"Long? Oh, no, only as long as we live!"

"Oh!" said the Negro, beginning his lamentations.

"Take care, Fry, take care! For, as they say in my country, the master may send you to the seesaw!" And Frycollin gulped down his sobs as he gulped down the meat which, in double doses, he was hastily swallowing.

Meanwhile Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, who were not men to waste time in wrangling when nothing could come of it, agreed upon doing something. It was evident that escape was not to be thought of. But if it was impossible for them to again set foot on the terrestrial globe, could they not make known to its inhabitants what had become of them since their disappearance, and tell them by whom they had been carried off, and provoke--how was not very clear--some audacious attempt on the part of their friends to rescue them from

Robur?

Communicate? But how? Should they follow the example of sailors in distress and enclose in a bottle a document giving the place of shipwreck and throw it into the sea? But here the sea was the atmosphere. The bottle would not swim. And if it did not fall on somebody and crack his skull it might never be found.

The colleagues were about to sacrifice one of the bottles on board when an idea occurred to Uncle Prudent. He took snuff, as we know, and we may pardon this fault in an American, who might do worse. And as a snuff-taker he possessed a snuff-box, which was now empty. This box was made of aluminum. If it was thrown overboard any honest citizen that found it would pick it up, and, being an honest citizen, he would take it to the police-office, and there they would open it and discover from the document what had become of the two victims of Robur the Conqueror!

And this is what was done. The note was short, but it told all, and it gave the address of the Weldon Institute, with a request that it might be forwarded. Then Uncle Prudent folded up the note, shut it in the box, bound the box round with a piece of worsted so as to keep it from opening it as it fell. And then all that had to be done was to wait for a favorable opportunity.

During this marvelous flight over Europe it was not an easy thing to

leave the cabin and creep along the deck at the risk of being suddenly and secretly blown away, and it would not do for the snuff-box to fall into the sea or a gulf or a lake or a watercourse, for it would then perhaps be lost. At the same time it was not impossible that the colleagues might in this way get into communication with the habitable globe.

It was then growing daylight, and it seemed as though it would be better to wait for the night and take advantage of a slackening speed or a halt to go out on deck and drop the precious snuff-box into some town.

When all these points had been thought over and settled, the prisoners, found they could not put their plan into execution--on that day, at all events--for the "Albatross," after leaving Gousta, had kept her southerly course, which took her over the North Sea, much to the consternation of the thousands of coasting craft engaged in the English, Dutch, French, and Belgian trade. Unless the snuff-box fell on the deck of one of these vessels there was every chance of its going to the bottom of the sea, and Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were obliged to wait for a better opportunity. And, as we shall immediately see, an excellent chance was soon to be offered them.

At ten o'clock that evening the "Albatross" reached the French coast near Dunkirk. The night was rather dark. For a moment they could see

the lighthouse at Grisnez cross its electric beam with the lights from Dover on the other side of the strait. Then the "Albatross" flew over the French territory at a mean height of three thousand feet.

There was no diminution in her speed. She shot like a rocket over the towns and villages so numerous in northern France. She was flying straight on to Paris, and after Dunkirk came Doullens, Amiens, Creil, Saint Denis. She never left the line; and about midnight she was over the "city of light," which merits its name even when its inhabitants are asleep or ought to be.

By what strange whim was it that she was stopped over the city of Paris? We do not know; but down she came till she was within a few hundred feet of the ground. Robur then came out of his cabin, and the crew came on to the deck to breathe the ambient air.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans took care not to miss such an excellent opportunity. They left their deck-house and walked off away from the others so as to be ready at the propitious moment. It was important their action should not be seen.

The "Albatross," like a huge coleopter, glided gently over the mighty city. She took the line of the boulevards, then brilliantly lighted by the Edison lamps. Up to her there floated the rumble of the vehicles as they drove along the streets, and the roll of the trains on the numerous railways that converge into Paris. Then she glided



over the highest monuments as if she was going to knock the ball off the Pantheon or the cross off the Invalides. She hovered over the two minarets of the Trocadero and the metal tower of the Champ de Mars, where the enormous reflector was inundating the whole capital with its electric rays.

This aerial promenade, this nocturnal loitering, lasted for about an hour. It was a halt for breath before the voyage was resumed.

And probably Robur wished to give the Parisians the sight of a meteor quite unforeseen by their astronomers. The lamps of the "Albatross" were turned on. Two brilliant sheaves of light shot down and moved along over the squares, the gardens, the palaces, the sixty thousand houses, and swept the space from one horizon to the other.

Assuredly the "Albatross" was seen this time--and not only well seen but heard, for Tom Turner brought out his trumpet and blew a rousing tarantaratara.

At this moment Uncle Prudent leant over the rail, opened his hand, and let his snuff-box fall.

Immediately the "Albatross" shot upwards, and past her, higher still, there mounted the noisy cheering of the crowd then thick on the boulevards--a hurrah of stupefaction to greet the imaginary meteor.

The lamps of the aeronef were turned off, and the darkness and the silence closed in around as the voyage was resumed at the rate of one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

This was all that was to be seen of the French capital. At four o'clock in the morning the "Albatross" had crossed the whole country obliquely; and so as to lose no time in traversing the Alps or the Pyrenees, she flew over the face of Provence to the cape of Antibes. At nine o'clock next morning the San Pietrini assembled on the terrace of St. Peter at Rome were astounded to see her pass over the eternal city. Two hours afterwards she crossed the Bay of Naples and hovered for an instant over the fuliginous wreaths of Vesuvius. Then, after cutting obliquely across the Mediterranean, in the early hours of the afternoon she was signaled by the look-outs at La Goulette on the Tunisian coast.

After America, Asia! After Asia, Europe! More than eighteen thousand miles had this wonderful machine accomplished in less than twenty-three days!

And now she was off over the known and unknown regions of Africa!

It may be interesting to know what had happened to the famous snuff-box after its fall?

It had fallen in the Rue de Rivoli, opposite No. 200, when the street

was deserted. In the morning it was picked up by an honest sweeper, who took it to the prefecture of police. There it was at first supposed to be an infernal machine. And it was untied, examined, and opened with care.

Suddenly a sort of explosion took place. It was a terrific sneeze on the part of the inspector.

The document was then extracted from the snuff-box, and to the general surprise, read as follows:

"Messrs. Prudent and Evans, president and secretary of the Weldon Institute, Philadelphia, have been carried off in the aeronef Albatross belonging to Robur the engineer."

"Please inform our friends and acquaintances."

"P. and P. E."

Thus was the strange phenomenon at last explained to the people of the two worlds. Thus was peace given to the scientists of the numerous observatories on the surface of the terrestrial globe.