

Chapter XV

A SKIRMISH IN DAHOMEY

At this point in the circumnavigatory voyage of the "Albatross" it is only natural that some such questions as the following should be asked. Who was this Robur, of whom up to the present we know nothing but the name? Did he pass his life in the air? Did his aeronef never rest? Had he not some retreat in some inaccessible spot in which, if he had need of repose or revictualing, he could betake himself? It would be very strange if it were not so. The most powerful flyers have always an eyrie or nest somewhere.

And what was the engineer going to do with his prisoners? Was he going to keep them in his power and condemn them to perpetual aviation? Or was he going to take them on a trip over Africa, South America, Australasia, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic and the Pacific, to convince them against their will, and then dismiss them with, "And now gentlemen, I hope you will believe a little more in heavier than air?"

To these questions, it is now impossible to reply. They are the secrets of the future. Perhaps the answers will be revealed. Anyhow the bird-like Robur was not seeking his nest on the northern frontier of Africa. By the end of the day he had traversed Tunis from Cape Bon

to Cape Carthage, sometimes hovering, and sometimes darting along at top speed. Soon he reached the interior, and flew down the beautiful valley of Medjeida above its yellow stream hidden under its luxuriant bushes of cactus and oleander; and scared away the hundreds of parrots that perch on the telegraph wires and seem to wait for the messages to pass to bear them away beneath their wings.

Two hours after sunset the helm was put up and the "Albatross" bore off to the southeast; and on the morrow, after clearing the Tell Mountains, she saw the rising of the morning star over the sands of the Sahara.

On the 30th of July there was seen from the aeronef the little village of Geryville, founded like Laghouat on the frontier of the desert to facilitate the future conquest of Kabylia. Next, not without difficulty, the peaks of Stillero were passed against a somewhat boisterous wind. Then the desert was crossed, sometimes leisurely over the Ksars or green oases, sometimes at terrific speed that far outstripped the flight of the vultures. Often the crew had to fire into the flocks of these birds which, a dozen or so at a time, fearlessly hurled themselves on to the aeronef to the extreme terror of Frycollin.

But if the vultures could only reply with cries and blows of beaks and talons, the natives, in no way less savage, were not sparing of their musket-shots, particularly when crossing the Mountain of Sel,

whose green and violet slope bore its cape of white. Then the "Albatross" was at last over the grand Sahara; and at once she rose into the higher zones so as to escape from a simoom which was sweeping a wave of ruddy sand along the surface of the ground like a bore on the surface of the sea.

Then the desolate tablelands of Chetka scattered their ballast in blackish waves up to the fresh and verdant valley of Ain-Massin. It is difficult to conceive the variety of the territories which could be seen at one view. To the green hills covered with trees and shrubs there succeeded long gray undulations draped like the folds of an Arab burnous and broken in picturesque masses. In the distance could be seen the wadys with their torrential waters, their forests of palm-trees, and blocks of small houses grouped on a hill around a mosque, among them Metlili, where there vegetates a religious chief, the grand marabout Sidi Chick.

Before night several hundred miles had been accomplished above a flattish country ridged occasionally with large sandhills. If the "Albatross" had halted, she would have come to the earth in the depths of the Wargla oasis hidden beneath an immense forest of palm-trees. The town was clearly enough displayed with its three distinct quarters, the ancient palace of the Sultan, a kind of fortified Kasbah, houses of brick which had been left to the sun to bake, and artesian wells dug in the valley--where the aeronef could have renewed her water supply. But, thanks to her extraordinary

speed, the waters of the Hydaspes taken in the vale of Cashmere still filled her tanks in the center of the African desert.

Was the "Albatross" seen by the Arabs, the Mozabites, and the Negroes who share amongst them the town of Wargla? Certainly, for she was saluted with many hundred gunshot, and the bullets fell back before they reached her.

Then came the night, that silent night in the desert of which Felicien David has so poetically told us the secrets.

During the following hours the course lay southwesterly, cutting across the routes of El Golea, one of which was explored in 1859 by the intrepid Duveyrier.

The darkness was profound. Nothing could be seen of the Trans-Saharan Railway constructing on the plans of Duponchel--a long ribbon of iron destined to bind together Algiers and Timbuktu by way of Laghouat and Gardaia, and destined eventually to run down into the Gulf of Guinea.

Then the "Albatross" entered the equatorial region below the tropic of Cancer. Six hundred miles from the northern frontier of the Sahara she crossed the route on which Major Laing met his, death in 1846, and crossed the road of the caravans from Morocco to the Sudan, and that part of the desert swept by the Tuaregs, where could be heard

what is called "the song of the sand," a soft and plaintive murmur that seems to escape from the ground.

Only one thing happened. A cloud of locusts came flying along, and there fell such a cargo of them on board as to threaten to sink the ship. But all hands set to work to clear the deck, and the locusts were thrown over except a few hundred kept by Tapage for his larder. And he served them up in so succulent a fashion that Frycollin forgot for the moment his perpetual trances and said, "these are as good as prawns."

The aeronef was then eleven hundred miles from the Wargla oasis and almost on the northern frontier of the Sudan. About two o'clock in the afternoon a city appeared in the bend of a large river. The river was the Niger. The city was Timbuktu.

If, up to then, this African Mecca had only been visited by the travelers of the ancient world Batouta, Khazan, Imbert, Mungo Park, Adams, Laing, Caillé, Barth, Lenz, on that day by a most singular chance the two Americans could boast of having seen, heard, and smelt it, on their return to America--if they ever got back there.

Of having seen it, because their view included the whole triangle of three or four miles in circumference; of having heard it, because the day was one of some rejoicing and the noise was terrible; of having smelt it, because the olfactory nerve could not but be very

disagreeably affected by the odors of the Youbou-Kamo square, where the meatmarket stands close to the palace of the ancient Somai kings.

The engineer had no notion of allowing the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute to be ignorant that they had the honor of contemplating the Queen of the Sudan, now in the power of the Tuaregs of Taganet.

"Gentlemen, Timbuktu!" he said, in the same tone as twelve days before he had said, "Gentlemen, India!" Then he continued, "Timbuktu is an important city of from twelve to thirteen thousand inhabitants, formerly illustrious in science and art. Perhaps you would like to stay there for a day or two?"

Such a proposal could only have been made ironically. "But," continued he, "it would be dangerous among the Negroes, Berbers, and Foullanes who occupy, it--particularly as our arrival in an aeronef might prejudice them against you."

"Sir," said Phil Evans, in the same tone, "for the pleasure of leaving you we would willingly risk an unpleasant reception from the natives. Prison for prison, we would rather be in Timbuktu than on the "Albatross.""

"That is a matter of taste," answered the engineer. "Anyhow, I shall not try the adventure, for I am responsible for the safety of the

guests who do me the honor to travel with me."

"And so," said Uncle Prudent, explosively, "you are not content with being our jailer, but you insult us."

"Oh! a little irony, that is all!"

"Are there any weapons on board?"

"Oh, quite an arsenal."

"Two revolvers will do, if I hold one and you the other."

"A duel!" exclaimed Robur, "a duel, which would perhaps cause the death of one of us."

"Which certainly would cause it."

"Well! No, Mr. President of the Weldon Institute, I very much prefer keeping you alive."

"To be sure of living yourself. That is wise."

"Wise or not, it suits me. You are at liberty to think as you like, and to complain to those who have the power to help you--if you can."

"And that we have done, Mr. Robur."

"Indeed!"

"Was it so difficult when we were crossing the inhabited part of Europe to drop a letter overboard?"

"Did you do that?" said Robur, in a paroxysm of rage.

"And if we have done it?"

"If you have done it--you deserve--"

"What, sir?"

"To follow your letter overboard."

"Throw us over, then. We did do it."

Robur stepped towards them. At a gesture from him Tom Turner and some of the crew ran up. The engineer was seriously tempted to put his threat into execution, and, fearful perhaps of yielding to it, he precipitately rushed into his cabin.

"Good!" exclaimed Phil Evans.

"And what he will dare not do," said Uncle Prudent, "I Will do! Yes, I Will do!"

At the moment the population of Timbuktu were crowding onto the squares and roads and the terraces built like amphitheaters. In the rich quarters of Sankere and Sarahama, as in the miserable huts at Raguidi, the priests from the minarets were thundering their loudest maledictions against the aerial monster. These were more harmless than the rifle-bullets; though assuredly, if the aeronef had come to earth she would have certainly been torn to pieces.

For some miles noisy flocks of storks, francolins, and ibises escorted the "Albatross" and tried to race her, but in her rapid flight she soon distanced them.

The evening came. The air was troubled by the roarings of the numerous herds of elephants and buffaloes which wander over this land, whose fertility is simply marvelous. For forty-eight hours the whole of the region between the prime meridian and the second degree, in the bend of the Niger, was viewed from the "Albatross."

If a geographer had only such an apparatus at his command, with what facility could he map the country, note the elevations, fix the courses of the rivers and their affluents, and determine the positions of the towns and villages! There would then be no huge blanks on the map of Africa, no dotted lines, no vague designations

which are the despair of cartographers.

In the morning of the 11th the "Albatross" crossed the mountains of northern Guinea, between the Sudan and the gulf which bears their name. On the horizon was the confused outline of the Kong mountains in the kingdom of Dahomey.

Since the departure from Timbuktu Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans noticed that the course had been due south. If that direction was persisted in they would cross the equator in six more degrees. The "Albatross" would then abandon the continents and fly not over the Bering Sea, or the Caspian Sea, or the North Sea, or the Mediterranean, but over the Atlantic Ocean.

This look-out was not particularly pleasing to the two friends, whose chances of escape had sunk to below zero. But the "Albatross" had slackened speed as though hesitating to leave Africa behind. Was Robur thinking of going back? No; but his attention had been particularly attracted to the country which he was then crossing.

We know--and he knew--that the kingdom of Dahomey is one of the most powerful on the West Coast of Africa. Strong enough to hold its own with its neighbor Ashantee, its area is somewhat small, being contained within three hundred and sixty leagues from north to south, and one hundred and eighty from east to west. But its population numbers some seven or eight hundred thousand, including the

neighboring independent territories of Whydah and Ardrah.

If Dahomey is not a large country, it is often talked about. It is celebrated for the frightful cruelties which signalize its annual festivals, and by its human sacrifices--fearful hecatombs intended to honor the sovereign it has lost and the sovereign who has succeeded him. It is even a matter of politeness when the King of Dahomey receives a visit from some high personage or some foreign ambassador to give him a surprise present of a dozen heads, cut off in his honor by the minister of justice, the "minghan," who is wonderfully skillful in that branch of his duties.

When the "Albatross" came flying over Dahomey, the old King Bahadou had just died, and the whole population was proceeding to the enthronization of his successor. Hence there was great agitation all over the country, and it did not escape Robur that everybody was on the move.

Long lines of Dahomians were hurrying along the roads from the country into the capital, Abomey. Well kept roads radiating among vast plains clothed with giant trees, immense fields of manioc, magnificent forests of palms, cocoa-trees, mimosas, orange-trees, mango-trees--such was the country whose perfumes mounted to the "Albatross," while many parrots and cardinals swarmed among the trees.

The engineer, leaning over the rail, seemed deep in thought, and

exchanged but a few words with Tom Turner. It did not look as though the "Albatross" had attracted the attention of those moving masses, which were often invisible under the impenetrable roof of trees. This was doubtless due to her keeping at a good altitude amid a bank of light cloud.

About eleven o'clock in the morning the capital was sighted, surrounded by its walls, defended by a fosse measuring twelve miles round, with wide, regular streets on the flat plain, and a large square on the northern side occupied by the king's palace. This huge collection of buildings is commanded by a terrace not far from the place of sacrifice. During the festival days it is from this high terrace that they throw the prisoners tied up in wicker baskets, and it can be imagined with what fury these unhappy wretches are cut in pieces.

In one of the courtyards which divide the king's palace there were drawn up four thousand warriors, one of the contingents of the royal army--and not the least courageous one. If it is doubtful if there are any Amazons on the river of that name, there is no doubt of there being Amazons at Dahomey. Some have a blue shirt with a blue or red scarf, with white-and-blue striped trousers and a white cap; others, the elephant-huntresses, have a heavy carbine, a short-bladed dagger, and two antelope horns fixed to their heads by a band of iron. The artillery-women have a blue-and-red tunic, and, as weapons, blunderbusses and old cast cannons; and another brigade, consisting

of vestal virgins, pure as Diana, have blue tunics and white trousers. If we add to these Amazons, five or six thousand men in cotton drawers and shirts, with a knotted tuft to increase their stature, we shall have passed in review the Dahomian army.

Abomey on this day was deserted. The sovereign, the royal family, the masculine and feminine army, and the population had all gone out of the capital to a vast plain a few miles away surrounded by magnificent forests.

On this plain the recognition of the new king was to take place. Here it was that thousands of prisoners taken during recent razzias were to be immolated in his honor.

It was about two o'clock when the "Albatross" arrived over the plain and began to descend among the clouds which still hid her from the Dahomians.

There were sixteen thousand people at least come from all parts of the kingdom, from Whydah, and Kerapay, and Ardrah, and Tombory, and the most distant villages.

The new king--a sturdy fellow named Bou-Nadi--some five-and-twenty years old, was seated on a hillock shaded by a group of wide-branched trees. Before him stood his male army, his Amazons, and his people.

At the foot of the mound fifty musicians were playing on their barbarous instruments, elephants' tusks giving forth a husky note, deerskin drums, calabashes, guitars, bells struck with an iron clapper, and bamboo flutes, whose shrill whistle was heard over all. Every other second came discharges of guns and blunderbusses, discharges of cannons with the carriages jumping so as to imperil the lives of the artillery-women, and a general uproar so intense that even the thunder would be unheard amidst it.

In one corner of the plain, under a guard of soldiers, were grouped the prisoners destined to accompany the defunct king into the other world. At the obsequies of Ghozo, the father of Bahadou, his son had dispatched three thousand, and Bou-Nadi could not do less than his predecessor. For an hour there was a series of discourses, harangues, palavers and dances, executed not only by professionals, but by the Amazons, who displayed much martial grace.

But the time for the hecatomb was approaching. Robur, who knew the customs of Dahomey, did not lose sight of the men, women, and children reserved for butchery.

The minghan was standing at the foot of the hillock. He was brandishing his executioner's sword, with its curved blade surmounted by a metal bird, whose weight rendered the cut more certain.

This time he was not alone. He could not have performed the task.

Near him were grouped a hundred executioners, all accustomed to cut off heads at one blow.

The "Albatross" came slowly down in an oblique direction. Soon she emerged from the bed of clouds which hid her till she was within three hundred feet of the ground, and for the first time she was visible from below.

Contrary to what had hitherto happened, the savages saw in her a celestial being come to render homage to King Baha-dou. The enthusiasm was indescribable, the shouts were interminable, the prayers were terrific--prayers addressed to this supernatural hippogriff, which "had doubtless come to" take the king's body to the higher regions of the Dahomian heaven. And now the first head fell under the minghan's sword, and the prisoners were led up in hundreds before the horrible executioners.

Suddenly a gun was fired from the "Albatross." The minister of justice fell dead on his face!

"Well aimed, Tom!" said Robur,

His comrades, armed as he was, stood ready to fire when the order was given.

But a change came over the crowd below. They had understood. The

winged monster was not a friendly spirit, it was a hostile spirit. And after the fall of the minghan loud shouts for revenge arose on all sides. Almost immediately a fusillade resounded over the plain.

These menaces did not prevent the "Albatross" from descending boldly to within a hundred and fifty feet of the ground. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, whatever were their feelings towards Robur, could not help joining him in such a work of humanity.

"Let us free the prisoners!" they shouted.

"That is what I am going to do!" said the engineer.

And the magazine rifles of the "Albatross" in the hands of the colleagues, as in the hands of the crew, began to rain down the bullets, of which not one was lost in the masses below. And the little gun shot forth its shrapnel, which really did marvels.

The prisoners, although they did not understand how the help had come to them, broke their bonds, while the soldiers were firing at the aeronef. The stern screw was shot through by a bullet, and a few holes were made in the hull. Frycollin, crouching in his cabin, received a graze from a bullet that came through the deck-house.

"Ah! They will have them!" said Tom Turner. And, rushing to the magazine, he returned with a dozen dynamite cartridges, which he

distributed to the men. At a sign from Robur, these cartridges were fired at the hillock, and as they reached the ground exploded like so many small shells.

The king and his court and army and people were stricken with fear at the turn things had taken. They fled under the trees, while the prisoners ran off without anybody thinking of pursuing them.

In this way was the festival interfered with. And in this way did Uncle Prudent and, Phil Evans recognize the power of the aeronef and the services it could render to humanity.

Soon the "Albatross" rose again to a moderate height, and passing over Whydah lost to view this savage coast which the southwest wind hems round with an inaccessible surf. And she flew out over the Atlantic.