

## Chapter XVI

### OVER THE ATLANTIC

Yes, the Atlantic! The fears of the two colleagues were realized; but it did not seem as though Robur had the least anxiety about venturing over this vast ocean. Both he and his men seemed quite unconcerned about it and had gone back to their stations.

Whither was the "Albatross" bound? Was she going more than round the world as Robur had said? Even if she were, the voyage must end somewhere. That Robur spent his life in the air on board the aeronef and never came to the ground was impossible. How could he make up his stock of provisions and the materials required for working his machines? He must have some retreat, some harbor of refuge--in some unknown and inaccessible spot where the "Albatross" could revictual. That he had broken off all connections with the inhabitants of the land might be true, but with every point on the surface of the earth, certainly not.

That being the case, where was this point? How had the engineer come to choose it? Was he expected by a little colony of which he was the chief? Could he there find a new crew?

What means had he that he should be able to build so costly a vessel

as the "Albatross" and keep her building secret? It is true his living was not expensive. But, finally, who was this Robur? Where did he come from? What had been his history? Here were riddles impossible to solve; and Robur was not the man to assist willingly in their solution.

It is not to be wondered at that these insoluble problems drove the colleagues almost to frenzy. To find themselves whipped off into the unknown without knowing what the end might be doubting even if the adventure would end, sentenced to perpetual aviation, was this not enough to drive the President and secretary of the Weldon Institute to extremities?

Meanwhile the "Albatross" drove along above the Atlantic, and in the morning when the sun rose there was nothing to be seen but the circular line where earth met sky. Not a spot of land was insight in this huge field of vision. Africa had vanished beneath the northern horizon.

When Frycollin ventured out of his cabin and saw all this water beneath him, fear took possession of him.

Of the hundred and forty-five million square miles of which the area of the world's waters consists, the Atlantic claims about a quarter; and it seemed as though the engineer was in no hurry to cross it. There was now no going at full speed, none of the hundred and twenty

miles an hour at which the "Albatross" had flown over Europe. Here, where the southwest winds prevail, the wind was ahead of them, and though it was not very strong, it would not do to defy it and the "Albatross" was sent along at a moderate speed, which, however, easily outstripped that of the fastest mail-boat.

On the 13th of July she crossed the line, and the fact was duly announced to the crew. It was then that Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans ascertained that they were bound for the southern hemisphere. The crossing of the line took place without any of the Neptunian ceremonies that still linger on certain ships. Tapage was the only one to mark the event, and he did so by pouring a pint of water down Frycollin's neck.

On the 18th of July, when beyond the tropic of Capricorn, another phenomenon was noticed, which would have been somewhat alarming to a ship on the sea. A strange succession of luminous waves widened out over the surface of the ocean with a speed estimated at quite sixty miles an hour. The waves ran along at about eight feet from one another, tracing two furrows of light. As night fell a bright reflection rose even to the "Albatross," so that she might have been taken for a flaming aerolite. Never before had Robur sailed on a sea of fire--fire without heat--which there was no need to flee from as it mounted upwards into the sky.

The cause of this light must have been electricity; it could not be

attributed to a bank of fish spawn, nor to a crowd of those animalculae that give phosphorescence to the sea, and this showed that the electrical tension of the atmosphere was considerable.

In the morning an ordinary ship would probably have been lost. But the "Albatross" played with the winds and waves like the powerful bird whose name she bore. If she did not walk on their surface like the petrels, she could like the eagles find calm and sunshine in the higher zones.

They had now passed the forty-seventh parallel. The day was but little over seven hours long, and would become even less as they approached the Pole.

About one o'clock in the afternoon the "Albatross" was floating along in a lower current than usual, about a hundred feet from the level of the sea. The air was calm, but in certain parts of the sky were thick black clouds, massed in mountains, on their upper surface, and ruled off below by a sharp horizontal line. From these clouds a few lengthy protuberances escaped, and their points as they fell seemed to draw up hills of foaming water to meet them.

Suddenly the water shot up in the form of a gigantic hourglass, and the "Albatross" was enveloped in the eddy of an enormous waterspout, while twenty others, black as ink, raged around her. Fortunately the gyratory movement of the water was opposite to that of the suspensory

screws, otherwise the aeronef would have been hurled into the sea. But she began to spin round on herself with frightful rapidity. The danger was immense, and perhaps impossible to escape, for the engineer could not get through the spout which sucked him back in defiance of his propellers. The men, thrown to the ends of the deck by centrifugal force, were grasping the rail to save themselves from being shot off.

"Keep cool!" shouted Robur.

They wanted all their coolness, and their patience, too. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, who had just come out of their cabin, were hurled back at the risk of flying overboard. As she spun the "Albatross" was carried along by the spout, which pirouetted along the waves with a speed enough to make the helices jealous. And if she escaped from the spout she might be caught by another, and jerked to pieces with the shock.

"Get the gun ready!" said Robur.

The order was given to Tom Turner, who was crouching behind the swivel amidships where the effect of the centrifugal force was least felt. He understood. In a moment he had opened the breech and slipped a cartridge from the ammunition-box at hand. The gun went off, and the waterspouts collapsed, and with them vanished the platform of cloud they seemed to bear above them.

"Nothing broken on board?" asked Robur.

"No," answered Tom Turner. "But we don't want to have another game of humming-top like that!"

For ten minutes or so the "Albatross" had been in extreme peril. Had it not been for her extraordinary strength of build she would have been lost.

During this passage of the Atlantic many were the hours whose monotony was unbroken by any phenomenon whatever. The days grew shorter and shorter, and the cold became keen. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans saw little of Robur. Seated in his cabin, the engineer was busy laying out his course and marking it on his maps, taking his observations whenever he could, recording the readings of his barometers, thermometers, and chronometers, and making full entries in his log-book.

The colleagues wrapped themselves well up and eagerly watched for the sight of land to the southward. At Uncle Prudent's request Frycollin tried to pump the cook as to whether the engineer was bound, but what reliance could be placed on the information given by this Gascon?

Sometimes Robur was an ex-minister of the Argentine Republic, sometimes a lord of the Admiralty, sometimes an ex-President of the United States, sometimes a Spanish general temporarily retired,

sometimes a Viceroy of the Indies who had sought a more elevated position in the air. Sometimes he possessed millions, thanks to successful razzias in the aeronef, and he had been proclaimed for piracy. Sometimes he had been ruined by making the aeronef, and had been forced to fly aloft to escape from his creditors. As to knowing if he were going to stop anywhere, no! But if he thought of going to the moon, and found there a convenient anchorage, he would anchor there! "Eh! Fry! My boy! That would just suit you to see what was going on up there."

"I shall not go! I refuse!" said the Negro, who took all these things seriously.

"And why, Fry, why? You might get married to some pretty bouncing Lunarian!"

Frycollin reported this conversation to his master, who saw it was evident that nothing was to be learnt about Robur. And so he thought still more of how he could have his revenge on him.

"Phil," said he one day, "is it quite certain that escape is impossible?"

"Impossible."

"Be it so! But a man is always his own property; and if necessary, by

sacrificing his life--"

"If we are to make that sacrifice," said Phil Evans, "the sooner the better. It is almost time to end this. Where is the "Albatross" going? Here we are flying obliquely over the Atlantic, and if we keep on we shall get to the coast of Patagonia or Tierra del Fuego. And what are we to do then? Get into the Pacific, or go to the continent at the South Pole? Everything is possible with this Robur. We shall be lost in the end. It is thus a case of legitimate self-defence, and if we must perish--"

"Which we shall not do," answered Uncle Prudent, "without being avenged, without annihilating this machine and all she carries."

The colleagues had reached a stage of impotent fury, and were prepared to sacrifice themselves if they could only destroy the inventor and his secret. A few months only would then be the life of this prodigious aeronef, of whose superiority in aerial locomotion they had such convincing proofs! The idea took such hold of them that they thought of nothing else but how to put it into execution. And how? By seizing on some of the explosives on board and simply blowing her up. But could they get at the magazines?

Fortunately for them, Frycollin had no suspicion of their scheme. At the thought of the "Albatross" exploding in midair, he would not have shrunk from betraying his master.



It was on the 23rd of July that the land reappeared in the southwest near Cape Virgins at the entrance of the Straits of Magellan. Under the fifty-second parallel at this time of year the night was eighteen hours long and the temperature was six below freezing.

At first the "Albatross," instead of keeping on to the south, followed the windings of the coast as if to enter the Pacific. After passing Lomas Bay, leaving Mount Gregory to the north and the Brecknocks to the west, they sighted Puerto Arena, a small Chilean village, at the moment the churchbells were in full swing; and a few hours later they were over the old settlement at Port Famine.

If the Patagonians, whose fires could be seen occasionally, were really above the average in stature, the passengers in the aeronef were unable to say, for to them they seemed to be dwarfs. But what a magnificent landscape opened around during these short hours of the southern day! Rugged mountains, peaks eternally capped with snow, with thick forests rising on their flanks, inland seas, bays deep set amid the peninsulas, and islands of the Archipelago. Clarence Island, Dawson Island, and the Land of Desolation, straits and channels, capes and promontories, all in inextricable confusion, and bound by the ice in one solid mass from Cape Forward, the most southerly point of the American continent, to Cape Horn the most southerly point of the New World.

When she reached Fort Famine the "Albatross" resumed her course to the south. Passing between Mount Tam on the Brunswick Peninsula and Mount Graves, she steered for Mount Sarmiento, an enormous peak wrapped in snow, which commands the Straits of Magellan, rising six thousand four hundred feet from the sea. And now they were over the land of the Fuegians, Tierra del Fuego, the land of fire. Six months later, in the height of summer, with days from fifteen to sixteen hours long, how beautiful and fertile would most of this country be, particularly in its northern portion! Then, all around would be seen valleys and pasturages that could form the feeding-grounds of thousands of animals; then would appear virgin forests, gigantic trees--birches, beeches, ash-trees, cypresses, tree-ferns--and broad plains overrun by herds of guanacos, vicunas, and ostriches. Now there were armies of penguins and myriads of birds; and, when the "Albatross" turned on her electric lamps the guillemots, ducks, and geese came crowding on board enough to fill Tapage's larder a hundred times and more.

Here was work for the cook, who knew how to bring out the flavor of the game and keep down its peculiar oiliness. And here was work for Frycollin in plucking dozen after dozen of such interesting feathered friends.

That day, as the sun was setting about three o'clock in the afternoon, there appeared in sight a large lake framed in a border of superb forest. The lake was completely frozen over, and a few natives

with long snowshoes on their feet were swiftly gliding over it.

At the sight of the "Albatross," the Fuegians, overwhelmed with terror--scattered in all directions, and when they could not get away they hid themselves, taking, like the animals, to the holes in the ground.

The "Albatross" still held her southerly course, crossing the Beagle Channel, and Navarin Island and Wollaston Island, on the shores of the Pacific. Then, having accomplished 4,700 miles since she left Dahomey, she passed the last islands of the Magellanic archipelago, whose most southerly outpost, lashed by the everlasting surf, is the terrible Cape Horn.