

## Chapter XVIII

### OVER THE VOLCANO

The sea was as rough as ever, and the symptoms became alarming. The barometer fell several millimeters. The wind came in violent gusts, and then for a moment or so failed altogether. Under such circumstances a sailing vessel would have had to reef in her topsails and her foresail. Everything showed that the wind was rising in the northwest. The storm-glass became much troubled and its movements were most disquieting.

At one o'clock in the morning the wind came on again with extreme violence. Although the aeronave was going right in its teeth she was still making progress at a rate of from twelve to fifteen miles an hour. But that was the utmost she could do.

Evidently preparations must be made for a cyclone, a very rare occurrence in these latitudes. Whether it be called a hurricane, as in the Atlantic, a typhoon, as in Chinese waters a simoom, as in the Sahara, or a tornado, as on the western coast, such a storm is always a gyratory one, and most dangerous for any ship caught in the current which increases from the circumference to the center, and has only one spot of calm, the middle of the vortex.

Robur knew this. He also knew it was best to escape from the cyclone and get beyond its zone of attraction by ascending to the higher strata. Up to then he had always succeeded in doing this, but now he had not an hour, perhaps not a minute, to lose.

In fact the violence of the wind sensibly increased. The crests of the waves were swept off as they rose and blown into white dust on the surface of the sea. It was manifest that the cyclone was advancing with fearful velocity straight towards the regions of the pole.

"Higher!" said Robur.

"Higher it is," said Tom Tumor.

An extreme ascensional power was communicated to the aeronef, and she shot up slantingly as if she was traveling on a plane sloping downwards from the southwest. Suddenly the barometer fell more than a dozen millimeters and the "Albatross" paused in her ascent.

What was the cause of the stoppage? Evidently she was pulled back by the air; some formidable current had diminished the resistance to the screws. When a steamer travels upstream more work is got out of her screw than when the water is running between the blades. The recoil is then considerable, and may perhaps be as great as the current. It was thus with the "Albatross" at this moment.

But Robur was not the man to give in. His seventy-four screws, working perfectly together, were driven at their maximum speed. But the aeronef could not escape; the attraction of the cyclone was irresistible. During the few moments of calm she began to ascend, but the heavy pull soon drew her back, and she sunk like a ship as she founders.

Evidently if the violence of the cyclone went on increasing the "Albatross" would be but as a straw caught in one of those whirlwinds that root up the trees, carry off roofs, and blow down walls.

Robur and Tom could only speak by signs. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans clung to the rail and wondered if the cyclone was not playing their game in destroying the aeronef and with her the inventor--and with the inventor the secret of his invention.

But if the "Albatross" could not get out of the cyclone vertically could she not do something else? Could she not gain the center, where it was comparatively calm, and where they would have more control over her? Quite so, but to do this she would have to break through the circular currents which were sweeping her round with them. Had she sufficient mechanical power to escape through them?

Suddenly the upper part of the cloud fell in. The vapor condensed in torrents of rain. It was two o'clock in the morning. The barometer,

oscillating over a range of twelve millimeters, had now fallen to 27.91, and from this something should be taken on account of the height of the aeronef above the level of the sea.

Strange to say, the cyclone was out of the zone to which such storms are generally restricted, such zone being bounded by the thirtieth parallel of north latitude and the twenty-sixth parallel of south latitude. This may perhaps explain why the eddying storm suddenly turned into a straight one. But what a hurricane! The tempest in Connecticut on the 22nd of March, 1882, could only have been compared to it, and the speed of that was more than three hundred miles an hour.

The "Albatross" had thus to fly before the wind or rather she had to be left to be driven by the current, from which she could neither mount nor escape. But in following this unchanging trajectory she was bearing due south, towards those polar regions which Robur had endeavored to avoid. And now he was no longer master of her course; she would go where the hurricane took her.

Tom Turner was at the helm, and it required all his skill to keep her straight. In the first hours of the morning--if we can so call the vague tint which began to rise over the horizon--the "Albatross" was fifteen degrees below Cape Horn; twelve hundred miles more and she would cross the antarctic circle. Where she was, in this month of July, the night lasted nineteen hours and a half. The sun's disk--without

warmth, without light--only appeared above the horizon to disappear almost immediately. At the pole the night lengthened into one of a hundred and seventy-nine hours. Everything showed that the "Albatross" was about to plunge into an abyss.

During the day an observation, had it been possible, would have given 66° 40' south latitude. The aeronef was within fourteen hundred miles of the pole.

Irresistibly was she drawn towards this inaccessible corner of the globe, her speed eating up, so to speak, her weight, although she weighed less than before, owing to the flattening of the earth at the pole. It seemed as though she could have dispensed altogether with her suspensory screws. And soon the fury of the storm reached such a height that Robur thought it best to reduce the speed of her helices as much as possible, so as to avoid disaster. And only enough speed was given to keep the aeronef under control of the rudder.

Amid these dangers the engineer retained his imperturbable coolness, and the crew obeyed him as if their leader's mind had entered into them. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had not for a moment left the deck; they could remain without being disturbed. The air made but slight resistance. The aeronef was like an aerostat, which drifts with the fluid masses in which it is plunged.

Is the domain of the southern pole a continent or an archipelago? Or

is it a palaeocrystic sea, whose ice melts not even during the long summer? We know not. But what we do know is that the southern pole is colder than the northern one--a phenomenon due to the position of the earth in its orbit during winter in the antarctic regions.

During this day there was nothing to show that the storm was abating. It was by the seventy-fifth meridian to the west that the "Albatross" crossed into the circumpolar region. By what meridian would she come out--if she ever came out?

As she descended more to the south the length of the day diminished. Before long she would be plunged in that continuous night which is illuminated only by the rays of the moon or the pale streamers of the aurora. But the moon was then new, and the companions of Robur might see nothing of the regions whose secret has hitherto defied human curiosity, There was not much inconvenience on board from the cold, for the temperature was not nearly so low as was expected.

It seemed as though the hurricane was a sort of Gulf Stream, carrying a certain amount of heat along with it.

Great was the regret that the whole region was in such profound obscurity. Even if the moon had been in full glory but few observations could have been made. At this season of the year an immense curtain of snow, an icy carapace, covers up the polar surface. There was none of that ice "blink" to be seen, that whitish

tint of which the reflection is absent from dark horizons. Under such circumstances, how could they distinguish the shape of the ground, the extent of the seas, the position of the islands? How could they recognize the hydrographic network of the country or the orographic configuration, and distinguish the hills and mountains from the icebergs and floes?

A little after midnight an aurora illuminated the darkness. With its silver fringes and spangles radiating over space, it seemed like a huge fan open over half the sky. Its farthest electric effluences were lost in the Southern Cross, whose four bright stars were gleaming overhead. The phenomenon was one of incomparable magnificence, and the light showed the face of the country as a confused mass of white.

It need not be said that they had approached so near to the pole that the compass was constantly affected, and gave no precise indication of the course pursued. Its inclination was such that at one time Robur felt certain they were passing over the magnetic pole discovered by Sir James Ross. And an hour later, in calculating the angle the needle made with the vertical, he exclaimed: "the South Pole is beneath us!"

A white cap appeared, but nothing could be seen of what it hid under its ice.

A few minutes afterwards the aurora died away, and the point where all the world's meridians cross is still to be discovered.

If Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans wished to bury in the most mysterious solitudes the aeronef and all she bore, the moment was propitious. If they did not do so it was doubtless because the explosive they required was still denied to them.

The hurricane still raged and swept along with such rapidity that had a mountain been met with the aeronef would have been dashed to pieces like a ship on a lee shore. Not only had the power gone to steer her horizontally, but the control of her elevation had also vanished.

And it was not unlikely that mountains did exist in these antarctic lands. Any instant a shock might happen which would destroy the "Albatross." Such a catastrophe became more probable as the wind shifted more to the east after they passed the prime meridian. Two luminous points then showed themselves ahead of the "Albatross." There were the two volcanos of the Ross Mountains--Erebus and Terror. Was the "Albatross" to be shriveled up in their flames like a gigantic butterfly?

An hour of intense excitement followed. One of the volcanoes, Erebus, seemed to be rushing at the aeronef, which could not move from the bed of the hurricane. The cloud of flame grew as they neared it. A network of fire barred their road. A brilliant light shone round over

all. The figures on board stood out in the bright light as if come from another world. Motionless, without a sound or a gesture, they waited for the terrible moment when the furnace would wrap them in its fires.

But the storm that bore the "Albatross" saved them from such a fearful fate. The flames of Erebus were blown down by the hurricane as it passed, and the "Albatross" flew over unhurt. She swept through a hail of ejected material, which was fortunately kept at bay by the centrifugal action of the suspensory screws. And she harmlessly passed over the crater while it was in full eruption.

An hour afterwards the horizon hid from their view the two colossal torches which light the confines of the world during the long polar night.

At two o'clock in the morning Balleny Island was sighted on the coast of Discovery Land, though it could not be recognized owing to its being bound to the mainland by a cement of ice.

And the "Albatross" emerged from the polar circle on the hundred and seventy-fifth meridian. The hurricane had carried her over the icebergs and icefloes, against which she was in danger of being dashed a hundred times or more. She was not in the hands of the helmsman, but in the hand of God--and God is a good pilot.

The aeronef sped along to the north, and at the sixtieth parallel the storm showed signs of dying away. Its violence sensibly diminished. The "Albatross" began to come under control again. And, what was a great comfort, had again entered the lighted regions of the globe; and the day reappeared about eight o'clock in the morning.

Robur had been carried by the storm into the Pacific over the polar region, accomplishing four thousand three hundred and fifty miles in nineteen hours, or about three miles a minute, a speed almost double that which the "Albatross" was equal to with her propellers under ordinary circumstances. But he did not know where he then was owing to the disturbance of the needle in the neighborhood of the magnetic pole, and he would have to wait till the sun shone out under convenient conditions for observation. Unfortunately, heavy clouds covered the sky all that day and the sun did not appear.

This was a disappointment more keenly felt as both propelling screws had sustained damage during the tempest. Robur, much disconcerted at this accident, could only advance at a moderate speed during this day, and when he passed over the antipodes of Paris was only going about eighteen miles an hour. It was necessary not to aggravate the damage to the screws, for if the propellers were rendered useless the situation of the aeronef above the vast seas of the Pacific would be a very awkward one. And the engineer began to consider if he could not effect his repairs on the spot, so as to make sure of continuing his voyage.

In the morning of the 27th of July, about seven o'clock, land was sighted to the north. It was soon seen to be an island. But which island was it of the thousands that dot the Pacific? However, Robur decided to stop at it without landing. He thought, that he could repair damages during the day and start in the evening.

The wind had died away completely and this was a favorable circumstance for the maneuver he desired to execute. At least, if she did not remain stationary the "Albatross" would be carried he knew not where.

A cable one hundred and fifty feet long with an anchor at the end was dropped overboard. When the aeronef reached the shore of the island the anchor dragged up the first few rocks and then got firmly fixed between two large blocks. The cable then stretched to full length under the influence of the suspensory screws, and the "Albatross" remained motionless, riding like a ship in a roadstead.

It was the first time she had been fastened to the earth since she left Philadelphia.