

Chapter XIX

ANCHORED AT LAST

When the "Albatross" was high in the air the island could be seen to be of moderate size. But on what parallel was it situated? What meridian ran through it? Was it an island in the Pacific, in Australasia, or in the Indian Ocean? When the sun appeared, and Robur had taken his observations, they would know; but although they could not trust to the indications of the compass there was reason to think they were in the Pacific.

At this height--one hundred and fifty feet--the island which measured about fifteen miles round, was like a three-pointed star in the sea.

Off the southwest point was an islet and a range of rocks. On the shore there were no tide-marks, and this tended to confirm Robur in his opinion as to his position for the ebb and flow are almost imperceptible in the Pacific.

At the northwest point there was a conical mountain about two hundred feet high.

No natives were to be seen, but they might be on the opposite coast.

In any case, if they had perceived the aeronef, terror had made them either hide themselves or run away. The "Albatross" had anchored on the southwest point of the island. Not far off, down a little creek, a small river flowed in among the rocks. Beyond were several winding valleys; trees of different kinds; and birds--partridges and bustards--in great numbers. If the island was not inhabited it was habitable. Robur might surely have landed on it; if he had not done so it was probably because the ground was uneven and did not offer a convenient spot to beach the aeronef.

While he was waiting for the sun the engineer began the repairs he reckoned on completing before the day was over. The suspensory screws were undamaged and had worked admirably amid all the violence of the storm, which, as we have said, had considerably lightened their work. At this moment half of them were in action, enough to keep the "Albatross" fixed to the shore by the taut cable. But the two propellers had suffered, and more than Robur had thought. Their blades would have to be adjusted and the gearing seen to by which they received their rotatory movement.

It was the screw at the bow which was first attacked under Robur's superintendence. It was the best to commence with, in case the "Albatross" had to leave before the work was finished. With only this propeller he could easily keep a proper course.

Meanwhile Uncle Prudent and his colleague, after walking about the

deck, had sat down aft. Frycollin was strangely reassured. What a difference! To be suspended only one hundred and fifty feet from the ground!

The work was only interrupted for a moment while the elevation of the sun above the horizon allowed Robur to take an horary angle, so that at the time of its culmination he could calculate his position.

The result of the observation, taken with the greatest exactitude, was as follows:

Longitude, $176^{\circ} 10'$ west.

Latitude, $44^{\circ} 25'$ south.

This point on the map answered to the position of the Chatham Islands, and particularly of Pitt Island, one of the group.

"That is nearer than I supposed," said Robur to Tom Turner.

"How far off are we?"

"Forty-six degrees south of X Island, or two thousand eight hundred miles."

"All the more reason to get our propellers into order," said the mate. "We may have the wind against us this passage, and with the

little stores we have left we ought to get to X as soon as possible."

"Yes, Tom, and I hope to get under way tonight, even if I go with one screw, and put the other to-rights on the voyage."

"Mr. Robur," said Tom "What is to be done with those two gentlemen and their servant?"

"Do you think they would complain if they became colonists of X Island?"

But where was this X? It was an island lost in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean between the Equator and the Tropic of Cancer--an island most appropriately named by Robur in this algebraic fashion. It was in the north of the South Pacific, a long way out of the route of inter-oceanic communication. There it was that Robur had founded his little colony, and there the "Albatross" rested when tired with her flight. There she was provisioned for all her voyages. In X Island, Robur, a man of immense wealth, had established a shipyard in which he built his aeronef. There he could repair it, and even rebuild it. In his warehouses were materials and provisions of all sorts stored for the fifty inhabitants who lived on the island.

When Robur had doubled Cape Horn a few days before his intention had been to regain X Island by crossing the Pacific obliquely. But the cyclone had seized the "Albatross," and the hurricane had carried her

away to the south. In fact, he had been brought back to much the same latitude as before, and if his propellers had not been damaged the delay would have been of no importance.

His object was therefore to get back to X Island, but as the mate had said, the voyage would be a long one, and the winds would probably be against them. The mechanical power of the "Albatross" was, however, quite equal to taking her to her destination, and under ordinary circumstances she would be there in three or four days.

Hence Robur's resolve to anchor on the Chatham Islands. There was every opportunity for repairing at least the fore-screw. He had no fear that if the wind were to rise he would be driven to the south instead of to the north. When night came the repairs would be finished, and he would have to maneuver so as to weigh anchor. If it were too firmly fixed in the rocks he could cut the cable and resume his flight towards the equator.

The crew of the "Albatross," knowing there was no time to lose, set to work vigorously.

While they were busy in the bow of the aeronef, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans held a little conversation together which had exceptionally important consequences.

"Phil Evans," said Uncle Prudent, "you have resolved, as I have, to

sacrifice your life?"

"Yes, like you."

"It is evident that we can expect nothing from Robur."

"Nothing."

"Well, Phil Evans, I have made up my mind. If the "Albatross" leaves this place tonight, the night will not pass without our having accomplished our task. We will smash the wings of this bird of Robur's! This night I will blow it into the air!"

"The sooner the better," said Phil Evans.

It will be seen that the two colleagues were agreed on all points even in accepting with indifference the frightful death in store for them. "Have you all you want?" asked Evans.

"Yes. Last night, while Robur and his people had enough to do to look after the safety of the ship, I slipped into the magazine and got hold of a dynamite cartridge."

"Let us set to work, Uncle Prudent."

"No. Wait till tonight. When the night comes we will go into our

cabin, and you shall see something that will surprise you."

At six o'clock the colleagues dined together as usual. Two hours afterwards they retired to their cabin like men who wished to make up for a sleepless night.

Neither Robur nor any of his companions had a suspicion of the catastrophe that threatened the "Albatross."

This was Uncle Prudent's plan. As he had said, he had stolen into the magazine, and there had possessed himself of some powder and cartridge like those used by Robur in Dahomey. Returning to his cabin, he had carefully concealed the cartridge with which he had resolved to blow up the "Albatross" in mid-air.

Phil Evans, screened by his companion, was now examining the infernal machine, which was a metallic canister containing about two pounds of dynamite, enough to shatter the aeronef to atoms. If the explosion did not destroy her at once, it would do so in her fall. Nothing was easier than to place this cartridge in a corner of the cabin, so that it would blow in the deck and tear away the framework of the hull.

But to obtain the explosion it was necessary to adjust the fulminating cap with which the cartridge was fitted. This was the most delicate part of the operation, for the explosion would have to be carefully timed, so as not to occur too soon or too late.

Uncle Prudent had carefully thought over the matter. His conclusions were as follows. As soon as the fore propeller was repaired the aeronef would resume her course to the north, and that done Robur and his crew would probably come aft to put the other screw into order. The presence of these people about the cabin might interfere with his plans, and so he had resolved to make a slow match do duty as a time-fuse.

"When I got the cartridge," said he to Phil Evans, "I took some gunpowder as well. With the powder I will make a fuse that will take some time to burn, and which will lead into the fulminate. My idea is to light it about midnight, so that the explosion will take place about three or four o'clock in the morning."

"Well planned!" said Phil Evans.

The colleagues, as we see, had arrived at such a stage as to look with the greatest nonchalance on the awful destruction in which they were about to perish. Their hatred against Robur and his people had so increased that they would sacrifice their own lives to destroy the "Albatross" and all she bore. The act was that of madmen, it was horrible; but at such a pitch had they arrived after five weeks of anger that could not vent itself, of rage that could not be gratified.

"And Frycollin?" asked Phil Evans, "have we the right to dispose of

his life?"

"We shall sacrifice ours as well!" said Uncle Prudent. But it is doubtful if Frycollin would have thought the reason sufficient.

Immediately Uncle Prudent set to work, while Evans kept watch in the neighborhood of the cabin. The crew were all at work forward. There was no fear of being surprised. Uncle Prudent began by rubbing a small quantity of the powder very fine; and then, having slightly moistened it, he wrapped it up in a piece of rag in the shape of a match. When it was lighted he calculated it would burn about an inch in five minutes, or a yard in three hours. The match was tried and found to answer, and was then wound round with string and attached to the cap of the cartridge. Uncle Prudent had all finished about ten o'clock in the evening without having excited the least suspicion.

During the day the work on the fore screw had been actively carried on, but it had had to be taken on board to adjust the twisted blades. Of the piles and accumulators and the machinery that drove the ship nothing was damaged.

When night fell Robur and his men knocked off work. The fore propeller not been got into place, and to finish it would take another three hours. After some conversation with Tom Turner it was decided to give the crew a rest, and postpone what required to be done to the next morning.

The final adjustment was a matter of extreme nicety, and the electric lamps did not give so suitable a light for such work as the daylight.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were not aware of this. They had understood that the screw would be in place during the night, and that the "Albatross" would be on her way to the north.

The night was dark and moonless. Heavy clouds made the darkness deeper. A light breeze began to rise. A few puffs came from the southwest, but they had no effect on the "Albatross." She remained motionless at her anchor, and the cable stretched vertically downward to the ground.

Uncle Prudent and his colleague, imagining they were under way again, sat shut up in their cabin, exchanging but a few words, and listening to the f-r-r-r-r of the suspensory screws, which drowned every other sound on board. They were waiting till the time of action arrived.

A little before midnight Uncle Prudent said, "It is time!" Under the berths in the cabin was a sliding box, forming a small locker, and in this locker Uncle Prudent put the dynamite and the slow-match. In this way the match would burn without betraying itself by its smoke or spluttering. Uncle Prudent lighted the end and pushed back the box under the berth with "Now let us go aft, and wait."

They then went out, and were astonished not to find the steersman at his post.

Phil Evans leant out over the rail.

"The "Albatross" is where she was," said he in a low voice. "The work is not finished. They have not started!"

Uncle Prudent made a gesture of disappointment. "We shall have to put out the match," said he.

"No," said Phil Evans, "we must escape!"

"Escape?"

"Yes! down the cable! Fifty yards is nothing!"

"Nothing, of course, Phil Evans, and we should be fools not to take the chance now it has come."

But first they went back to the cabin and took away all they could carry, with a view to a more or less prolonged stay on the Chatham Islands. Then they shut the door and noiselessly crept forward, intending to wake Frycollin and take him with them.

The darkness was intense. The clouds were racing up from the

southwest, and the aeronef was tugging at her anchor and thus throwing the cable more and more out of the vertical. There would be no difficulty in slipping down it.

The colleagues made their way along the deck, stopping in the shadow of the deckhouses to listen if there was any sound. The silence was unbroken. No light shone from the portholes. The aeronef was not only silent; she was asleep.

Uncle Prudent was close to Frycollin's cabin when Phil Evans stopped him. "The look-out!" he said.

A man was crouching near the deck-house. He was only half asleep. All flight would be impossible if he were to give the alarm. Close by were a few ropes, and pieces of rag and waste used in the work at the screw.

An instant afterwards the man was gagged and blindfolded and lashed to the rail unable to utter a sound or move an inch. This was done almost without a whisper.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans listened. All was silent within the cabins. Every one on board was asleep. They reached Frycollin's cabin. Tapage was snoring away in a style worthy of his name, and that promised well.

To his great surprise, Uncle Prudent had not even to push Frycollin's door. It was open. He stepped into the doorway and looked around. "Nobody here!" he said.

"Nobody! Where can he be?" asked Phil Evans.

They went into the bow, thinking Frycollin might perhaps be asleep in the corner. Still they found nobody.

"Has the fellow got the start of us?" asked Uncle Prudent.

"Whether he has or not," said Phil Evans, "we can't wait any longer. Down you go."

Without hesitation the fugitives one after the other clambered over the side and, seizing the cable with hands and feet slipped down it safe and sound to the ground.

Think of their joy at again treading the earth they had lost for so long--at walking on solid ground and being no longer the playthings of the atmosphere!

They were staring up the creek to the interior of the island when suddenly a form rose in front of them. It was Frycollin. The Negro had had the same idea as his master and the audacity to start without telling him. But there was no time for recriminations, and Uncle

Prudent was in search of a refuge in some distant part of the island when Phil Evans stopped him.

"Uncle Prudent," said he. "Here we are safe from Robur. He is doomed like his companions to a terrible death. He deserves it, we know. But if he would swear on his honor not to take us prisoners again--"

"The honor of such a man--"

Uncle Prudent did not finish his sentence.

There was a noise on the "Albatross." Evidently, the alarm had been given. The escape was discovered.

"Help! Help!" shouted somebody. It was the look-out man, who had got rid of his gag. Hurried footsteps were heard on deck. Almost immediately the electric lamps shot beams over a large circle.

"There they are! There they are!" shouted Tom Turner. The fugitives were seen.

At the same instant an order was given by Robur, and the suspensory screws being slowed, the cable was hauled in on board, and the "Albatross" sank towards the ground.

At this moment the voice of Phil Evans was heard shouting, "Engineer

Robur, will you give us your word of honor to leave us free on this island?"

"Never!" said Robur. And the reply was followed by the report of a gun, and the bullet grazed Phil's shoulder.

"Ah! The brutes!" said Uncle Prudent. Knife in hand, he rushed towards the rocks where the anchor had fixed itself. The aeronef was not more than fifty feet from the ground.

In a few seconds the cable was cut, and the breeze, which had increased considerably, striking the "Albatross" on the quarter, carried her out over the sea.