

Chapter XX

THE WRECK OF THE ALBATROSS

It was then twenty minutes after midnight. Five or six shots had been fired from the aeronef. Uncle Prudent and Frycollin, supporting Phil Evans, had taken shelter among the rocks. They had not been hit. For the moment there was nothing to fear.

As the "Albatross" drifted off from Pitt Island she rose obliquely to nearly three thousand feet. It was necessary to increase the ascensional power to prevent her falling into the sea.

When the look-out man had got clear of his gag and shouted, Robur and Tom Turner had rushed up to him and torn off his bandage. The mate had then run back to the stern cabin. It was empty! Tapage had searched Frycollin's cabin, and that also was empty.

When he saw that the prisoners had escaped, Robur was seized with a paroxysm of anger. The escape meant the revelation of his secret to the world. He had not been much concerned at the document thrown overboard while they were crossing Europe, for there were so many chances that it would be lost in its fall; but now!

As he grew calm, "They have escaped," said he. "Be it so! But they

cannot get away from Pitt Island, and in a day or so I will go back!
I will recapture them! And then--"

In fact, the safety of the three fugitives was by no means assured. The "Albatross" would be repaired, and return well in hand. Before the day was out they might again be in the power of the engineer.

Before the day was out! But in two hours the "Albatross" would be annihilated! The dynamite cartridge was like a torpedo fastened to her hull, and would accomplish her destruction in mid-air. The breeze freshened, and the aeronef was carried to the northeast. Although her speed was but moderate, she would be out of sight of the Chatham Islands before sunrise. To return against the wind she must have her propellers going, particularly the one in the bow.

"Tom," said the engineer, "turn the lights full on."

"Yes, Sir."

"And all hands to work."

"Yes, Sir."

There was no longer any idea of putting off the work till tomorrow. There was now no thought of fatigue. Not one of the men of the "Albatross" failed to share in the feelings of his chief. Not one but

was ready to do anything to recapture the fugitives!

As soon as the screw was in place they would return to the island and drop another anchor, and give chase to the fugitives. Then only would they begin repairing the stern-screw; and then the aeronef could resume her voyage across the Pacific to X Island.

It was important, above all things, that the "Albatross" should not be carried too far to the northeast, but unfortunately the breeze grew stronger, and she could not head against it, or even remain stationary. Deprived of her propellers she was an unguidable balloon. The fugitives on the shore knew that she would have disappeared before the explosion blew her to pieces.

Robur felt much disappointment at seeing his plans so interfered with. Would it not take him much longer than he thought to get back to his old anchorage?

While the work at the screw was actively pushed on, he resolved to descend to the surface of the sea, in the hope that the wind would there be lighter. Perhaps the "Albatross" would be able to remain in the neighborhood until she was again fit to work to windward.

The maneuver was instantly executed. If a passing ship had sighted the aerial machine as she sunk through the air, with her electric lights in full blaze, with what terror would she have been seized!

When the "Albatross" was a few hundred feet from the waves she stopped. Unfortunately Robur found that the breeze was stronger here than above, and the aeronef drifted off more rapidly. He risked being blown a long way off to the northeast, and that would delay his return to Pitt Island. In short, after several experiments, he found it better to keep his ship well up in the air, and the "Albatross" went aloft to about ten thousand feet. There, if she did not remain stationary, the drifting was very slight. The engineer could thus hope that by sunrise at such an altitude he would still be in sight of the island.

Robur did not trouble himself about the reception the fugitives might have received from the natives--if there were any natives. That they might help them mattered little to him. With the powers of offense possessed by the "Albatross" they would be promptly terrified and dispersed. The capture of the prisoners was certain, and once he had them again, "They will not escape from X Island!"

About one o'clock in the morning the fore-screw was finished, and all that had to be done was to get it back to its place. This would take about an hour. That done, the "Albatross" would be headed southwest and the stern-screw could be taken in hand.

And how about the match that was burning in the deserted cabin? The match of which more than a third was now consumed? And the spark that

was creeping along to the dynamite?

Assuredly if the men of the aeronef had not been so busy one of them would have heard the feeble sputtering that was going on in the deck-house. Perhaps he would have smelt the burning powder! He would doubtless have become uneasy! And told Tom Turner! And then they would have looked about, and found the box and the infernal machine; and then there would have been time to save this wonderful "Albatross" and all she bore!

But the men were at work in the bow, twenty yards away from the cabin. Nothing brought them to that part of the deck; nothing called off their attention from their work. Robur was there working with his hands, excellent mechanic as he was. He hurried on the work, but nothing was neglected, everything was carefully done. Was it not necessary that he should again become absolute master of his invention? If he did not recapture the fugitives they would get away home. They would begin inquiring into matters. They might even discover X Island, and there would be an end to this life, which the men of the "Albatross" had created for themselves, a life that seemed superhuman and sublime.

Tom Turner came up to the engineer. It was a quarter past one. "It seems to me, sir, that the breeze is falling, and going round to the west."

"What does the barometer say?" asked Robur, after looking up at the sky.

"It is almost stationary, and the clouds seem gathering below us."

"So they are, and it may be raining down at the sea; but if we keep above the rain it makes no difference to us. It will not interfere with the work."

"If it is raining it is not a heavy rain," said Tom. "The clouds do not look like it, and probably the wind has dropped altogether."

"Perhaps so, but I think we had better not go down yet. Let us get into going order as soon as we can, and then we can do as we like."

At a few minutes after two the first part of the work was finished. The fore-screw was in its place, and the power was turned on. The speed was gradually increased, and the "Albatross," heading to the southwest, returned at moderate speed towards the Chatham Islands.

"Tom," said Robur, "it is about two hours and a half since we got adrift. The wind has not changed all the time. I think we ought to be over the island in an hour."

"Yes, sir. We are going about forty feet a second. We ought to be there about half-past three."

"All the better. It would suit us best to get back while it is dark, and even beach the "Albatross" if we can. Those fellows will fancy we are a long way off to the northward, and never think of keeping a look-out. If we have to stop a day or two on the island--"

"We'll stop, and if we have to fight an army of natives?"

"We'll fight," said Robur. "We'll fight then for our "Albatross.""

The engineer went forward to the men, who were waiting for orders.

"My lads," he said to them, "we cannot knock off yet. We must work till day comes."

They were all ready to do so. The stern-screw had now to be treated as the other had been. The damage was the same, a twisting from the violence of the hurricane during the passage across the southern pole.

But to get the screw on board it seemed best to stop the progress of the aeronef for a few minutes, and even to drive her backwards. The engines were reversed. The aeronef began to fall astern, when Tom Turner was surprised by a peculiar odor.

This was from the gas given off by the match, which had accumulated in the box, and was now escaping from the cabin. "Hallo!" said the mate, with a sniff.

"What is the matter?" asked Robur.

"Don't you smell something? Isn't it burning powder?"

"So it is, Tom."

"And it comes from that cabin."

"Yes, the very cabin--"

"Have those scoundrels set it on fire?"

"Suppose it is something else!" exclaimed Robur. "Force the door, Tom; drive in the door!"

But the mate had not made one step towards it when a fearful explosion shook the "Albatross." The cabins flew into splinters. The lamps went out. The electric current suddenly failed. The darkness was complete. Most of the suspensory screws were twisted or broken, but a few in the bow still revolved.

At the same instant the hull of the aeronef opened just behind the first deck-house, where the engines for the fore-screw were placed; and the after-part of the deck collapsed in space.

Immediately the last suspensory screw stopped spinning, and the "Albatross" dropped into the abyss.

It was a fall of ten thousand feet for the eight men who were clinging to the wreck; and the fall was even faster than it might have been, for the fore propeller was vertical in the air and still working!

It was then that Robur, with extraordinary coolness, climbed up to the broken deck-house, and seizing the lever reversed the rotation, so that the propeller became a suspender. The fall continued, but it was checked, and the wreck did not fall with the accelerating swiftness of bodies influenced solely by gravitation; and if it was death to the survivors of the "Albatross" from their being hurled into the sea, it was not death by asphyxia amid air which the rapidity of descent rendered unbreathable.

Eighty seconds after the explosion, all that remained of the "Albatross" plunged into the waves!