

## Chapter XXI

### THE INSTITUTE AGAIN

Some weeks before, on the 13th of June, on the morning after the sitting during which the Weldon Institute had been given over to such stormy discussions, the excitement of all classes of the Philadelphia population, black or white, had been much easier to imagine than to describe.

From a very early hour conversation was entirely occupied with the unexpected and scandalous incident of the night before. A stranger calling himself an engineer, and answering to the name of Robur, a person of unknown origin, of anonymous nationality, had unexpectedly presented himself in the club-room, insulted the balloonists, made fun of the aeronauts, boasted of the marvels of machines heavier than air, and raised a frightful tumult by the remarks with which he greeted the menaces of his adversaries. After leaving the desk, amid a volley of revolver shots, he had disappeared, and in spite of every endeavor, no trace could be found of him.

Assuredly here was enough to exercise every tongue and excite every imagination. But by how much was this excitement increased when in the evening of the 13th of June it was found that neither the president nor secretary of the Weldon Institute had returned to their

homes! Was it by chance only that they were absent? No, or at least there was nothing to lead people to think so. It had even been agreed that in the morning they would be back at the club, one as president, the other as secretary, to take their places during a discussion on the events of the preceding evening.

And not only was there the complete disappearance of these two considerable personages in the state of Pennsylvania, but there was no news of the valet Frycollin. He was as undiscoverable as his master. Never had a Negro since Toussaint L'Ouverture, Soulouque, or Dessaline had so much talked about him.

The next day there was no news. Neither the colleagues nor Frycollin had been found. The anxiety became serious. Agitation commenced. A numerous crowd besieged the post and telegraph offices in case any news should be received. There was no news.

And they had been seen coming out of the Weldon Institute loudly talking together, and with Frycollin in attendance, go down Walnut Street towards Fairmount Park! Jem Chip, the vegetarian, had even shaken hands with the president and left him with "Tomorrow!"

And William T. Forbes, the manufacturer of sugar from rags, had received a cordial shake from Phil Evans who had said to him twice, "Au revoir! Au revoir!"

Miss Doll and Miss Mat Forbes, so attached to Uncle Prudent by the bonds of purest friendship, could not get over the disappearance, and in order to obtain news of the absent, talked even more than they were accustomed to.

Three, four, five, six days passed. Then a week, then two weeks, and there was nothing to give a clue to the missing three. The most minute search had been made in every quarter. Nothing! In the park, even under the trees and brushwood. Nothing! Always nothing! Although here it was noticed that the grass looked to be pressed down in a way that seemed suspicious and certainly was inexplicable; and at the edge of the clearing there were traces of a recent struggle. Perhaps a band of scoundrels had attacked the colleagues here in the deserted park in the middle of the night!

It was possible. The police proceeded with their inquiries in all due form and with all lawful slowness. They dragged the Schuylkill river, and cut into the thick bushes that fringe its banks; and if this was useless it was not quite a waste, for the Schuylkill is in great want of a good weeding, and it got it on this occasion.

Practical people are the authorities of Philadelphia!

Then the newspapers were tried. Advertisements and notices and articles were sent to all the journals in the Union without distinction of color. The "Daily Negro," the special organ of the black race, published a portrait of Frycollin after his latest

photograph. Rewards were offered to whoever would give news of the three absentees, and even to those who would find some clue to put the police on the track. "Five thousand dollars! Five thousand dollars to any citizen who would--"

Nothing was done. The five thousand dollars remained with the treasurer of the Weldon Institute.

Undiscoverable! Undiscoverable! Undiscoverable! Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, of Philadelphia!

It need hardly be said that the club was put to serious inconvenience by this disappearance of its president and secretary. And at first the assembly voted urgency to a measure which suspended the work on the "Go-Ahead." How, in the absence of the principal promoters of the affair, of those who had devoted to the enterprise a certain part of their fortune in time and money--how could they finish the work when these were not present? It were better, then, to wait.

And just then came the first news of the strange phenomenon which had exercised people's minds some weeks before. The mysterious object had been again seen at different times in the higher regions of the atmosphere. But nobody dreamt of establishing a connection between this singular reappearance and the no less singular disappearance of the members of the Weldon Institute. In fact, it would have required a very strong dose of imagination to connect one of these facts with

the other.

Whatever it might be, asteroid or aerolite or aerial monster, it had reappeared in such a way that its dimensions and shape could be much better appreciated, first in Canada, over the country between Ottawa and Quebec, on the very morning after the disappearance of the colleagues, and later over the plains of the Far West, where it had tried its speed against an express train on the Union Pacific.

At the end of this day the doubts of the learned world were at an end. The body was not a product of nature, it was a flying machine, the practical application of the theory of "heavier than air." And if the inventor of the aëroplane had wished to keep himself unknown he could evidently have done better than to try it over the Far West. As to the mechanical force he required, or the engines by which it was communicated, nothing was known, but there could be no doubt the aëroplane was gifted with an extraordinary faculty of locomotion. In fact, a few days afterwards it was reported from the Celestial Empire, then from the southern part of India, then from the Russian steppes.

Who was then this bold mechanic that possessed such powers of locomotion, for whom States had no frontiers and oceans no limits, who disposed of the terrestrial atmosphere as if it were his domain? Could it be this Robur whose theories had been so brutally thrown in the face of the Weldon Institute the day he led the attack against

the utopia of guidable balloons? Perhaps such a notion occurred to some of the wide-awake people, but none dreamt that the said Robur had anything to do with the disappearance of the president and secretary of the Institute.

Things remained in this state of mystery when a telegram arrived from France through the New York cable at 11-37 A.M. on July 13. And what was this telegram? It was the text of the document found at Paris in a snuff-box revealing what had happened to the two personages for whom the Union was in mourning.

So, then, the perpetrator of this kidnapping "was" Robur the engineer, come expressly to Philadelphia to destroy in its egg the theory of the balloonists. He it was who commanded the "Albatross!" He it was who carried off by way of reprisal Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans and Frycollin; and they might be considered lost for ever. At least until some means were found of constructing an engine capable of contending with this powerful machine their terrestrial friends would never bring them back to earth.

What excitement! What stupor! The telegram from Paris had been addressed to the members of the Weldon Institute. The members of the club were immediately informed of it. Ten minutes later all Philadelphia received the news through its telephones, and in less than an hour all America heard of it through the innumerable electric wires of the new continent.

No one would believe it! "It is an unseasonable joke," said some. "It is all smoke," said others. How could such a thing be done in Philadelphia, and so secretly, too? How could the "Albatross" have been beached in Fairmount Park without its appearance having been signaled all over Pennsylvania?

Very good. These were the arguments. The incredulous had the right of doubting. But the right did not last long. Seven days after the receipt of the telegram the French mail-boat "Normandie" came into the Hudson, bringing the famous snuff-box. The railway took it in all haste from New York to Philadelphia.

It was indeed the snuff-box of the President of the Weldon Institute. Jem Chip would have done on at day to take some more substantial nourishment, for he fell into a swoon when he recognized it. How many a time had he taken from it the pinch of friendship! And Miss Doll and Miss Mat also recognized it, and so did William T. Forbes, Truck Milnor, Bat T. Fynn, and many other members. And not only was it the president's snuff-box, it was the president's writing!

Then did the people lament and stretch out their hands in despair to the skies. Uncle Prudent and his colleague carried away in a flying machine, and no one able to deliver them!

The Niagara Falls Company, in which Uncle Prudent was the largest

shareholder, thought of suspending its business and turning off its cataracts. The Wheelton Watch Company thought of winding up its machinery, now it had lost its manager.

Nothing more was heard of the aeronef. July passed, and there was no news. August ran its course, and the uncertainty on the subject of Robur's prisoners was as great as ever. Had he, like Icarus, fallen a victim to his own temerity?

The first twenty-seven days of September went by without result, but on the 28th a rumor spread through Philadelphia that Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had during the afternoon quietly walked into the president's house. And, what was more extraordinary, the rumor was true, although very few believed it.

They had, however, to give in to the evidence. There could be no doubt these were the two men, and not their shadows. And Frycollin also had come back! The members of the club, then their friends, then the crowd, swarmed into the president's house, and shook hands with the president and secretary, and cheered them again and again. Jem Chip was there, having left his luncheon's joint of boiled lettuces, and William T. Forbes and his daughters, and all the members of the club. It is a mystery how Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans emerged alive from the thousands who welcomed them.

On that evening was the weekly meeting of the Institute. It was

expected that the colleagues would take their places at the desk. As they had said nothing of their adventures, it was thought they would then speak, and relate the impressions of their voyage. But for some reason or other both were silent. And so also was Frycollin, whom his congeners in their delirium had failed to dismember.

But though the colleagues did not tell what had happened to them, that is no reason why we should not. We know what occurred on the night of the 27th and 28th of July; the daring escape to the earth, the scramble among the rocks, the bullet fired at Phil Evans, the cut cable, and the "Albatross" deprived of her propellers, drifting off to the northeast at a great altitude. Her electric lamps rendered her visible for some time. And then she disappeared.

The fugitives had little to fear. Now could Robur get back to the island for three or four hours if his screws were out of gear? By that time the "Albatross" would have been destroyed by the explosion, and be no more than a wreck floating on the sea; those whom she bore would be mangled corpses, which the ocean would not even give up again. The act of vengeance would be accomplished.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans looked upon it as an act of legitimate self-defence, and felt no remorse whatever. Evans was but slightly wounded by the rifle bullet, and the three made their way up from the shore in the hope of meeting some of the natives. The hope was realized. About fifty natives were living by fishing off the western

coast. They had seen the aeronef descend on the island, and they welcomed the fugitives as if they were supernatural beings. They worshipped them, we ought rather to say. They accommodated them in the most comfortable of their huts.

As they had expected, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans saw nothing more of the aeronef. They concluded that the catastrophe had taken place in some high region of the atmosphere, and that they would hear no more of Robur and his prodigious machine.

Meanwhile they had to wait for an opportunity of returning to America. The Chatham Islands are not much visited by navigators, and all August passed without sign of a ship. The fugitives began to ask themselves if they had not exchanged one prison for another.

At last a ship came to water at the Chatham Islands. It will not have been forgotten that when Uncle Prudent was seized he had on him several thousand paper dollars, much more than would take him back to America. After thanking their adorers, who were not sparing of their most respectful demonstrations, Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans, and Frycollin embarked for Auckland. They said nothing of their adventures, and in two weeks landed in New Zealand.

At Auckland, a mail-boat took them on board as passengers, and after a splendid passage the survivors of the "Albatross" stepped ashore at San Francisco. They said nothing as to who they were or whence they

had come, but as they had paid full price for their berths no American captain would trouble them further. At San Francisco they took the first train out on the Pacific Railway, and on the 27th of September, they arrived at Philadelphia, That is the compendious history of what had occurred since the escape of the fugitives. And that is why this very evening the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute took their seats amid a most extraordinary attendance.

Never before had either of them been so calm. To look at them it did not seem as though anything abnormal had happened since the memorable sitting of the 12th of June. Three months and a half had gone, and seemed to be counted as nothing. After the first round of cheers, which both received without showing the slightest emotion, Uncle Prudent took off his hat and spoke.

"Worthy citizens," said he, "the meeting is now open."

Tremendous applause. And properly so, for if it was not extraordinary that the meeting was open, it was extraordinary that it should be opened by Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans.

The president allowed the enthusiasm to subside in shouts and clappings; then he continued: "At our last meeting, gentlemen, the discussion was somewhat animated--(hear, hear)--between the partisans of the screw before and those of the screw behind for our

balloon the "Go-Ahead." (Marks of surprise.) We have found a way to bring the beforists and the behindists in agreement. That way is as follows: we are going to use two screws, one at each end of the car." Silence, and complete stupefaction.

That was all.

Yes, all! Of the kidnapping of the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute not a word! Not a word of the "Albatross" nor of Robur! Not a word of the voyage! Not a word of the way in which the prisoners had escaped! Not a word of what had become of the aeronef, if it still flew through space, or if they were to be prepared for new reprisals on the member's of the club!

Of course the balloonists were longing to ask Uncle Prudent and the secretary about all these things, but they looked so close and so serious that they thought it best to respect their attitude. When they thought fit to speak they would do so, and it would be an honor to hear. After all, there might be in all this some secret which would not yet be divulged.

And then Uncle Prudent, resuming his speech amid a silence up to then unknown in the meetings of the Weldon Institute, said, "Gentlemen, it now only remains for us to finish the aerostat 'Go-Ahead.' It is left to her to effect the conquest of the air! The meeting is at an end!"