

Chapter XXII

THE GO-AHEAD IS LAUNCHED

On the following 19th of April, seven months after the unexpected return of Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, Philadelphia was in a state of unwonted excitement. There were neither elections nor meetings this time. The aerostat "Go-Ahead," built by the Weldon Institute, was to take possession of her natural element.

The celebrated Harry W. Tinder, whose name we mentioned at the beginning of this story, had been engaged as aeronaut. He had no assistant, and the only passengers were to be the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute.

Did they not merit such an honor? Did it not come to them appropriately to rise in person to protest against any apparatus that was heavier than air?

During the seven months, however, they had said nothing of their adventures; and even Frycollin had not uttered a whisper of Robur and his wonderful clipper. Probably Uncle Prudent and his friend desired that no question should arise as to the merits of the aeronef, or any other flying machine.

Although the "Go-Ahead" might not claim the first place among aerial locomotives, they would have nothing to say about the inventions of other aviators. They believed, and would always believe, that the true atmospheric vehicle was the aerostat, and that to it alone belonged the future.

Besides, he on whom they had been so terribly--and in their idea so justly--avenged, existed no longer. None of those who accompanied him had survived. The secret of the "Albatross" was buried in the depths of the Pacific!

That Robur had a retreat, an island in the middle of that vast ocean, where he could put into port, was only a hypothesis; and the colleagues reserved to themselves the right of making inquiries on the subject later on. The grand experiment which the Weldon Institute had been preparing for so long was at last to take place. The "Go-Ahead" was the most perfect type of what had up to then been invented in aerostatic art--she was what an "Inflexible" or a "Formidable" is in ships of war.

She possessed all the qualities of a good aerostat. Her dimensions allowed of her rising to the greatest height a balloon could attain; her impermeability enabled her to remain for an indefinite time in the atmosphere; her solidity would defy any dilation of gas or violence of wind or rain; her capacity gave her sufficient ascensional force to lift with all their accessories an electric

engine that would communicate to her propellers a power superior to anything yet obtained. The "Go-Ahead" was of elongated form, so as to facilitate her horizontal displacement. Her car was a platform somewhat like that of the balloon used by Krebs and Renard; and it carried all the necessary outfit, instruments, cables, grapnels, guide-ropes, etc., and the piles and accumulators for the mechanical power. The car had a screw in front, and a screw and rudder behind. But probably the work done by the machines would be very much less than that done by the machines of the "Albatross."

The "Go-Ahead" had been taken to the clearing in Fairmount Park, to the very spot where the aeronef had landed for a few hours.

Her ascensional power was due to the very lightest of gaseous bodies. Ordinary lighting gas possesses an elevating force of about 700 grams for every cubic meter. But hydrogen possesses an ascensional force estimated at 1,100 grams per cubic meter. Pure hydrogen prepared according to the method of the celebrated Henry Gifford filled the enormous balloon. And as the capacity of the "Go-Ahead" was 40,000 cubic meters, the ascensional power of the gas she contained was 40,000 multiplied by 1,100 or 44,000 kilograms.

On this 29th of April everything was ready. Since eleven o'clock the enormous aerostat had been floating a few feet from the ground ready to rise in mid-air. It was splendid weather and seemed to have been made specially for the experiment, although if the breeze had been

stronger the results might have been more conclusive. There had never been any doubt that a balloon could be guided in a calm atmosphere; but to guide it when the atmosphere is in motion is quite another thing; and it is under such circumstances that the experiment should be tried.

But there was no wind today, nor any sign of any. Strange to say, North America on that day omitted to send on to Europe one of those first-class storms which it seems to have in such inexhaustible numbers. A better day could not have been chosen for an aeronautic experiment.

The crowd was immense in Fairmount Park; trains had poured into the Pennsylvania capital sightseers from the neighboring states; industrial and commercial life came to a standstill that the people might troop to the show-master, workmen, women, old men, children, members of Congress, soldiers, magistrates, reporters, white natives and black natives, all were there. We need not stop to describe the excitement, the unaccountable movements, the sudden pushings, which made the mass heave and swell. Nor need we recount the number of cheers which rose from all sides like fireworks when Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans appeared on the platform and hoisted the American colors. Need we say that the majority of the crowd had come from afar not so much to see the "Go-Ahead" as to gaze on these extraordinary men?

Why two and not three? Why not Frycollin? Because Frycollin thought his campaign in the "Albatross" sufficient for his fame. He had declined the honor of accompanying his master, and he took no part in the frenzied declamations that greeted the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute.

Of the members of the illustrious assembly not one was absent from the reserved places within the ropes. There were Truck Milnor, Bat T. Fynn, and William T. Forbes with his two daughters on his arm. All had come to affirm by their presence that nothing could separate them from the partisans of "lighter than air."

About twenty minutes past eleven a gun announced the end of the final preparations. The "Go-Ahead" only waited the signal to start. At twenty-five minutes past eleven the second gun was fired.

The "Go-Ahead" was about one hundred and fifty feet above the clearing, and was held by a rope. In this way the platform commanded the excited crowd. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans stood upright and placed their left hands on their hearts, to signify how deeply they were touched by their reception. Then they extended their right hands towards the zenith, to signify that the greatest of known balloons was about to take possession of the supra-terrestrial domain.

A hundred thousand hands were placed in answer on a hundred thousand hearts, and a hundred thousand other hands were lifted to the sky.

The third gun was fired at half-past eleven. "Let go!" shouted Uncle Prudent; and the "Go-Ahead" rose "majestically"--an adverb consecrated by custom to all aerostatic ascents.

It really was a superb spectacle. It seemed as if a vessel were just launched from the stocks. And was she not a vessel launched into the aerial sea? The "Go-Ahead" went up in a perfectly vertical line--a proof of the calmness of the atmosphere--and stopped at an altitude of eight hundred feet.

Then she began her horizontal maneuvering. With her screws going she moved to the east at a speed of twelve yards a second. That is the speed of the whale--not an inappropriate comparison, for the balloon was somewhat of the shape of the giant of the northern seas.

A salvo of cheers mounted towards the skillful aeronauts. Then under the influence of her rudder, the "Go-Ahead" went through all the evolutions that her steersman could give her. She turned in a small circle; she moved forwards and backwards in a way to convince the most refractory disbeliever in the guiding of balloons. And if there had been any disbeliever there he would have been simply annihilated.

But why was there no wind to assist at this magnificent experiment? It was regrettable. Doubtless the spectators would have seen the "Go-Ahead" unhesitatingly execute all the movements of a

sailing-vessel in beating to windward, or of a steamer driving in the wind's eye.

At this moment the aerostat rose a few hundred yards. The maneuver was understood below. Uncle Prudent and his companions were going in search of a breeze in the higher zones, so as to complete the experiment. The system of cellular balloons--analogous to the swimming bladder in fishes--into which could be introduced a certain amount of air by pumping, had provided for this vertical motion. Without throwing out ballast or losing gas the aeronaut was able to rise or sink at his will. Of course there was a valve in the upper hemisphere which would permit of a rapid descent if found necessary. All these contrivances are well known, but they were here fitted in perfection.

The "Go-Ahead" then rose vertically. Her enormous dimensions gradually grew smaller to the eye, and the necks of the crowd were almost cricked as they gazed into the air. Gradually the whale became a porpoise, and the porpoise became a gudgeon. The ascensional movement did not cease until the "Go-Ahead" had reached a height of fourteen thousand feet. But the air was so free from mist that she remained clearly visible.

However, she remained over the clearing as if she were a fixture. An immense bell had imprisoned the atmosphere and deprived it of movement; not a breath of wind was there, high or low. The aerostat

maneuvered without encountering any resistance, seeming very small owing to the distance, much as if she were being looked at through the wrong end of a telescope.

Suddenly there was a shout among the crowd, a shout followed by a hundred thousand more. All hands were stretched towards a point on the horizon. That point was the northwest. There in the deep azure appeared a moving body, which was approaching and growing larger. Was it a bird beating with its wings the higher zones of space? Was it an aerolite shooting obliquely through the atmosphere? In any case, its speed was terrific, and it would soon be above the crowd. A suspicion communicated itself electrically to the brains of all on the clearing.

But it seemed as though the "Go-Ahead" had sighted this strange object. Assuredly it seemed as though she feared some danger, for her speed was increased, and she was going east as fast as she could.

Yes, the crowd saw what it meant! A name uttered by one of the members of the Weldon Institute was repeated by a hundred thousand mouths:

"The "Albatross!" The "Albatross!""