

Chapter 16

ROBUR, THE CONQUEROR

Robur, the Conqueror! This then was the likeness I had vaguely recalled. Some years before the portrait of this extraordinary man had been printed in all the American newspapers, under date of the thirteenth of June, the day after this personage had made his sensational appearance at the meeting of the Weldon Institute at Philadelphia.

I had noted the striking character of the portrait at the time; the square shoulders; the back like a regular trapezoid, its longer side formed by that geometrical shoulder line; the robust neck; the enormous spheroidal head. The eyes at the least emotion, burned with fire, while above them were the heavy, permanently contracted brows, which signified such energy. The hair was short and crisp, with a glitter as of metal in its lights. The huge breast rose and fell like a blacksmith's forge; and the thighs, the arms and hands, were worthy of the mighty body. The narrow beard was the same also, with the smooth shaven cheeks which showed the powerful muscles of the jaw.

And this was Robur the Conqueror, who now stood before me, who revealed himself to me, hurling forth his name like a threat, within

his own impenetrable fortress!

Let me recall briefly the facts which had previously drawn upon Robur the Conqueror the attention of the entire world. The Weldon Institute was a club devoted to aeronautics under the presidency of one of the chief personages of Philadelphia, commonly called Uncle Prudent. Its secretary was Mr. Phillip Evans. The members of the Institute were devoted to the theory of the "lighter than air" machine; and under their two leaders were constructing an enormous dirigible balloon, the "Go-Ahead."

At a meeting in which they were discussing the details of the construction of their balloon, this unknown Robur had suddenly appeared and, ridiculing all their plans, had insisted that the only true solution of flight lay with the heavier than air machines, and that he had proven this by constructing one.

He was in this turn doubted and ridiculed by the members of the club, who called him in mockery Robur the Conqueror. In the tumult that followed, revolver shots were fired; and the intruder disappeared.

That same night he had by force abducted the president and the secretary of the club, and had taken them, much against their will upon a voyage in the wonderful air-ship, the "Albatross," which he had constructed. He meant thus to prove to them beyond argument the correctness of his assertions. This ship, a hundred feet long, was

upheld in the air by a large number of horizontal screws and was driven forward by vertical screws at its bow and stern. It was managed by a crew of at least half a dozen men, who seemed absolutely devoted to their leader, Robur.

After a voyage almost completely around the world, Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans managed to escape from the "Albatross" after a desperate struggle. They even managed to cause an explosion on the airship, destroying it, and involving the inventor and all his crew in a terrific fall from the sky into the Pacific ocean.

Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans then returned to Philadelphia. They had learned that the "Albatross" had been constructed on an unknown isle of the Pacific called Island X; but since the location of this hiding-place was wholly unknown, its discovery lay scarcely within the bounds of possibility. Moreover, the search seemed entirely unnecessary, as the vengeful prisoners were quite certain that they had destroyed their jailers.

Hence the two millionaires, restored to their homes, went calmly on with the construction of their own machine, the "Go-Ahead." They hoped by means of it to soar once more into the regions they had traversed with Robur, and to prove to themselves that their lighter than air machine was at least the equal of the heavy "Albatross." If they had not persisted, they would not have been true Americans.

On the twentieth of April in the following year the "Go-Ahead" was finished and the ascent was made, from Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. I myself was there with thousands of other spectators. We saw the huge balloon rise gracefully; and, thanks to its powerful screws, it maneuvered in every direction with surprising ease. Suddenly a cry was heard, a cry repeated from a thousand throats. Another airship had appeared in the distant skies and it now approached with marvelous rapidity. It was another "Albatross," perhaps even superior to the first. Robur and his men had escaped death in the Pacific; and, burning for revenge, they had constructed a second airship in their secret Island X.

Like a gigantic bird of prey, the "Albatross" hurled itself upon the "Go-Ahead." Doubtless, Robur, while avenging himself wished also to prove the immeasurable superiority of the heavier than air machines.

Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans defended themselves as best they could. Knowing that their balloon had nothing like the horizontal speed of the "Albatross," they attempted to take advantage of their superior lightness and rise above her. The "Go-Ahead," throwing out all her ballast, soared to a height of over twenty thousand feet. Yet even there the "Albatross" rose above her, and circled round her with ease.

Suddenly an explosion was heard. The enormous gas-bag of the "Go-Ahead," expanding under the dilation of its contents at this great height, had finally burst.

Half-emptied, the balloon fell rapidly.

Then to our universal astonishment, the "Albatross" shot down after her rival, not to finish the work of destruction but to bring rescue. Yes! Robur, forgetting his vengeance, rejoined the sinking "Go-Ahead," and his men lifted Mr. Prudent, Mr. Evans, and the aeronaut who accompanied them, onto the platform of his craft. Then the balloon, being at length entirely empty, fell to its destruction among the trees of Fairmount Park.

The public was overwhelmed with astonishment, with fear! Now that Robur had recaptured his prisoners, how would he avenge himself? Would they be carried away, this time, forever?

The "Albatross" continued to descend, as if to land in the clearing at Fairmount Park. But if it came within reach, would not the infuriated crowd throw themselves upon the airship, tearing both it and its inventor to pieces?

The "Albatross" descended within six feet of the ground. I remember well the general movement forward with which the crowd threatened to attack it. Then Robur's voice rang out in words which even now I can repeat almost as he said them:

"Citizens of the United States, the president and the secretary of

the Weldon Institute are again in my power. In holding them prisoners I would but be exercising my natural right of reprisal for the injuries they have done me. But the passion and resentment which have been roused both in them and you by the success of the 'Albatross,' show that the souls of men are not yet ready for the vast increase of power which the conquest of the air will bring to them. Uncle Prudent, Phillip Evans, you are free."

The three men rescued from the balloon leaped to the ground. The airship rose some thirty feet out of reach, and Robur recommenced:

"Citizens of the United States, the conquest of the air is made; but it shall not be given into your hands until the proper time. I leave, and I carry my secret with me. It will not be lost to humanity, but shall be entrusted to them when they have learned not to abuse it. Farewell, Citizens of the United States!"

Then the "Albatross" rose under the impulse of its mighty screws, and sped away amidst the hurrahs of the multitude.

I have ventured to remind my readers of this last scene somewhat in detail, because it seemed to reveal the state of mind of the remarkable personage who now stood before me. Apparently he had not then been animated by sentiments hostile to humanity. He was content to await the future; though his attitude undeniably revealed the immeasurable confidence which he had in his own genius, the immense

pride which his almost superhuman powers had aroused within him.

It was not astonishing, moreover, that this haughtiness had little by little been aggravated to such a degree that he now presumed to enslave the entire world, as his public letter had suggested by its significant threats. His vehement mind had with time been roused to such over-excitement that he might easily be driven into the most violent excesses.

As to what had happened in the years since the last departure of the "Albatross," I could only partly reconstruct this even with my present knowledge. It had not sufficed the prodigious inventor to create a flying machine, perfect as that was! He had planned to construct a machine which could conquer all the elements at once. Probably in the workshops of Island X, a selected body of devoted workmen had constructed, one by one, the pieces of this marvelous machine, with its quadruple transformation. Then the second "Albatross" must have carried these pieces to the Great Eyrie, where they had been put together, within easier access of the world of men than the far-off island had permitted. The "Albatross" itself had apparently been destroyed, whether by accident or design, within the eyrie. The "Terror" had then made its appearance on the roads of the United States and in the neighboring waters. And I have told under what conditions, after having been vainly pursued across Lake Erie, this remarkable masterpiece had risen through the air carrying me a prisoner on board.