

Chapter 17

IN THE NAME OF THE LAW

What was to be the issue of this remarkable adventure? Could I bring it to any denouement whatever, either sooner or later? Did not Robur hold the results wholly in his own hands? Probably I would never have such an opportunity for escape as had occurred to Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans amid the islands of the Pacific. I could only wait. And how long might the waiting last!

To be sure, my curiosity had been partly satisfied. But even now I knew only the answer to the problems of the Great Eyrie. Having at length penetrated its circle, I comprehended all the phenomena observed by the people of the Blueridge Mountains. I was assured that neither the country-folk throughout the region, nor the townfolk of Pleasant Garden and Morganton were in danger of volcanic eruptions or earthquakes. No subterranean forces whatever were battling within the bowels of the mountains. No crater had arisen in this corner of the Alleghanies. The Great Eyrie served merely as the retreat of Robur the Conqueror. This impenetrable hiding-place where he stored his materials and provisions, had without doubt been discovered by him during one of his aerial voyages in the "Albatross." It was a retreat probably even more secure than that as yet undiscovered Island X in

the Pacific.

This much I knew of him; but of this marvelous machine of his, of the secrets of its construction and propelling force, what did I really know? Admitting that this multiple mechanism was driven by electricity, and that this electricity was, as we knew it had been in the "Albatross," extracted directly from the surrounding air by some new process, what were the details of its mechanism? I had not been permitted to see the engine; doubtless I should never see it.

On the question of my liberty I argued thus: Robur evidently intends to remain unknown. As to what he intends to do with his machine, I fear, recalling his letter, that the world must expect from it more of evil than of good. At any rate, the incognito which he has so carefully guarded in the past he must mean to preserve in the future. Now only one man can establish the identity of the Master of the World with Robur the Conqueror. This man is I his prisoner, I who have the right to arrest him, I, who ought to put my hand on his shoulder, saying, "In the Name of the Law--"

On the other hand, could I hope for a rescue from without? Evidently not. The police authorities must know everything that had happened at Black Rock Creek. Mr. Ward, advised of all the incidents, would have reasoned on the matter as follows: when the "Terror" quitted the creek dragging me at the end of her hawser, I had either been drowned or, since my body had not been recovered, I had been taken on board

the "Terror," and was in the hands of its commander.

In the first case, there was nothing more to do than to write "deceased" after the name of John Strock, chief inspector of the federal police in Washington.

In the second case, could my confreres hope ever to see me again? The two destroyers which had pursued the "Terror" into the Niagara River had stopped, perforce, when the current threatened to drag them over the falls. At that moment, night was closing in, and what could be thought on board the destroyers but that the "Terror" had been engulfed in the abyss of the cataract? It was scarce possible that our machine had been seen when, amid the shades of night, it rose above the Horseshoe Falls, or when it winged its way high above the mountains on its route to the Great Eyrie.

With regard to my own fate, should I resolve to question Robur? Would he consent even to appear to hear me? Was he not content with having hurled at me his name? Would not that name seem to him to answer everything?

That day wore away without bringing the least change to the situation. Robur and his men continued actively at work upon the machine, which apparently needed considerable repair. I concluded that they meant to start forth again very shortly, and to take me with them. It would, however, have been quite possible to leave me at

the bottom of the Eyrie. There would have been no way by which I could have escaped, and there were provisions at hand sufficient to keep me alive for many days.

What I studied particularly during this period was the mental state of Robur. He seemed to me under the dominance of a continuous excitement. What was it that his ever-seething brain now meditated? What projects was he forming for the future? Toward what region would he now turn? Would he put in execution the menaces expressed in his letter--the menaces of a madman!

The night of that first day, I slept on a couch of dry grass in one of the grottoes of the Great Eyrie. Food was set for me in this grotto each succeeding day. On the second and third of August, the three men continued at their work scarcely once, however, exchanging any words, even in the midst of their labors. When the engines were all repaired to Robur's satisfaction, the men began putting stores aboard their craft, as if expecting a long absence. Perhaps the "Terror" was about to traverse immense distances; perhaps even, the captain intended to regain his Island X, in the midst of the Pacific.

Sometimes I saw him wander about the Eyrie buried in thought, or he would stop and raise his arm toward heaven as if in defiance of that God with Whom he assumed to divide the empire of the world. Was not his overweening pride leading him toward insanity? An insanity which his two companions, hardly less excited than he, could do nothing to

subdue! Had he not come to regard himself as mightier than the elements which he had so audaciously defied even when he possessed only an airship, the "Albatross?" And now, how much more powerful had he become, when earth, air and water combined to offer him an infinite field where none might follow him!

Hence I had much to fear from the future, even the most dread catastrophes. It was impossible for me to escape from the Great Eyrie, before being dragged into a new voyage. After that, how could I possibly get away while the "Terror" sped through the air or the ocean? My only chance must be when she crossed the land, and did so at some moderate speed. Surely a distant and feeble hope to cling to!

It will be recalled that after our arrival at the Great Eyrie, I had attempted to obtain some response from Robur, as to his purpose with me; but I had failed. On this last day I made another attempt.

In the afternoon I walked up and down before the large grotto where my captors were at work. Robur, standing at the entrance, followed me steadily with his eyes. Did he mean to address me?

I went up to him. "Captain," said I, "I have already asked you a question, which you have not answered. I ask it again: What do you intend to do with me?"

We stood face to face scarce two steps apart. With arms folded, he

glared at me, and I was terrified by his glance. Terrified, that is the word! The glance was not that of a sane man. Indeed, it seemed to reflect nothing whatever of humanity within.

I repeated my question in a more challenging tone. For an instant I thought that Robur would break his silence and burst forth.

"What do you intend to do with me? Will you set me free?"

Evidently my captor's mind was obsessed by some other thought, from which I had only distracted him for a moment. He made again that gesture which I had already observed; he raised one defiant arm toward the zenith. It seemed to me as if some irresistible force drew him toward those upper zones of the sky, that he belonged no more to the earth, that he was destined to live in space; a perpetual dweller in the clouds.

Without answering me, without seeming to have understood me, Robur reentered the grotto.

How long this sojourn or rather relaxation of the "Terror" in the Great Eyrie was to last, I did not know. I saw, however, on the afternoon of this third of August that the repairs and the embarkation of stores were completed. The hold and lockers of our craft must have been completely crowded with the provisions taken from the grottoes of the Eyrie.

Then the chief of the two assistants, a man whom I now recognized as that John Turner who had been mate of the "Albatross," began another labor. With the help of his companion, he dragged to the center of the hollow all that remained of their materials, empty cases, fragments of carpentry, peculiar pieces of wood which clearly must have belonged to the "Albatross," which had been sacrificed to this new and mightier engine of locomotion. Beneath this mass there lay a great quantity of dried grasses. The thought came to me that Robur was preparing to leave this retreat forever!

In fact, he could not be ignorant that the attention of the public was now keenly fixed upon the Great Eyrie; and that some further attempt was likely to be made to penetrate it. Must he not fear that some day or other the effort would be successful, and that men would end by invading his hiding-place? Did he not wish that they should find there no single evidence of his occupation?

The sun disappeared behind the crests of the Blueridge. His rays now lighted only the very summit of Black Dome towering in the northwest. Probably the "Terror" awaited only the night in order to begin her flight. The world did not yet know that the automobile and boat could also transform itself into a flying machine. Until now, it had never been seen in the air. And would not this fourth transformation be carefully concealed, until the day when the Master of the World chose to put into execution his insensate menaces?

Toward nine o'clock profound obscurity enwrapped the hollow. Not a star looked down on us. Heavy clouds driven by a keen eastern wind covered the entire sky. The passage of the "Terror" would be invisible, not only in our immediate neighborhood, but probably across all the American territory and even the adjoining seas.

At this moment Turner, approaching the huge stack in the middle of the eyrie, set fire to the grass beneath.

The whole mass flared up at once. From the midst of a dense smoke, the roaring flames rose to a height which towered above the walls of the Great Eyrie. Once more the good folk of Morganton and Pleasant Garden would believe that the crater had reopened. These flames would announce to them another volcanic upheaval.

I watched the conflagration. I heard the roarings and cracklings which filled the air. From the deck of the "Terror," Robur watched it also.

Turner and his companion pushed back into the fire the fragments which the violence of the flames cast forth. Little by little the huge bonfire grew less. The flames sank down into a mere mass of burnt-out ashes; and once more all was silence and blackest night.

Suddenly I felt myself seized by the arm. Turner drew me toward the

"Terror." Resistance would have been useless. And moreover what could be worse than to be abandoned without resources in this prison whose walls I could not climb!

As soon as I set foot on the deck, Turner also embarked. His companion went forward to the look-out; Turner climbed down into the engine-room, lighted by electric bulbs, from which not a gleam escaped outside.

Robur himself was at the helm, the regulator within reach of his hand, so that he could control both our speed and our direction. As to me, I was forced to descend into my cabin, and the hatchway was fastened above me. During that night, as on that of our departure from Niagara, I was not allowed to watch the movements of the "Terror."

Nevertheless, if I could see nothing of what was passing on board, I could hear the noises of the machinery. I had first the feeling that our craft, its bow slightly raised, lost contact with the earth. Some swerves and balancings in the air followed. Then the turbines underneath spun with prodigious rapidity, while the great wings beat with steady regularity.

Thus the "Terror," probably forever, had left the Great Eyrie, and launched into the air as a ship launches into the waters. Our captain soared above the double chain of the Alleghanies, and without doubt

he would remain in the upper zones of the air until he had left all the mountain region behind.

But in what direction would he turn? Would he pass in flight across the plains of North Carolina, seeking the Atlantic Ocean? Or would he head to the west to reach the Pacific? Perhaps he would seek, to the south, the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. When day came how should I recognize which sea we were upon, if the horizon of water and sky encircled us on every side?

Several hours passed; and how long they seemed to me! I made no effort to find forgetfulness in sleep. Wild and incoherent thoughts assailed me. I felt myself swept over worlds of imagination, as I was swept through space, by an aerial monster. At the speed which the "Terror" possessed, whither might I not be carried during this interminable night? I recalled the unbelievable voyage of the "Albatross," of which the Weldon Institute had published an account, as described by Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans. What Robur, the Conqueror, had done with his first airship, he could do even more readily with this quadruple machine.

At length the first rays of daylight brightened my cabin. Would I be permitted to go out now, to take my place upon the deck, as I had done upon Lake Erie?

I pushed upon the hatchway: it opened. I came half way out upon the

deck.

All about was sky and sea. We floated in the air above an ocean, at a height which I judged to be about a thousand or twelve hundred feet. I could not see Robur, so he was probably in the engine room. Turner was at the helm, his companion on the look-out.

Now that I was upon the deck, I saw what I had not been able to see during our former nocturnal voyage, the action of those powerful wings which beat upon either side at the same time that the screws spun beneath the flanks of the machine.

By the position of the sun, as it slowly mounted from the horizon, I realized that we were advancing toward the south. Hence if this direction had not been changed during the night this was the Gulf of Mexico which lay beneath us.

A hot day was announced by the heavy livid clouds which clung to the horizon. These warnings of a coming storm did not escape the eye of Robur when toward eight o'clock he came on deck and took Turner's place at the helm. Perhaps the cloud-bank recalled to him the waterspout in which the "Albatross" had so nearly been destroyed, or the mighty cyclone from which he had escaped only as if by a miracle above the Antarctic Sea.

It is true that the forces of Nature which had been too strong for

the "Albatross," might easily be evaded by this lighter and more versatile machine. It could abandon the sky where the elements were in battle and descend to the surface of the sea; and if the waves beat against it there too heavily, it could always find calm in the tranquil depths.

Doubtless, however, there were some signs by which Robur, who must be experienced in judging, decided that the storm would not burst until the next day.

He continued his flight; and in the afternoon, when we settled down upon the surface of the sea, there was not a sign of bad weather. The "Terror" is a sea bird, an albatross or frigate-bird, which can rest at will upon the waves! Only we have this advantage, that fatigue has never any hold upon this metal organism, driven by the inexhaustible electricity!

The whole vast ocean around us was empty. Not a sail nor a trail of smoke was visible even on the limits of the horizon. Hence our passage through the clouds had not been seen and signaled ahead.

The afternoon was not marked by any incident. The "Terror" advanced at easy speed. What her captain intended to do, I could not guess. If he continued in this direction, we should reach some one of the West Indies, or beyond that, at the end of the Gulf, the shore of Venezuela or Colombia. But when night came, perhaps we would again

rise in the air to clear the mountainous barrier of Guatemala and Nicaragua, and take flight toward Island X, somewhere in the unknown regions of the Pacific.

Evening came. The sun sank in an horizon red as blood. The sea glistened around the "Terror," which seemed to raise a shower of sparks in its passage. There was a storm at hand. Evidently our captain thought so. Instead of being allowed to remain on deck, I was compelled to re-enter my cabin, and the hatchway was closed above me.

In a few moments from the noises that followed, I knew that the machine was about to be submerged. In fact, five minutes later, we were moving peacefully forward through the ocean's depths.

Thoroughly worn out, less by fatigue than by excitement and anxious thought, I fell into a profound sleep, natural this time and not provoked by any soporific drug. When I awoke, after a length of time which I could not reckon, the "Terror" had not yet returned to the surface of the sea.

This maneuver was executed a little later. The daylight pierced my porthole; and at the same moment I felt the pitching and tossing to which we were subjected by a heavy sea.

I was allowed to take my place once more outside the hatchway; where my first thought was for the weather. A storm was approaching from

the northwest. Vivid lightning darted amid the dense, black clouds. Already we could hear the rumbling of thunder echoing continuously through space. I was surprised--more than surprised, frightened!--by the rapidity with which the storm rushed upward toward the zenith. Scarcely would a ship have had time to furl her sails to escape the shock of the blast, before it was upon her! The advance was as swift as it was terrible.

Suddenly the wind was unchained with unheard of violence, as if it had suddenly burst from this prison of cloud. In an instant a frightful sea uprose. The breaking waves, foaming along all their crests, swept with their full weight over the "Terror." If I had not been wedged solidly against the rail, I should have been swept overboard!

There was but one thing to do--to change our machine again into a submarine. It would find security and calm at a few dozen feet beneath the surface. To continue to brave the fury of this outrageous sea was impossible.

Robur himself was on deck, and I awaited the order to return to my cabin--an order which was not given. There was not even any preparation for the plunge. With an eye more burning than ever, impassive before this frightful storm, the captain looked it full in the face, as if to defy it, knowing that he had nothing to fear.

It was imperative that the terror should plunge below without losing a moment. Yet Robur seemed to have no thought of doing so. No! He preserved his haughty attitude as of a man who in his immeasurable pride, believed himself above or beyond humanity.

Seeing him thus I asked myself with almost superstitious awe, if he were not indeed a demoniac being, escaped from some supernatural world.

A cry leaped from his mouth, and was heard amid the shrieks of the tempest and the howlings of the thunder. "I, Robur! Robur!--The master of the world!"

He made a gesture which Turner and his companions understood. It was a command; and without any hesitation these unhappy men, insane as their master, obeyed it.

The great wings shot out, and the airship rose as it had risen above the falls of Niagara. But if on that day it had escaped the might of the cataract, this time it was amidst the might of the hurricane that we attempted our insensate flight.

The air-ship soared upward into the heart of the sky, amid a thousand lightning flashes, surrounded and shaken by the bursts of thunder. It steered amid the blinding, darting lights, courting destruction at every instant.

Robur's position and attitude did not change. With one hand on the helm, the other on the speed regulators while the great wings beat furiously, he headed his machine toward the very center of the storm, where the electric flashes were leaping from cloud to cloud.

I must throw myself upon this madman to prevent him from driving his machine into the very middle of this aerial furnace! I must compel him to descend, to seek beneath the waters, a safety which was no longer possible either upon the surface of the sea or in the sky! Beneath, we could wait until this frightful outburst of the elements was at an end!

Then amid this wild excitement my own passion, all my instincts of duty, arose within me! Yes, this was madness! Yet must I not arrest this criminal whom my country had outlawed, who threatened the entire world with his terrible invention? Must I not put my hand on his shoulder and summon him to surrender to justice! Was I or was I not Strock, chief inspector of the federal police? Forgetting where I was, one against three, uplifted in mid-sky above a howling ocean, I leaped toward the stern, and in a voice which rose above the tempest, I cried as I hurled myself upon Robur:

"In the name of the law, I--"

Suddenly the "Terror" trembled as if from a violent shock. All her

frame quivered, as the human frame quivers under the electric fluid. Struck by the lightning in the very middle of her powerful batteries, the air-ship spread out on all sides and went to pieces.

With her wings fallen, her screws broken, with bolt after bolt of the lightning darting amid her ruins, the "Terror" fell from the height of more than a thousand feet into the ocean beneath.