

## Chapter 18

### THE OLD HOUSEKEEPER'S LAST COMMENT

When I came to myself after having been unconscious for many hours, a group of sailors whose care had restored me to life surrounded the door of a cabin in which I lay. By my pillow sat an officer who questioned me; and as my senses slowly returned, I answered to his questioning.

I told them everything. Yes, everything! And assuredly my listeners must have thought that they had upon their hands an unfortunate whose reason had not returned with his consciousness.

I was on board the steamer Ottawa, in the Gulf of Mexico, headed for the port of New Orleans. This ship, while flying before the same terrific thunder-storm which destroyed the "Terror," had encountered some wreckage, among whose fragments was entangled my helpless body. Thus I found myself back among humankind once more, while Robur the Conqueror and his two companions had ended their adventurous careers in the waters of the Gulf. The Master of the World had disappeared forever, struck down by those thunder-bolts which he had dared to brave in the regions of their fullest power. He carried with him the secret of his extraordinary machine.

Five days later the Ottawa sighted the shores of Louisiana; and on the morning of the tenth of August she reached her port. After taking a warm leave of my rescuers, I set out at once by train for Washington, which more than once I had despaired of ever seeing again.

I went first of all to the bureau of police, meaning to make my earliest appearance before Mr. Ward.

What was the surprise, the stupefaction, and also the joy of my chief, when the door of his cabinet opened before me! Had he not every reason to believe, from the report of my companions, that I had perished in the waters of Lake Erie?

I informed him of all my experiences since I had disappeared, the pursuit of the destroyers on the lake, the soaring of the "Terror" from amid Niagara Falls, the halt within the crater of the Great Eyrie, and the catastrophe, during the storm, above the Gulf of Mexico.

He learned for the first time that the machine created by the genius of this Robur, could traverse space, as it did the earth and the sea.

In truth, did not the possession of so complete and marvelous a machine justify the name of Master of the World, which Robur had taken to himself? Certain it is that the comfort and even the lives of the public must have been forever in danger from him; and that all

methods of defence must have been feeble and ineffective.

But the pride which I had seen rising bit by bit within the heart of this prodigious man had driven him to give equal battle to the most terrible of all the elements. It was a miracle that I had escaped safe and sound from that frightful catastrophe.

Mr. Ward could scarcely believe my story. "Well, my dear Strock," said he at last, "you have come back; and that is the main thing. Next to this notorious Robur, you will be the man of the hour. I hope that your head will not be turned with vanity, like that of this crazy inventor!"

"No, Mr. Ward," I responded, "but you will agree with me that never was inquisitive man put to greater straits to satisfy his curiosity."

"I agree, Strock; and the mysteries of the Great Eyrie, the transformations of the "Terror," you have discovered them! But unfortunately, the still greater secrets of this Master of the World have perished with him."

The same evening the newspapers published an account of my adventures, the truthfulness of which could not be doubted. Then, as Mr. Ward had prophesied, I was the man of the hour.

One of the papers said, "Thanks to Inspector Strock the American

police still lead the world. While others have accomplished their work, with more or less success, by land and by sea, the American police hurl themselves in pursuit of criminals through the depths of lakes and oceans and even through the sky."

Yet, in following, as I have told, in pursuit of the "Terror," had I done anything more than by the close of the present century will have become the regular duty of my successors?

It is easy to imagine what a welcome my old housekeeper gave me when I entered my house in Long Street. When my apparition--does not the word seem just--stood before her, I feared for a moment she would drop dead, poor woman! Then, after hearing my story, with eyes streaming with tears, she thanked Providence for having saved me from so many perils.

"Now, sir," said she, "now--was I wrong?"

"Wrong? About what?"

"In saying that the Great Eyrie was the home of the devil?"

"Nonsense; this Robur was not the devil!"

"Ah, well!" replied the old woman, "he was worthy of being so!"

