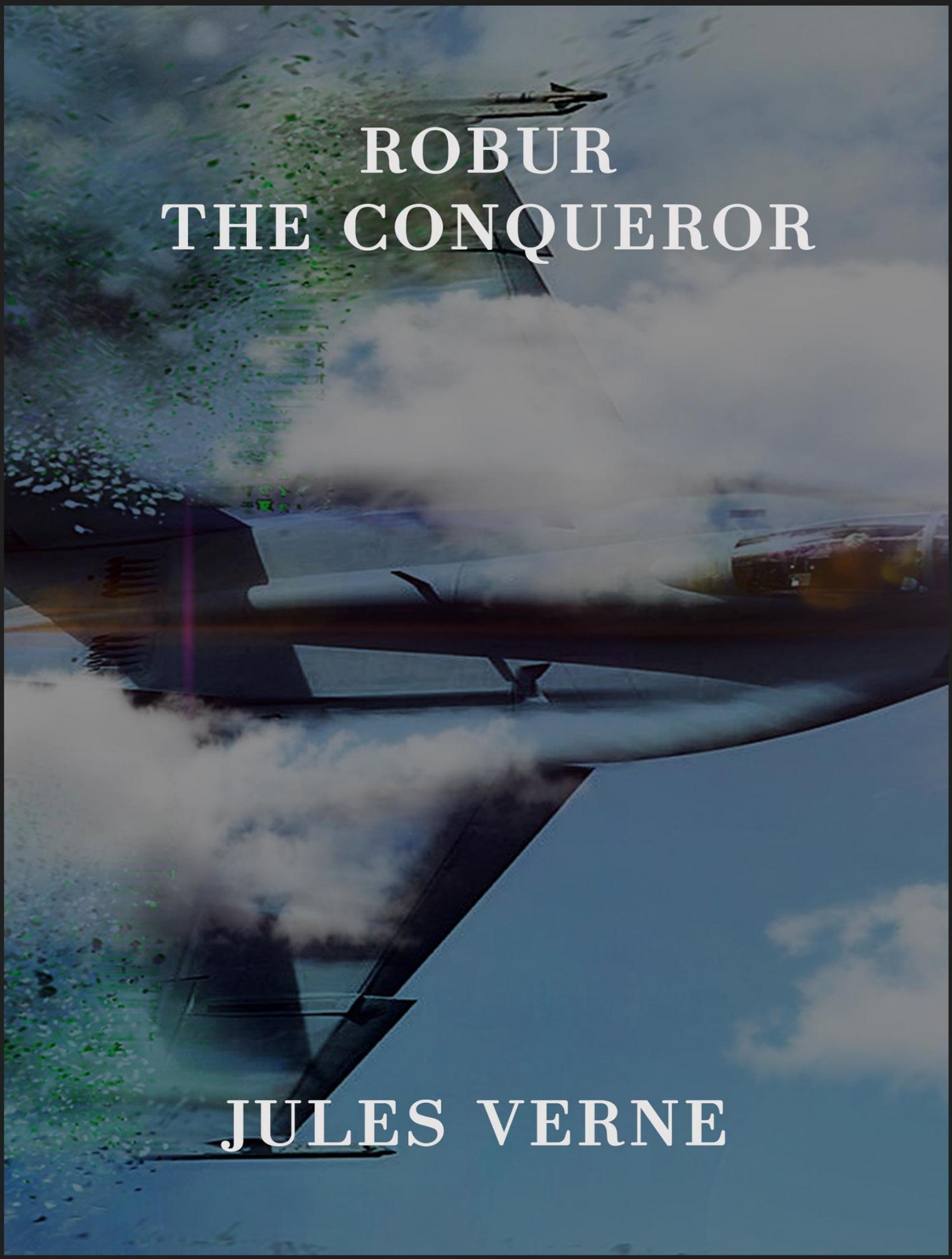

ROBUR THE CONQUEROR

JULES VERNE

Robur the Conqueror

Pages de titre
Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII
Chapter XIX
Chapter XX
Chapter XXI
Chapter XXII

Chapter XXIII
—End of Voyage Extraordinaire—Robur the Conqueror—
Copyright

ROBUR THE CONQUEROR

By

Jules Verne

Chapter I

MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS

BANG! Bang!

The pistol shots were almost simultaneous. A cow peacefully grazing fifty yards away received one of the bullets in her back. She had nothing to do with the quarrel all the same.

Neither of the adversaries was hit.

Who were these two gentlemen? We do not know, although this would be an excellent opportunity to hand down their names to posterity. All we can say is that the elder was an Englishman and the younger an American, and both of them were old enough to know better.

So far as recording in what locality the inoffensive ruminant had just tasted her last tuft of herbage, nothing can be easier. It was on the left bank of Niagara, not far from the suspension bridge which joins the American to the Canadian bank three miles from the falls.

The Englishman stepped up to the American.

"I contend, nevertheless, that it was 'Rule Britannia!'"

"And I say it was 'Yankee Doodle!'" replied the young American.

The dispute was about to begin again when one of the seconds—doubtless in the interests of the milk trade—interposed.

"Suppose we say it was 'Rule Doodle' and 'Yankee Britannia' and adjourn to breakfast?"

This compromise between the national airs of Great Britain and the United States was adopted to the general satisfaction. The Americans and Englishmen walked up the left bank of the Niagara on their way to Goat Island, the neutral ground between the falls. Let us leave them in the presence of the boiled eggs and traditional ham, and floods enough of tea to make the cataract jealous, and trouble ourselves no more about them. It is extremely unlikely that we shall again meet with them in this story.

Which was right; the Englishman or the American? It is not easy to say. Anyhow the duel shows how great was the excitement, not only in the new but also in the old world, with regard to an inexplicable phenomenon which for a month or more had driven everybody to distraction.

Never had the sky been so much looked at since the appearance of man on the terrestrial globe. The night before an aerial trumpet had blared its brazen notes through space immediately over that part of Canada between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Some people had heard those notes as "Yankee Doodle," others had heard them as "Rule

Britannia," and hence the quarrel between the Anglo-Saxons, which ended with the breakfast on Goat Island. Perhaps it was neither one nor the other of these patriotic tunes, but what was undoubted by all was that these extraordinary sounds had seemed to descend from the sky to the earth.

What could it be? Was it some exuberant aeronaut rejoicing on that sonorous instrument of which the Renommée makes such obstreperous use?

No! There was no balloon and there were no aeronauts. Some strange phenomenon had occurred in the higher zones of the atmosphere, a phenomenon of which neither the nature nor the cause could be explained. Today it appeared over America; forty-eight hours afterwards it was over Europe; a week later it was in Asia over the Celestial Empire.

Hence in every country of the world—empire, kingdom, or republic—there was anxiety which it was important to allay. If you hear in your house strange and inexplicable noises, do you not at once endeavor to discover the cause? And if your search is in vain, do you not leave your house and take up your quarters in another? But in this case the house was the terrestrial globe! There are no means of leaving that house for the moon or Mars, or Venus, or Jupiter, or any other planet of the solar system. And so of necessity we have to find out what it is that takes place, not in the infinite void, but within the atmospherical zones. In fact, if there is no air there is no noise, and as there was a noise—that famous trumpet, to wit—the phenomenon must occur in the air, the

density of which invariably diminishes, and which does not extend for more than six miles round our spheroid.

Naturally the newspapers took up the question in their thousands, and treated it in every form, throwing on it both light and darkness, recording many things about it true or false, alarming and tranquillizing their readers—as the sale required—and almost driving ordinary people mad. At one blow party politics dropped unheeded—and the affairs of the world went on none the worse for it.

But what could this thing be? There was not an observatory that was not applied to. If an observatory could not give a satisfactory answer what was the use of observatories? If astronomers, who doubled and tripled the stars a hundred thousand million miles away, could not explain a phenomenon occurring only a few miles off, what was the use of astronomers?

The observatory at Paris was very guarded in what it said. In the mathematical section they had not thought the statement worth noticing; in the meridional section they knew nothing about it; in the physical observatory they had not come across it; in the geodetic section they had had no observation; in the meteorological section there had been no record; in the calculating room they had had nothing to deal with. At any rate this confession was a frank one, and the same frankness characterized the replies from the observatory of Montsouris and the magnetic station in the park of St. Maur. The same respect for the truth distinguished the Bureau des Longitudes.

The provinces were slightly more affirmative. Perhaps in the night of the fifth and the morning of the sixth of May there had appeared a flash of light of electrical origin which lasted about twenty seconds. At the Pic du Midi this light appeared between nine and ten in the evening. At the Meteorological Observatory on the Puy de Dome the light had been observed between one and two o'clock in the morning; at Mont Ventoux in Provence it had been seen between two and three o'clock; at Nice it had been noticed between three and four o'clock; while at the Semnoz Alps between Annecy, Le Bourget, and Le Léman, it had been detected just as the zenith was paling with the dawn.

Now it evidently would not do to disregard these observations altogether. There could be no doubt that a light had been observed at different places, in succession, at intervals, during some hours. Hence, whether it had been produced from many centers in the terrestrial atmosphere, or from one center, it was plain that the light must have traveled at a speed of over one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

In the United Kingdom there was much perplexity. The observatories were not in agreement. Greenwich would not consent to the proposition of Oxford. They were agreed on one point, however, and that was: "It was nothing at all!"

But, said one, "It was an optical illusion!" While the other contended that, "It was an acoustical illusion!" And so they disputed. Something, however, was, it will be seen, common to both "It was an illusion."

Between the observatory of Berlin and the observatory of Vienna the discussion threatened to end in international complications; but Russia, in the person of the director of the observatory at Pulkowa, showed that both were right. It all depended on the point of view from which they attacked the phenomenon, which, though impossible in theory, was possible in practice.

In Switzerland, at the observatory of Sautis in the canton of Appenzell, at the Righi, at the Gäbriss, in the passes of the St. Gothard, at the St. Bernard, at the Julier, at the Simplon, at Zurich, at Somblick in the Tyrolean Alps, there was a very strong disinclination to say anything about what nobody could prove—and that was nothing but reasonable.

But in Italy, at the meteorological stations on Vesuvius, on Etna in the old Casa Inglesi, at Monte Cavo, the observers made no hesitation in admitting the materiality of the phenomenon, particularly as they had seen it by day in the form of a small cloud of vapor, and by night in that of a shooting star. But of what it was they knew nothing.

Scientists began at last to tire of the mystery, while they continued to disagree about it, and even to frighten the lowly and the ignorant, who, thanks to one of the wisest laws of nature, have formed, form, and will form the immense majority of the world's inhabitants. Astronomers and meteorologists would soon have dropped the subject altogether had not, on the night of the 26th and 27th, the observatory of Kautokeino at Finmark, in Norway, and during the night of the 28th and 29th that of Isfjord at Spitzbergen—Norwegian

one and Swedish the other—found themselves agreed in recording that in the center of an aurora borealis there had appeared a sort of huge bird, an aerial monster, whose structure they were unable to determine, but who, there was no doubt, was showering off from his body certain corpuscles which exploded like bombs.

In Europe not a doubt was thrown on this observation of the stations in Finmark and Spitzbergen. But what appeared the most phenomenal about it was that the Swedes and Norwegians could find themselves in agreement on any subject whatever.

There was a laugh at the asserted discovery in all the observatories of South America, in Brazil, Peru, and La Plata, and in those of Australia at Sydney, Adelaide, and Melbourne; and Australian laughter is very catching.

To sum up, only one chief of a meteorological station ventured on a decided answer to this question, notwithstanding the sarcasms that his solution provoked. This was a Chinaman, the director of the observatory at Zi-Ka-Wey which rises in the center of a vast plateau less than thirty miles from the sea, having an immense horizon and wonderfully pure atmosphere. "It is possible," said he, "that the object was an aviform apparatus—a flying machine!"

What nonsense!

But if the controversy was keen in the old world, we can imagine what it was like in that portion of the new of which the United States occupy

so vast an area.

A Yankee, we know, does not waste time on the road. He takes the street that leads him straight to his end. And the observatories of the American Federation did not hesitate to do their best. If they did not hurl their objectives at each other's heads, it was because they would have had to put them back just when they most wanted to use them. In this much-disputed question the observatories of Washington in the District of Columbia, and Cambridge in Massachusetts, found themselves opposed by those of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and Ann Arbor in Michigan. The subject of their dispute was not the nature of the body observed, but the precise moment of its observation. All of them claimed to have seen it the same night, the same hour, the same minute, the same second, although the trajectory of the mysterious voyager took it but a moderate height above the horizon. Now from Massachusetts to Michigan, from New Hampshire to Columbia, the distance is too great for this double observation, made at the same moment, to be considered possible.

Dudley at Albany, in the state of New York, and West Point, the military academy, showed that their colleagues were wrong by an elaborate calculation of the right ascension and declination of the aforesaid body.

But later on it was discovered that the observers had been deceived in the body, and that what they had seen was an aerolite. This aerolite could not be the object in question, for how could an aerolite blow a trumpet?

It was in vain that they tried to get rid of this trumpet as an optical illusion. The ears were no more deceived than the eyes. Something had assuredly been seen, and something had assuredly been heard. In the night of the 12th and 13th of May—a very dark night—the observers at Yale College, in the Sheffield Science School, had been able to take down a few bars of a musical phrase in D major, common time, which gave note for note, rhythm for rhythm, the chorus of the Chant du Départ.

"Good," said the Yankee wags. "There is a French band well up in the air."

"But to joke is not to answer." Thus said the observatory at Boston, founded by the Atlantic Iron Works Society, whose opinions in matters of astronomy and meteorology began to have much weight in the world of science.

Then there intervened the observatory at Cincinnati, founded in 1870, on Mount Lookout, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Kilgour, and known for its micrometrical measurements of double stars. Its director declared with the utmost good faith that there had certainly been something, that a traveling body had shown itself at very short periods at different points in the atmosphere, but what were the nature of this body, its dimensions, its speed, and its trajectory, it was impossible to say.

It was then a journal whose publicity is immense—the "New York Herald"—received the anonymous contribution hereunder.

"There will be in the recollection of most people the rivalry which existed a few years ago between the two heirs of the Begum of Ragginahra, the French doctor Sarrasin, the city of Frankville, and the German engineer Schultze, in the city of Steeltown, both in the south of Oregon in the United States.

"It will not have been forgotten that, with the object of destroying Frankville, Herr Schultze launched a formidable engine, intended to beat down the town and annihilate it at a single blow.

"Still less will it be forgotten that this engine, whose initial velocity as it left the mouth of the monster cannon had been erroneously calculated, had flown off at a speed exceeding by sixteen times that of ordinary projectiles—or about four hundred and fifty miles an hour—that it did not fall to the ground, and that it passed into an aerolitic stage, so as to circle for ever round our globe.

"Why should not this be the body in question?"

Very ingenious, Mr. Correspondent on the "New York Herald!" but how about the trumpet? There was no trumpet in Herr Schulze's projectile!

So all the explanations explained nothing, and all the observers had observed in vain. There remained only the suggestion offered by the director of Zi-Ka-Wey. But the opinion of a Chinaman!

The discussion continued, and there was no sign of agreement. Then came a short period of rest. Some days elapsed without any object,

aerolite or otherwise, being described, and without any trumpet notes being heard in the atmosphere. The body then had fallen on some part of the globe where it had been difficult to trace it; in the sea, perhaps. Had it sunk in the depths of the Atlantic, the Pacific, or the Indian Ocean? What was to be said in this matter?

But then, between the 2nd and 9th of June, there came a new series of facts which could not possibly be explained by the unaided existence of a cosmic phenomenon.

In a week the Hamburgers at the top of St. Michael's Tower, the Turks on the highest minaret of St. Sophia, the Rouennais at the end of the metal spire of their cathedral, the Strasburgers at the summit of their minister, the Americans on the head of the Liberty statue at the entrance of the Hudson and on the Bunker Hill monument at Boston, the Chinese at the spike of the temple of the Four Hundred Genii at Canton, the Hindus on the sixteenth terrace of the pyramid of the temple at Tanjore, the San Pietrini at the cross of St. Peter's at Rome, the English at the cross of St. Paul's in London, the Egyptians at the apex of the Great Pyramid of Ghizeh, the Parisians at the lighting conductor of the iron tower of the Exposition of 1889, a thousand feet high, all of them beheld a flag floating from some one of these inaccessible points.

And the flag was black, dotted with stars, and it bore a golden sun in its center.

Chapter II

AGREEMENT IMPOSSIBLE

"And the first who says the contrary—"

"Indeed! But we will say the contrary so long as there is a place to say it in!"

"And in spite of your threats—"

"Mind what you are saying, Bat Fynn!"

"Mind what you are saying, Uncle Prudent!"

"I maintain that the screw ought to be behind!"

"And so do we! And so do we!" replied half a hundred voices confounded in one.

"No! It ought to be in front!" shouted Phil Evans.

"In front!" roared fifty other voices, with a vigor in no whit less remarkable.

"We shall never agree!"

"Never! Never!"

"Then what is the use of a dispute?"

"It is not a dispute! It is a discussion!"

One would not have thought so to listen to the taunts, objurgations, and vociferations which filled the lecture room for a good quarter of an hour.

The room was one of the largest in the Weldon Institute, the well-known club in Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U. S. A. The evening before there had been an election of a lamplighter, occasioning many public manifestations, noisy meetings, and even interchanges of blows, resulting in an effervescence which had not yet subsided, and which would account for some of the excitement just exhibited by the members of the Weldon Institute. For this was merely a meeting of balloonists, discussing the burning question of the direction of balloons.

In this great saloon there were struggling, pushing, gesticulating, shouting, arguing, disputing, a hundred balloonists, all with their hats on, under the authority of a president, assisted by a secretary and treasurer. They were not engineers by profession, but simply amateurs of all that appertained to aerostatics, and they were amateurs in a fury, and especially foes of those who would oppose to aerostats "apparatuses heavier than the air," flying machines, aerial ships, or what not. That these people might one day discover the method of guiding balloons is possible. There could be no doubt that their president had considerable difficulty in guiding them.

This president, well known in Philadelphia, was the famous Uncle Prudent, Prudent being his family name. There is nothing surprising in America in the qualificative uncle, for you can there be uncle without having either nephew or niece. There they speak of uncle as in other places they speak of father, though the father may have had no children.

Uncle Prudent was a personage of consideration, and in spite of his name was well known for his audacity. He was very rich, and that is no drawback even in the United States; and how could it be otherwise when he owned the greater part of the shares in Niagara Falls? A society of engineers had just been founded at Buffalo for working the cataract. It seemed to be an excellent speculation. The seven thousand five hundred cubic meters that pass over Niagara in a second would produce seven millions of horsepower. This enormous power, distributed amongst all the workshops within a radius of three hundred miles, would return an annual income of three hundred million dollars, of which the greater part would find its way into the pocket of Uncle Prudent. He was a bachelor, he lived quietly, and for his only servant had his valet Frycollin, who was hardly worthy of being the servant to so audacious a master.

Uncle Prudent was rich, and therefore he had friends, as was natural; but he also had enemies, although he was president of the club—among others all those who envied his position. Amongst his bitterest foes we may mention the secretary of the Weldon Institute.

This was Phil Evans, who was also very rich, being the manager of the Wheelton Watch Company, an important manufactory, which makes every day five hundred movements equal in every respect to the best Swiss workmanship. Phil Evans would have passed for one of the happiest men in the world, and even in the United States, if it had not been for Uncle Prudent. Like him he was in his forty-sixth year; like him of invariable health; like him of undoubted boldness. They were two men made to understand each other thoroughly, but they did not, for both were of extreme violence of character. Uncle Prudent was furiously hot; Phil Evans was abnormally cool.

And why had not Phil Evans been elected president of the club? The votes were exactly divided between Uncle Prudent and him. Twenty times there had been a scrutiny, and twenty times the majority had not declared for either one or the other. The position was embarrassing, and it might have lasted for the lifetime of the candidates.

One of the members of the club then proposed a way out of the difficulty. This was Jem Chip, the treasurer of the Weldon Institute. Chip was a confirmed vegetarian, a proscriber of all animal nourishment, of all fermented liquors, half a Mussulman, half a Brahman. On this occasion Jem Chip was supported by another member of the club, William T. Forbes, the manager of a large factory where they made glucose by treating rags with sulphuric acid. A man of good standing was this William T. Forbes, the father of two

charming girls—Miss Dorothy, called Doll, and Miss Martha, called Mat, who gave the tone to the best society in Philadelphia.

It followed, then, on the proposition of Jem Chip, supported by William T. Forbes and others, that it was decided to elect the president "on the center point."

This mode of election can be applied in all cases when it is desired to elect the most worthy; and a number of Americans of high intelligence are already thinking of employing it in the nomination of the President of the Republic of the United States.

On two boards of perfect whiteness a black line is traced. The length of each of these lines is mathematically the same, for they have been determined with as much accuracy as the base of the first triangle in a trigonometrical survey. That done, the two boards were erected on the same day in the center of the conference room, and the two candidates, each armed with a fine needle, marched towards the board that had fallen to his lot. The man who planted his needle nearest the center of the line would be proclaimed President of the Weldon Institute.

The operation must be done at once—no guide marks or trial shots allowed; nothing but sureness of eye. The man must have a compass in his eye, as the saying goes; that was all.

Uncle Prudent stuck in his needle at the same moment as Phil Evans did his. Then there began the measurement to discover which of the

two competitors had most nearly approached the center.

Wonderful! Such had been the precision of the shots that the measures gave no appreciable difference. If they were not exactly in the mathematical center of the line, the distance between the needles was so small as to be invisible to the naked eye.

The meeting was much embarrassed.

Fortunately one of the members, Truck Milnor, insisted that the measurements should be remade by means of a rule graduated by the micrometrical machine of M. Perreaux, which can divide a millimeter into fifteen-hundredths of a millimeter with a diamond splinter, was brought to bear on the lines; and on reading the divisions through a microscope the following were the results: Uncle Prudent had approached the center within less than six fifteenth-hundredths of a millimeter. Phil Evans was within nine fifteen-hundredths.

And that is why Phil Evans was only secretary of the Weldon Institute, whereas Uncle Prudent was president. A difference of three fifteen-hundredths of a millimeter! And on account of it Phil Evans vowed against Uncle Prudent one of those hatreds which are none the less fierce for being latent.

Chapter III

A VISITOR IS ANNOUNCED

The many experiments made during this last quarter of the nineteenth century have given considerable impetus to the question of guidable balloons. The cars furnished with propellers attached in 1852 to the aerostats of the elongated form introduced by Henry Giffard, the machines of Dupuy de Lome in 1872, of the Tissandier brothers in 1883, and of Captain Krebs and Renard in 1884, yielded many important results. But if these machines, moving in a medium heavier than themselves, maneuvering under the propulsion of a screw, working at an angle to the direction of the wind, and even against the wind, to return to their point of departure, had been really "guidable," they had only succeeded under very favorable conditions. In large, covered halls their success was perfect. In a calm atmosphere they did very well. In a light wind of five or six yards a second they still moved. But nothing practical had been obtained. Against a miller's wind—nine yards a second—the machines had remained almost stationary. Against a fresh breeze—eleven yards a second—they would have advanced backwards. In a storm—twenty-seven to thirty-three yards a second—they would have been blown about like a feather. In a hurricane—sixty yards a second—they would have run the risk of being dashed to pieces. And in one of those cyclones which exceed a

hundred yards a second not a fragment of them would have been left. It remained, then, even after the striking experiments of Captains Krebs and Renard, that though guidable aerostats had gained a little speed, they could not be kept going in a moderate breeze. Hence the impossibility of making practical use of this mode of aerial locomotion.

With regards to the means employed to give the aerostat its motion a great deal of progress had been made. For the steam engines of Henry Giffard, and the muscular force of Dupuy de Lome, electric motors had gradually been substituted. The batteries of bichromate of potassium of the Tissandier brothers had given a speed of four yards a second. The dynamo-electric machines of Captain Krebs and Renard had developed a force of twelve horsepower and yielded a speed of six and a half yards per second.

With regard to this motor, engineers and electricians had been approaching more and more to that desideratum which is known as a steam horse in a watch case. Gradually the results of the pile of which Captains Krebs and Renard had kept the secret had been surpassed, and aeronauts had become able to avail themselves of motors whose lightness increased at the same time as their power.

In this there was much to encourage those who believed in the utilization of guidable balloons. But yet how many good people there are who refuse to admit the possibility of such a thing! If the aerostat finds support in the air it belongs to the medium in which it moves; under such conditions, how can its mass, which offers so much