

A Fanciful Story.

[From the Atlantic Monthly.]

TRIAL TRIP
OF THE
"FLYING CLOUD."

"Through in four days to San Francisco," repeated I. "Marvellous age?"

I hastily computed the distance by an air-line, and placed the speed of the craft at some thirty miles an hour. That seemed reasonable enough. Indeed, the whole statement cohered marvellously well; all the parts harmonized with each other and looked plausible, even reasonable, as I have said, except the grand fact itself, which was too momentous for belief. But why should it not be true? What new achievement of the human mind ought to startle one in this nineteenth century, after having witnessed the wonders of steam and electro-magnetism? I determined to sift the matter, but immediately remembered that all the knowledge I had of it had been imparted to me in the strictest confidence. The ingenious inventors, as was clearly their right, had reserved it to themselves to choose the time and way of making their invention public, when it was to break on the world, some fine morning, like the discovery of a second moon performing its orbit round the earth. I sunk into a brown study.

In the evening, Mr. Bonflon called again, as he had promised. He brought with him a large roll of plans and drawings, for the purpose of illustrating more clearly the principles and method of construction and operation of his aerial ship.

They were projected on a large scale, and the workmanship was superb. Months of hard labor by a finished draughtsman must have been devoted to their execution.—"And what an additional outlay of time and brains," thought I, "must have been required, to devise the scheme and construct the machine itself, so as to elevate the ingenious ideal into an absolute working reality!" These drawings, Mr. Bonflon informed me, were duplicates of others which had been privately deposited in the Patent-Office at Washington.

The one which chiefly attracted my attention was that which represented the monster steamer complete, with all its appendages and complement of passengers, in its majestic flight through the air. Below it were drifting clouds. Its course lay quite above the storms and hurricanes and conflicting wind-currents which vex the lower strata of the atmosphere, where it comes in contact with the earth's uneven surface, and is kept in motion by the contractions and expansions of alternate cold and heat, and is broken and set whirling by the forests and gorges and mountain-tops among which it is compelled to force its way.—Above all this, Mr. Bonflon assured me, as aeronauts report, there is ever a smooth, quiet atmospheric sea.

"But how is life to be sustained for any considerable time in that rarefied medium?" inquired I, "when it is asserted that even in ascending high mountains, the texture of the soft parts of the human body becomes so loose and flabby from diminished atmospheric pressure as to cause one, so to speak, to sweat blood,—which oozes perceptibly from the mouth and nose and eyes, and even from under the finger-nails?"

Mr. Bonflon pointed to a long, narrow line which floated rearward at an angle of about forty-five degrees from the point of its attachment to his ship.

"That," said he, "is an India-rubber tube several thousand feet long, extending down in the respirable atmosphere, and keeping the cabins always supplied with fresh and wholesome air."

"But would the heavier nether air flow in that direction?" I asked.

"With a little help from the engine," he replied, "a constant current, whenever needed, is kept up; and the process of breathing is rendered as easy and agreeable in the cabins of the 'Flying Cloud' as in one's own parlors at home. On the upper deck,

which is not inclosed, you see, it is different. In the first trial trip to California, Mr. M— insisted on remaining above on this deck for six consecutive hours, and the result was an attack of hemorrhage from the lungs. On his going below, however, it almost instantly ceased."

I must now endeavor to give the reader some definite idea of this extraordinary machine, as exhibited in the drawings. Its buoyant power was, of course, on the principle of the balloon. But the gas-chamber, or part to be inflated, instead of being globular in form, consisted of two horizontal cones joined at the base; or more accurately still, it resembled an immense barrel extended at both ends to a point, and resting on its side. This shape was given it, according to Mr. Bonflon, that it might offer the least resistance to the element in which it was intended to move. In structure it was composed of a strong flexible frame of whalebone and steel, covered with silk, strengthened and rendered air-tight and water-proof by a coating of India-rubber. Its size, of course, would depend upon the proposed tonnage of a particular ship. That of the working-model, as nearly as I remember, was about six hundred feet long, by some seventy or eighty in breadth in the middle, which was calculated to be amply sufficient to sustain the immense car beneath, with its engine, and fuel for a week, and three hundred passengers with their baggage; leaving still a considerable margin for freight.

Mr. Bonflon here pointed out, with great minuteness, the simple, but ingenious method devised for the inflation of this enormous machine, and the regulation of the gas; which I pass over, from an inability to render it intelligible by mere description.

The car or vessel suspended below, and to which the balloon part bore the relation of masts and sails, was fashioned after the best model of a clipper ship, but still farther elongated. Below deck it was divided into sitting and dining cabins, state-rooms, kitchen, engine-room, and so forth; and above was a long, railed, promenade-deck. The attachment between the two parts was by means of a network of ropes, extending from every quarter, and from the whole circumference of the ship, connecting with staples in the framework of the balloon, and finally embracing its entire body in its folds. Two enormous paddle-wheels, made of oiled silk stretched on delicate frames, and driven by a steam-engine of the lightest structure possible, furnished the propelling power; while at the stern, like a vast fin, played the helm, of a similar material and construction to the paddle-wheels.

All this was explained to me in much fuller detail than I can here repeat, by Mr. Bonflon, who added, that the material employed combined lightness with strength to a much greater degree than had ever before been achieved,—that the fuel used was of the fluid kind, a new combination of concentrated combustibles invented by himself,—and that the weight of the entire machine had been carefully calculated beforehand, together with its buoyant power, and the results had demonstrated the accuracy of the mathematics.

I turned on Mr. Bonflon and looked him squarely in the face. He was a modest man and blushed slightly, but did not shrink. There could be no dishonesty there. His countenance bore the unmistakable stamp of integrity, as well as intelligence; and his whole appearance and bearing were those of a true man.

Had he brought me the newspapers he promised, not yet eight days old, from San Francisco?

No. He had been detained down-town all day in the whirl of our New York Babel, and had not yet been home. He would hand it in to-morrow.

Mr. Bonflon had been introduced to me that morning by a friend on whose acuteness and judgment I felt I had many good reasons to rely. Without pretending any precise knowledge of the man, or, indeed, any knowledge at all, beyond what had been gathered from the individual himself in a very brief acquaintance of Mr. Bonflon's own seeking, he expressed a warm interest in him personally, as also in the

startling discovery he professed to have made.

In that interview, Mr. Bonflon had informed us in brief, that, after ten years of patient and toilsome experiment, of disappointment, of perishing and reviving hope, he had at length achieved the grand object of his life. He had solved the problem of the navigation of the air. He had proved by actual results, that the great ocean of atmosphere above us could be ploughed as successfully and safely as the waters beneath, and with much greater facility and pleasure. He stated that the first trial trip, after the completion of the ship, had been made in the night from an obscure point in the State of Maryland, and extended north and northeast, along the Atlantic coast, to New York,—whose glow of light from a great height, like a phosphorescent mist, was plainly distinguishable,—and thence to the neighborhood of Boston, and back to the place of starting; and that a second, with equally favorable results, had been made from the same point by a more inland route, northwest to Buffalo and the Canada line; and he named several well-known persons who were on board at one or the other of these times, and related some little anecdotes illustrative of their states of mind and apprehensions while drifting above the earth on the occasion of these novel voyages.

He said, further, that the President and heads of departments at Washington were fully cognizant of the matter; and that a third grand trial-trip, in the interest of government, had been secretly made, with important dispatches to California, relating to the security of our rights in the Pacific. Four days had been consumed in the passage out, including a stoppage of a couple of hours on a fine plateau, near the head waters of the Missouri, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains; and the same in the return. They had landed in the night in a deep valley a few miles out of San Francisco, and remained two days in that city;—which gave a period of ten days to the entire voyage, out and back. Forty selected individuals, all bound to secrecy, had participated in the risks and excitements of the extraordinary occasion. Mr. Bonflon was not of the number. An heroic daughter of his was. His partner, Mons. De Aery, a French gentleman of great mechanical skill, had managed the affair; and the craft, in the same hands, was now absent on her second expedition across the American continent.

Such was the sum of Mr. Bonflon's revelations of the morning. What a discovery! How the announcement would astonish the world, upset commerce, and transform the habits and relations of mankind! America, the pioneer in many valuable discoveries and reforms, was still ahead,—still destined to lead the van in the development of the powers and resources of Nature, and the onward march of nations.

Hurriedly recalling all these points to mind, I requested to know of Mr. Bonflon how it had been possible, with so many confidants and the prying propensities of the press, whose agents, like an invisible police, are everywhere, to keep the matter from becoming public,—at least, to cover the affair so completely that no hint of the existence of his machine should have been given in any quarter, or of the vast changes which its introduction as a power in the world could not fail to effect.

To this he replied, that the press had behaved very handsomely; that the principal papers of the country had *attaches* aboard on the first trip to the Pacific; but that all parties—the government, the editors, together with De Aery and himself—were agreed that the matter should be kept strictly private, until its practicability and value should be established beyond the possibility of question.

I now remembered, that, several years ago, a good deal of noise had been made about a flying machine which had been constructed in some of the suburbs of the city, and that a day had been advertised when it would make an ascent, but it failed. I mentioned the circumstances to Mr. Bonflon.

"Yes," he replied. "It was at Hoboken

De Aery and myself spent three years in the construction of that machine, and a large amount of money. On the day when the trial of its power was to have taken place, the weather proved unfavorable, and we met with unexpected delays. The spectators who had congregated by thousands, became impatient; and the mob, breaking in upon us, destroyed in an hour property which had cost us five thousand dollars and the labor of years."

I felt obliged to sympathize with Mr. Bonflon. He had met with the usual fortune of public benefactors, and particularly of inventors. His success, however, should it prove real, in the unexampled brilliancy of its results, would more than compensate him for all his disappointments and losses. He would rank as the greatest of discoverers,—as the master mind of this master century.

Leading him off from this one topic into general conversation, I held him thus engaged for an hour. I was charmed with his comprehensive intelligence, and with the scope and liberality of his views. In everything relating to mechanics, his opinions were marked with originality. This had evidently been his favorite field, where his quick perceptions and powers of concentration and analysis had elevated him to an eminence where he stood almost alone. I had never met his equal. In plausible suggestions relative to the possibilities of the future, he took me quite above my level, and left me floating in a maze of glittering bewilderment. But I could discover no breaks, no confusion in his mind, on the themes he presented. His premises were apparently well considered, and his conclusions the fair and natural sequences flowing from them.

On the following day, Mr. Bonflon called on me again. In the interval, my friend and myself had held extended consultations. My friend, while externally calm as the surface of a summer sea, as was his wont, it was plain for me to see, was internally deeply stirred and excited by the extraordinary nature of Mr. Bonflon's revelations. Acknowledging a mutual and increasing interest in the intelligent inventor, we nevertheless parted in a wilderness of doubt. There was a mystery in the matter,—a surprise for the world or a surprise for ourselves,—which time, it would seem, with its busy thumb and finger, must be left to unravel at its leisure.

Mr. Bonflon had not brought the Californian papers with him. Two or three copies only which had come into his possession had been handed around among his confidential friends, and he had not been able to lay his hand on one. He informed me that the "Flying Cloud" was expected to return in three days, and after remaining two days on the Atlantic side of the continent, would then start on her third experimental trip to the Pacific. At that time he expected to make one of the party himself, and he invited me to accompany him.

I accepted the invitation, and received from him particular instructions as to the nature of my outfit. It was in the midst of the heat of summer. He advised, however, a full supply of thick clothing, on account of the increased chill and coldness of the atmosphere at high altitudes; and, indeed, recommended a mail of flannel next the skin. Everything else—the supply of the larder, with an excellent cook, beds, and so forth—would be amply provided by De Aery and himself for the comfort and accommodation of their guests. The station, or point of departure, Mr. Bonflon informed me, was a retired spot, but a few miles out of the city of Baltimore; and he promised to be at hand at the proper time to accompany me in person, and see me safely on board the "Flying Cloud."

I saw nothing more of Mr. Bonflon for several days. Meanwhile I arranged my affairs for a brief absence, and, as my family were all off in the country, prepared a special letter for use, if needed, to be dated and mailed at the last moment, notifying them of a probable gap in my correspondence, on account of some pressing business which would take me out of the city

for a few days and keep me constantly employed.

In three or four days I received a note from Mr. Bonflon, advising me to hold myself in readiness; and at the proper time, he presented himself before me. But he came to apologize. The "Flying Cloud" had returned. The second trip had been as successfully and safely performed as the first. Nothing had occurred to mar the pleasure of the voyage; but, unfortunately, before coming on to New York, De Aery had filled out the complement of guests for the third grand expedition. Even he (Mr. Bonflon) should remain behind; but he should see that seats were reserved for us both, without fail, for the next succeeding trip.

Mr. Bonflon took his leave; and I found myself more deeply involved in doubt and perplexity than ever. I could hardly say that I was disappointed, or that I was not. I had thrown myself on a wave, with no look-out or means of judging where I was to be cast, and had formed no opinions. As yet, everything looked fair with Mr. Bonflon. His face was as honest as the rising sun, and it was next to impossible to doubt him. He might be the prey of some strange phantasm, some monomania; but the evidences did not show it. The account he had given of himself was manly and coherent; his claims as a discoverer had been modestly presented, and were not wholly unsupported by circumstances, or unreasonable in themselves. Indeed, they must be regarded as coming within the range of probabilities fully as much as, to human seeing, had once the established, but ceaseless, wonders of steam locomotion, and electric telegraphing.

Singularly enough,—and it illustrates the constantly shifting scenes in the kaleidoscope of life,—within an hour, Mr. Bonflon returned with a new message, and with the programme of the "Flying Cloud" changed, if not reversed. He had seen De Aery again. One or two of the expected passengers had telegraphed that untoward circumstances would compel them to remain behind, and there would be room for us.—But no time was to be lost; the air-steamer would weigh anchor before daylight of the following morning, and we must start for Baltimore by the next train. De Aery and several others were already flying over the rail on their way to Philadelphia.

I did not allow myself to hesitate. With an unusual degree of excitement, made up of the mingled emotions of wonder, doubt, and, I frankly confess, apprehension, I dated and superscribed the letter to my absent family; and, taking my carpet-bag in my hand, packed to plethora several days before in readiness for the occasion, set out on the strange and questionable adventure.

The run to Baltimore was made without accident or delay. Mr. Bonflon and myself conversed a good deal, and I found additional cause to admire the discriminating character of his mind and the curious and wonderful stores it contained. Some of the time we dozed, or sunk into a mental confusion like that to which the body was subjected by the motion of the cars, and called it sleep. My own most impressive visions, however, were those of silent wakefulness, and were connected with the morrow and the "Flying Cloud."

We stopped in the chief city of Maryland only long enough to obtain some slight refreshments, such as could be furnished readily in the middle of the night, and proceeded at once to the wharf or station of our sky-sailer. Ah, how shall I describe my sensations on beholding this most wonderful achievement of the age, and thus satisfying myself that it was an actual existence, and not the mere chimera of a diseased brain? There she sat like a majestic swan, floating, as it were, in the pure empyrean, and crowned with a diadem of stars. The moon, Arcturus, and the Pleiades might well make obeisance to her and the Milky Way invite her to extend her flight and plough her snowy fields. I was astonished at her size, the symmetry of her parts, and the harmony of her proportions, as she lay there at a great height, which I was quite unable to estimate, in bold relief against the sky.

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