

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

J. R. Orton

Table of Contents

<u>Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'</u>	1
<u>J. R. Orton</u>	1

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

J. R. Orton

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

"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 the 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 into 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.

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

"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 possible 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 on 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 materials 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 newspaper 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.

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

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 grant 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! How the practical fact would overturn 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 practicality 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 was to make an ascent, but it failed. I mentioned the circumstance to Mr. Bonflon.

"Yes," he replied. "It was at Hoboken. De Aery and myself spent years in the construction of that machine, and a large amount of money. On the day when the trial of its powers was to have taken place, the weather proved unfavorable, and we met with unexpected delays. The spectators, who had congregated by the 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."

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

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 California paper with him. The 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 heats 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 found 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.

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

His face was as honest as the morning 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 seeming, 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 first 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 all make obeisance to her, and the Milky Way invite her to extend her flight and plough its 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.

But Mr. Bonflon could afford me but a brief time for observation and the indulgence of my wonder. The stores and most of the passengers were already on board; and taking me by the arm, he hurried me forward, and seated me in the small car or tender, by means of which, and the agency of ropes and pulleys, we were to reach her decks. Our upward movement immediately commenced. It was steady and gentle, not calculated to create alarm; and still the notion of quitting Mother Earth for an indefinite number of days, to rove in the blue unknown of space, was attended with some apprehensions and regrets. I gazed anxiously at the receding objects below; but my feelings underwent a change as we approached the "Flying Cloud" herself, were pulled into her gangway, and I found myself standing on her solid decks. A brief further period intervened, and our anchor was loosed; the tremendous machine became instinct with life; she began to move; and, hurrah! we were under way.

The thoughts and emotions of this bewildering moment it is impossible to describe. Our craft moved off majestically, like some huge water-fowl rising from the sea. Her course was westward and upward, like the eagle with his face turned toward the palace of the sun. At first the lights in the city of Baltimore became more numerous and distinct, as intervening objects were surmounted and overlooked. Next they began to fade, shrinking down into twinkling points like fireflies, until they disappeared. Forests, hills, and mountains followed after, as our altitude was increased, blending together like a hazy landscape, until, on passing above the cloud region, and finding the level of our track, the earth was wholly lost to our view, and our course lay through the

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

blue serene of space, without a lighthouse or a landmark, and nothing but the constant lamps of heaven to guide us in our passage.

What a sea! The ocean has its visible surface on which move the ships; but we had none. The heavens were beneath us as well as above. We were floating in the great circle of the systems and the suns. We were of the universe; but were to be numbered with the constellations and the stars. We could compare ourselves to a company of immortals quitting the earth and traversing the electric seas which lead to brighter homes. Or we were voyagers to the sun, or to the nearer Venus, or to the far distant Centaurus. What a world of new thought was forced upon us by the fancies and realities and charm and awe of our extraordinary condition, combined with the profound consciousness we could not fail to entertain of the effects which this crowning discovery of Messrs. Bonflon and De Aery must produce on travel, on commerce, on art, and the common destiny of mankind!

I found the atmosphere of the cabins, as my friend Bonflon had asserted, agreeable and healthful. I could also occupy the promenade deck for half an hour with little inconvenience, so far as the levity of the air was concerned; but the cold was severe; while the system, in consequence of an undue expansion of its particles, solid and fluid, from the diminished pressure of the atmosphere, was rendered doubly susceptible to its influence. The advice given by Mr. Bonflon to case myself in flannels, with an armament at hand of outer winter-clothing, proved well-timed; and yet a period of lassitude, verging on faintness, invariably followed every considerable exposure to the open air.

But the pleasure of gazing on those fields of space without obstruction, without the intervention of so much as a plate of crystal glass, repaid me for every risk and every ill. Though it might be said there was no scenery there, where nothing was visible but the stars, yet far beyond the power of mountain and valley, forest and lake, waterfall and ocean, did that scene, which was no scene, or next to none, bind me in the spell of its fascination. The motion of our craft, as we careered noiselessly through the shoreless and objectless void, without sense of effort or friction, was a charm of itself, — bringing to a flower, crystallizing into refulgent stars, the dim, obscure, however glorious, poetry of life. Here were the wildest imaginations of the dreamer melted in a crucible, and reproduced in living forms of usefulness and beauty. In my own years of widely diversified experience, what had I met with to compare with this? Nothing. The force of steam was marvellous, — talking over a wire mysterious; but here I was in a great ship riding among the planets and the stars. I had likened Niagara to a vast mill-dam, because I could find no peer to set beside it; so now, in my weakness, the sublime pageant of the "Flying Cloud" could search out nothing higher in my recollection with which to compare it than a wild ride of my youth in a canoe, for a half-mile or so, down the rapids of a river.

But morning was at hand. The rich golden glow of night, to which the dwellers on the earth's surface are accustomed, as we passed to higher altitudes, had given place to a thin inky blue. This was obscured by no fleck or mist, and yet the stars shone through it faint and dim, despoiling the firmament of its glory. The same loss of power was manifest on the ushering in of day. The auroral flame, which ordinarily greets us in the east with such a ruddy laugh, was now nothing better than a wan and dismal smile; and even the sun, as he struggled up from what seemed a bed of leaden mist, brought with him only a pallid, lifeless twilight. It was not that his rays were impeded by cloud or haze; he had lost his power to shine. He hung there in the heavens like a great white shield, and looked down on us as rayless and powerless and devoid of life as a dead man's eye.

Having at length wearied myself with gazing, and feeling chill and weak from the coldness and tenuity of the atmosphere, I subsided into the comfort and companionship of the cabins below. Among the passengers I recognized attaches of the press, besides several gentlemen of Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, with whom I was somewhat acquainted. More circumspect, or less slaves to the imagination than myself, they had contented themselves with in-door observations. But their enthusiasm was none the less inflamed. In astonishment they looked at each other; in restless bewilderment they glanced out of the windows on the desert, trackless plane traversed by the "Flying Cloud," and spoke with a species of awe of the shock which the announcement of what they were then witnessing would give to sober men's minds; and suggested, in broken

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

sentences, some of the consequences which would be likely to flow from the grand invention.

What with the excitement and lack of sleep, we all found ourselves a little nervous. Coffee and Havanas failed to allay the feeling; and, in the absence of the morning papers, we resorted to whist, chess, and our pocket supplies of the "Atlantic Monthly," "Harper," and so forth, and to the very select library provided by Messrs. Bonflon and De Aery, the proprietors, for the use of the passengers, — and at last to our beds. It could not be denied that we were nervous. With all the smoothness and beauty of our running, there was a sensation, an uncertain quivering motion, not at first noticed and not at all definable, about our craft, that constantly suggested the idea that we were standing on nothing, or, at best, nothing better than dissolving quicksands, which were liable at any moment wholly to slide away and leave us; and it required some strength of mind to resist the vagary, and prevent it from effecting a troublesome lodgment in the imagination.

Thus passed the day, which fortunately, in my case, was succeeded by a night of repose. The restlessness of mind and body once subdued, Nature asserted her empire, and I slept profoundly until morning. Another day and night followed, with little variation from the first; and by this time, the strangeness and mystery of my situation had quite worn away, and the feeling of security was established. I trod the upper deck with all the pride, and more than the composure, of a modern monarch on his throne.

But the sameness of the scenery of the vast aerial ocean, in which we were sailing alone, without consort, without ever descriing a sail, or even keeping a lookout, without so much as ever discovering a floating plank to remind us of a wreck, or a seaweed to tell us of the land, was already beginning to pall on the senses, when there appeared in the distance before us, and multiplying to the right and the left, a succession of white, sparkling pyramids and cones, resting on the clouds and flashing in the nether light, like crystal monuments set to mark the boundaries of space. These were crests of the Rocky Mountains, covered with perpetual snow.

I gazed on them with rapture. Right in our eye, nearly due west, stood out Long's Peak, James's Peak, and the Spanish Peaks, at first small in size, but momentarily swelling in dimensions; while, far to the north, were just discernible the more lofty summits of Mount Hooker and Mount Brown. Lying between Mount James and the Spanish Peaks, inclining to their eastern slope, lay the green plateau, not yet visible, where we were to land. Its position was carefully pointed out to Mr. Bonflon and myself by Mr. De Aery, but we strained our eyes and used our glasses in vain. No strength of sight could penetrate the clouds and haze which covered the body of the mountains, and hid the earth, with the exception of those lofty silver pinnacles, from our view.

Though these high peaks, like distant masts at sea, were first seen early in the day, the meridian of noon overtook us before we came up with them. At length, in increasing numbers and a thousand diversified shapes, they lay spread out before us, and soon thereafter were directly under our feet. Our magical machine, coming to a halt, fluttered like a great bird above them, and gave us an opportunity, such as probably had never been enjoyed by voyagers before, to spy out their beauty, their mystery, and their strength.

On nearing the mountains, we had left behind us the twilight of the void, and come again into the full flood of day. This enabled the sight to rest upon the scene with pleasure, to examine its diversified splendors, and penetrate its chasms and gorges, otherwise inaccessible to man. But to describe them is impossible. Broad fields of sparkling snow, pyramids of ice, wide fissures shining like steel mirrors, — produced by some unimaginable convulsion, possibly a thousand or ten thousand years ago, and large enough to engulf a city, — with black humps or spires of granite here and there projecting through the white; while afar down the rocky sides of interminable swells and precipices came up a sound of water and a blush of green, betokening the direction in which we were to look for the generative body of Mother Earth; all these, and much more which I cannot stop to name, were grouped in the rough, but magnificent landscape before us.

No cabin could confine me at such a time as this. I stood out on the upper deck in the extreme bow of the boat; and from an unobstructed point of view, nearly over the figure-head, in the very abandonment of daring, feasted

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

my senses on the wondrous glories of this mountain—scene of enchantment.

De Aery was at the helm. But I have scarcely introduced this extraordinary gentleman to the reader. He was a tall, black-haired, mercurial Frenchman, with an eye like a falcon, who, with only an occasional Gallicism purposely indulged in, spoke American like a native. I had every confidence in his prudence and skill in the management of his craft; and still, as I perceived that we were gradually settling down in the direction of the loftiest of those snow-peaks, until scarcely fifty feet intervened between us and its round, polished brow, to all appearance as solid as feldspar, I raised my voice and accosted him.

"Halloo! Captain!" said I, "are you intending to land us on this Atlas-top?"

"Effectivement," replied he. "Mon Dieu! B——, come here."

I went to him.

"This," said he, "is the very Old Man of the Mountain. I intend to plant the stars and stripes in the centre of his bald head."

"Capital!" replied I. "But can you achieve it safely?"

"Yes. I can manage my bird with as much ease as a pigeon poises himself on his wings, or an Indian steers his canoe. See! we are approaching the crown of the pinnacle."

I watched the experiment with an interest not unmingled with fear. He held in one hand a handsome American flag, of moderate size, and occasionally, with a slight motion of his arm, and a glance of pride, spread out its silken folds on the motionless air. Gradually the "Flying Cloud," under his skilful hands, closed upon the bleak, glittering summit, which, rounding off like the bald head of some venerable giant, was, at its apex, scarcely ten feet in diameter.

"No eagle, even, has ever set his foot here," said De Aery. "There is not a track, or feather, or mark of any living thing to be seen. The 'Flying Cloud' will be the first to explore many mysteries and to explode others. Not even do the winds reach this height. Boreas and the bird of Jove, — I will vanquish them both. I will step out upon that icy peak."

"No, no, Captain," I expostulated. "You might lose your foothold and perish."

"Not at all," rejoined he, with a laugh. "I am as sure-footed as a goat. But if you think it risky, Monsieur, I forbear. But the snow looks solid as adamant. I fear I shall not be able to erect this flag, unless I have a firm spot for my feet."

By this time our craft had reached a proper position, — her stern alongside and almost in contact with the jutting peak, — to answer the ambitious purpose of the Frenchman. Raising the flag of the Republic in his hand, he requested us all to do it proper honor, — to salute it with a "three times three," — as he should succeed in securing it in its place. Cautiously extending the staff, he brought it in contact with the snow, and gave it several light blows, for the purpose of ascertaining its solidity. It seemed of almost icy texture, and emitted a half-sharp and half-muffled sound in reply. Then, elevating the standard aloft in both hands, he brought it down with force as the farmer urges a stake into the ground; not doubting, as would seem, that a succession of such blows would be needed in order to achieve his purpose.

A single stroke of the shaft, however, proved more than enough. To the surprise and dismay of us all, the firm ringing surface turned out but a shell, and all beneath, a loose bed of sparkling snow-crystals, like white sand.

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

The flag sunk down and disappeared, and De Aery, losing his balance, plunged over and went with it.

We gazed after him in speechless horror. Before any one of us had sufficiently recovered himself to speak, we were startled by a dull sound, like a rushing wind, or distant, rumbling thunder; and an immense mass of snow, many hundred feet in depth, and covering a third of the cone, parted from its place, and, like a great, foaming wave, broken and shapeless, rushed down the mountain's side. For the moment, all eyes were fixed upon it. At first, it swept on without cohering, like a cataract of sand; but, on coming in contact with the moister snow below, it formed into a thousand balls and masses, some rolling and some sliding, but each gathering bulk and velocity as it went.

By the aid of our glasses we were able to sweep the rough slopes and precipitous descents below, to the distance of many miles; and, forgetting De Aery, we watched the development of the phenomenon with terror. The larger slides gradually absorbed the smaller ones, as common fish are swallowed by sharks; but those which remained, fattened and expanded by what they fed on, assumed enormous dimensions. Choosing different paths, they pursued their course in smoking tracks of devastation. Rocks, precipices, forests, furnished no obstruction. Roaring, crashing onward, as though Mars or the Sun had opened its batteries upon us, those sliding, whirling worlds of snow swept through valleys large enough to have furnished sites for cities, without a check, and bore down or overleaped all obstacles, as easily as a man would walk over an ant-hill, or some hollow where a toad had burrowed. Finally they were lost to sight, passing behind intervening spurs or ridges of the mountain, or becoming hidden in the cloud-mists which lay heavily about its base; but the sound continued to roll back upon us for some time, like the roar of distant artillery. I could no longer wonder at the terror with which the cry of an avalanche is said to fill the dwellers among the Alps.

As this absorbing pageant of the mountains disappeared, our thoughts reverted to De Aery. Had he been carried away by the snow-slip? or was his mangled corse below us among the black crags laid bare by that catastrophe? Turning my gaze beneath, I discovered, far down, many hundred feet, a moving object, scarcely bigger than a fly, and, on bringing my glass to bear upon it, perceived that it was the Frenchman. He was standing on a bare rib of rock, with his flag still in his hand, and apparently unharmed. Waving the ensign to attract our attention, at the same time he shouted with the whole strength of his lungs. But his voice scarcely reached us, and probably would not alone have attracted our notice. We replied with encouraging cheers; and the "three times three," which we had intended for the American eagle, was given on the spot to De Aery.

But how to rescue him from his perilous condition was indeed a serious question. The "Flying Cloud," it was obvious, with her great size and spreading pinions, could not venture among those ticklish quicksands, whose insecure foundations had just been so strikingly illustrated before us. Indeed, the slightest jar might precipitate another fall of snow, and bury the object of our solicitude five hundred feet deep in its bosom. The sagacity of Mr. Bonflon relieved us from our dilemma. He hoisted out the small car or tender, and, letting it down with great care and precision, safely accomplished the object. In the space of half an hour, De Aery, without a scratch, and, like a gallant Gaul, rather proud of his adventure than frightened at it, was again restored to our arms.

Drawing off from our dangerous proximity to the "Old Man of the Mountain," which had so nearly proved fatal to at least one of our number, but astonished beyond measure at the novelty of our experiences and the grandeur of the scenes we had witnessed, we retraced our course for a short distance, and, gradually lessening the interval between us and the earth, soon had the satisfaction of hearing the cry of "Land, ho!" from the look-out man. The valley was in sight where we were to take in water and enjoy a little picnic on the green grass, ere the form and smell of Mother Earth, with her homely but blessed realities, should be quite forgotten.

We effected our landing in complete safety. The spot was a little, luxurious nook among the lesser hills, with few trees, but full of wild flowers, wild fruits, and wild grasses. Everything about it was wild, but cheering and charming, especially to air-wanderers like us. The foot of the white hunter, or even of the roving Indian, had perhaps never visited it, nor foraging-parties of the buffalo or deer, for we saw no signs of them; but birds of

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

varied plumage and song, and troops of squirrels, with footprints here and there of the grizzly bear, and a drove of wild turkeys, with red heads aloft, rushing over an eminence at our left as we approached, and an occasional whir of a rattlesnake at our feet, sufficiently indicated the kind of denizens by which the plateau was inhabited.

Here, on the rich sward and delicate mosses, under the shadow of some willows, we spread out our repast by the side of a clear mountain-spring; and, to say nothing of old Otard and Schiedam Schnapps, opened some bottles of Sparkling Catawba, and old Jersey Champagne, of a remote vintage, which I have now quite forgotten. With the flow of these beverages flowed our speech, in jovial words and songs and raillery enough, if not in wit. De Aery, as having by a hair's breadth just escaped with his life, and in virtue of his extraordinary feat in leaping five hundred feet or more through a bank of snow, now that the danger was over, was made the butt of much pleasantry, which he bore with his usual equanimity and grace.

When these arrowy flights at the expense of the light-hearted Frenchman had exhausted themselves, I took occasion to inquire of him what his sensations were during his brief burial. He replied as follows: —

"I thought nothing at all about it. I remember feeling chagrined because I was making a failure, and clung tight to my flag, fearing to lose that too. *Mon Dieu!* It might be expected that one would feel cold, buried up in ice; but such was not the case. I was hot. The snow burned my face, as it came in contact with it. As to the ride, it was pleasant enough, but rather rapid and perplexing to the breath. It was like sinking into a pit of quicksand, where everything gives way below one, as though the bottom of the world had fallen out. There was the struggle of a moment to keep the fine snow out of my mouth and nostrils, as I drew in my breath, and the next instant my feet came in contact with the solid rock, where you discovered me. The magnificent avalanche you describe I know nothing about. I neither heard nor saw anything of it, only as I afterward examined the marks it had left behind it. This leads me to suppose that I was a good deal confused at the time, though I was not aware of it. Indeed, I have an impression of seeming to turn somersets in my descent, and this may account for it. But, for the honor of France, I saved my adopted country's flag."

High-minded Gaul! We all praised and honored him, and comforted him for his disappointment. It was a noble attempt he had made, to nail the American banner to the head of Mount James, impelled by the loftiest of motives, — and, like many others of its kind, had for the present failed. At some other time he might prove more successful; or some other might achieve the object in his place, and so appropriate his laurels; but no one would be likely to excel him in his flying leap. In this he had distanced even the famous traveller at Rhodes.

Having given a couple of hours to this species of recreation, we weighed anchor, and again got under way. Slowly and smoothly, without a ripple or a jar, we ascended through the blue ether to our former altitude, and floated off over those majestic mountain-tops, toward the west. Loath to part from scenes of such impressive beauty, — scenes, alone paralleled in our recollection by fabulous tales of Oriental enchantment, — we gazed behind us at those flashing crests of alabaster, until they grew small in the distance, and finally were wholly lost to our sight. With them disappeared the last vestige of the solid earth, and we were again afloat in space.

The following night and day were passed like their predecessors. Another night came, and we were over the eastern bound of the State of California. A few hours more, without accident, would terminate our remarkable voyage, and set us down in the city of San Francisco. All of us were brimming high with hope. Though we did not anticipate reaching the station before one or two o'clock in the morning, and probably should not disembark before dawn, we were loath to retire to rest. It was near midnight before all of us were in our berths.

But when at length there, I found it impossible to sleep. The excitement attendant on the beginning of the trip seemed to have returned on me with a double force. I listened for some sound to relieve the awful stillness which, like the wing of Death, seemed to have settled over the "Flying Cloud"; but there was no southing of the wind, as at sea, and no noise to be heard, save the monotonous movement of the engine and the paddle-wheels; and this, so evenly did they play, was rather a motion than a sound.

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

This period of restlessness was succeeded by one of strange bewilderment, which might have been sleep, or might not. Rapidly changing scenes and fantastic figures some of them beautiful and some horrible, flitted before me like a dissolving panorama. A band, as though of steel wire, seemed to encircle my brain, and to compress it closer and closer; and the spine, for its whole length, felt as though subjected to a like crushing pressure.

How long this state of hallucination continued I have no means of knowing. From it, by a great effort, I suddenly aroused myself, and returned to my proper senses. Where I was, and all the extraordinary events of the last few days, were clear in my recollection. But I was weighed down with weakness, and found, on attempting to speak, that I had no voice.

Suspecting that I had been stricken by some terrible disease, I attempted to rise; and, loath to disturb any of my fellow-travellers, undertook to crawl out upon the upper deck. This, after a good deal of effort, I accomplished. Lying, therefore, — I could not stand, — I prayed for a breath of air to relieve my hot and oppressed brow; but in vain. The atmosphere seemed gone. Chill and dark, the heavens spread out above me without a twinkle or a smile. The full-moon was there, and there was no cloud or haze to obscure her light; but she did not shine. Her white, rayless face was a mockery to the night. The same was true of the stars. The dazzling canopy was faded out, and Cygnus and the Great Bear were subdued to pallid points, like patches of white-gray paper stuck upon a wall.

Floating by the side of the "Flying Cloud," and nearly of her size, I discovered a dark, irregular object, and dragged myself to the edge of the deck to investigate it more closely. The two came together, but without damage or friction. They touched and parted, like substances nearly at rest in still water. I put out my hand on the strange visitor, and received a pretty severe shock, as though I had been subjected to the action of an electric battery. At the same time, a light, bluish flame ran over its surface, showing me more accurately its form and dimensions. To the touch, it was solid and cold, like iron or granite. I pressed upon it, and it yielded like a floating dish. I tried to break off a fragment, but was unable to separate so much as a scale.

A moment's reflection convinced me of the nature of this apparent island in the air. It was an immense aerolite; and with this conviction came the solution of my own painful state. We had unconsciously passed beyond the controlling power of the earth's gravitation, into the region of the upper atmosphere, where, science informs us, these meteoric stones float in equilibrium, until some accidental impulse throws them from their balance, when they are precipitated to the surface of the earth. I must be dying for lack of air. And the man at the helm, where was he? He must have fallen asleep, and left our vessel to her own buoyant fancies. And my companions! Bonflon! De Aery! All ere this might have perished, and the "Flying Cloud," aside from myself, be bearing into these upper altitudes nothing but a load of death.

Terror-struck, I dragged myself, with all the speed I could accomplish, to the stern. There sat the helmsman at his post, but asleep or insensible. I shook him, but he gave no signs of life. I shouted with what little strength I had, but in vain.

"Wake up! wake up!" I cried, "or we are lost!"

At length he opened his eyes, but did not move.

"Wake up!" I screamed again. "Breakers ahead, and worse. You have let the craft run wild. We are above our level. We are all dying for lack of air."

"Oh, let me sleep!" he murmured. "I must sleep a little while longer. It can't — can't be morning yet."

"By this time, fright, or the necessity of the occasion, was renewing my strength.

"Dick!" I shouted in his ear, "Dick, you scoundrel! you will murder us all. Do your duty, or I will shoot you!"

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

With this I discharged a barrel of my revolver above his head, which, like my voice in my efforts at hallooing, sounded only as a faint echo of itself, but, nevertheless, proved sufficient to give his dormant faculties a shock. He started up, and, though still but half-conscious, took the helm and gave it the direction I bade him.

From him I hastened to the engineer, whom I found in a like state of insensibility. I succeeded in arousing him; but it was necessary that he should be made to comprehend the difficulties of our situation, — that our craft, water-logged as it were, would float forever where she was, for all anybody could say to the contrary, until forced down by the power of the engine alone to lower and life-giving atmospheric planes. To get him to understand this was not so easy. But I succeeded in part, and, in my anxiety for my friends, rushed below to look after their condition.

As I anticipated, I found every one of them in a state of incipient asphyxia. But the "Flying Cloud" was already descending into denser air. Oxygen and pressure were performing their mystic work; and within half an hour I had the pleasure of seeing them all restored to consciousness and rapidly returning strength. But the renewed lights exposed a sight almost too frightful to mention. Every man of us was crimson from escaped blood, which seemed to have oozed forth, like a pale-red dew, from every pore of our bodies.

Messrs. Bonflon and De Aery, when they came to realize the danger from which we had so narrowly escaped, were nearly dumb with horror. The lively Frenchman exhibited a sensibility which the extremity of his single peril, a day or two before, had failed to call up. He wept aloud. Mr. Bonflon was circumspect and thoughtful. He did not lose his Yankee balance; but both of them, each in his own way, overwhelmed me with expressions of obligation.

But the dangers of this dreadful night — a night which can never pass from my recollection — were not yet over. We were all gathered in the main cabin, congratulating each other, next after our escape, on our rapidly returning strength, — happy in the thought that our trip out, though sprinkled with danger, was so near a prosperous completion, and almost momentarily expecting to hear the stroke of the bell which should announce to us that the red light to designate our place of landing was in sight, when, instead of the silver ring of this messenger of peace, we were startled and horrified by an alarm of fire.

Bonflon and De Aery rushed to the engine-room. A cloud of smoke poured out from the door by which they disappeared. They were gone only for a moment; for no man could remain in the hell of flames and vapors into which they ventured and live. They came out dragging with them the half-suffocated, scorched, and blazing engineer. How the accident occurred, it was impossible to divine and useless to inquire. Closing the door tightly after them to confine the flames, where confinement, except for the briefest period, among matter so combustible, and partitions scarcely more formidable than those of a paper bandbox, was clearly impossible, they threw the burning engineer into our arms, and themselves took the management of the craft.

De Aery, in this crisis, rose from the man to the hero, almost to a demigod. His orders rung through the startled air clear and round like the voice of a golden bell. Bonflon seconded him with coolness and decision. With us a moment sufficed to extinguish the burning garments of the engineer; but by that time the flames had burst from the engine-room, and that part of the beautiful boat was a ragged, crackling ruin.

Fleeing to the upper deck, and taking refuge in the bow, we became sensible that we were descending through the air with frightful rapidity. When the accident occurred, we were already at a low level, on the look-out for the signal at our station. This circumstance was in our favor, if anything could be, when a danger so imminent and dreadful was pressing. Land, like a hazy shadow, was just discoverable in the dim distance below us; and oh for one foot of it as a place of rest! But if it were possible to escape the flames, it was clear enough that we must be dashed in pieces against the solid earth.

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

De Aery was now the only one remaining in the stern. He was exposed to great peril, but refused to quit his post while it remained possible to control in any degree the motions of the vessel. The flames played about him without shaking his courage or his coolness, and broke through upon the upper deck and separated him from us with a seething hedge and whirlpool of fire. We lost sight of him, and supposed he had perished, when suddenly his voice, issuing from the midst of the furnace, rung on our ears like a trumpet.

"Up the ropes! quit the ship, or you die, every man of you!" he shouted; and at the same time we discovered him emerging from the flames and smoke, and ascending the network which enveloped the balloon and connected it with the ship. We followed his example; some of our number — the more timid or the more daring, it would be difficult to say which — continuing the ascent until they had reached the upper surface of the gas-chamber, and placed its entire fragile bulk between them and the hazard they most dreaded.

The momentary refuge afforded by these upper works was scarcely attained, when the bow, where we had stood but a minute before, and the whole hull of the "Flying Cloud" with it, blended together in one mass of surging fire. The appearance in the heavens of this strange sight, to a watcher at some rancho, or in the not distant city of San Francisco, if such there were, must have afforded a more vivid illustration of the fall of a blazing star or meteoric wonder than astronomer has ever put on record.

But I delay the catastrophe. Land and water soon became distinguishable from each other beneath us, and hills from valleys, and forests from bare plains. There was little wind, except the fierce currents rushing upward, produced by the heat of our own conflagration. This, for the time, subdued everything to itself, and, as we approached the ground, served by its direction to modify the fury of our descent. The denser lower atmosphere also contributed to the same end; and, most fortunately, when we reached the earth, and the collision came, we struck in water instead of on the land.

Still, the collision was a fierce one. With the mass of fire between us and the ground directly below, blinded by the smoke and half suffocated by the heat, we were not conscious of the good fortune that awaited us, until, with a swoop and a plunge, we found ourselves submerged, and, with an equal velocity, immediately thrown back again by the buoyant force of the balloon into the open air. The flood of fire in which we had descended was instantly extinguished; and we awoke to a sense of our possible safety in darkness rendered doubly profound by the contrast.

Daylight was near at hand. By a careful adjustment of our weights we kept the balloon from rolling, and sustained ourselves above the water among the netting. As morning came, we discovered we had landed in a small lake, hardly large enough to be dignified with the name, but obviously of considerable depth. The shore was not distant; and as the day was sultry, with a little grateful labor at swimming and towing, on the part of a few of us, we soon reached it. There we examined into each other's condition. Scarce one of us but was able to show damage by fire, or from too rough contact with the fragments of the "Flying Cloud," which preceded us in our plunge into the lake. But no bones were broken, and no one badly flayed. The case of the engineer was the worst; but even he was able to keep upon his feet, and pronounced in no danger.

No hut or field or sign of inhabitants was to be seen. With mixed feelings, in which, for the present at least, the sense of personal safety triumphed over all regrets, even with Messrs. Bonflon and De Aery, at the shipwreck of so many brilliant hopes, we scuttled that part of our craft still afloat, and sunk it in the lake; and with weary footsteps, but unobstructed with baggage, as near as we could determine by the aid of a compass, took the direction toward San Francisco. A couple of hours brought us to the rancho of Senor Jose Dianza, who received us as a band of pilgrims over the Plains, who, at the hands of robbers and the elements, had lost everything but life, and helped us on to the city of the land of gold.

It is needless to detain the reader with the particulars of our return. They were such only as occur to thousands in the rough and circuitous transit between San Francisco and New York. We came home by the Isthmus route, and

Trial Trip of the 'Flying Cloud'

in ships that ploughed the honest waves. We explained our absence to our disturbed families and friends as best we might; and some will remember — and if they do not, they can refresh their recollection by a reference to the public prints — that several missing gentlemen of some importance in the world, about that time, suddenly reappeared upon the stage of action.

We resolved that the whole affair in which we had been engaged should remain forever buried in oblivion. But time and reflection have wrought a change with me, though I shall not presume to disturb the veil which covers my associates. I have come to consider the adventure quite too good to be lost, and the experiment in aerial navigation, which came so near proving successful, of too much importance to science to be suppressed. Hence, conquering my repugnance, I have decided, on my own responsibility, to give these interesting and valuable particulars to the world.