

THE CONQUEST OF THE AIR

Chapter I

On the first of September 187* at eight o'clock in the evening, several people were assembled in the conversation room of the Grand Hotel in Arcachon. A sudden reduction in the temperature and the fine but concentrated rain that was falling outside explained that unusual gathering. It was necessary to kill time, as people say in vulgar terms, and the bathers were killing it by chatting. Sometimes, however, there was a lull in the conversation, and everyone listened silently to the splashing of waves on the sandy beach or the roar of the wind shaking the branches of the pine trees.¹

Several groups had formed; everyone, according to his character, his humor or the caprice of the moment, was able to vary his chat. In one corner they were talking literature, in another, the discussion was entirely political; here, women were discussing fashion; there, serious financiers were pompously raising the 3% to the level of a social principle. The most animate group, however, was the one whose members were talking about distant explorations and the voyagers who had undertaken them.

"Yes," exclaimed Sir Walter Donderry, an Englishman as plump as a Rabelaisian monk and as red-faced as a poppy, "yes—and I don't say this, Messieurs, to wound your national susceptibility, my compatriots alone have the perseverance and boldness that overcomes the obstacles and braves the dangers into which voyagers penetrating into unknown regions often run."

The United Kingdom is the foremost nation in the world!" added Harry Catlen, a former manufacturer from Birmingham, endowed by his fortune with the title of Esquire, sententiously.²

"The English sometimes push conceit and vanity to the point of stupidity," a Russian whispered in the ear of a Frenchman whom hazard had set beside him.

"It's a malady of which we have rid ourselves, but which we have transmitted to the British islanders," the Frenchman replied, in a low voice.

"Monsieur Kisseloff," Sir Walter Donderry put in, "I didn't hear the words you addressed to Monsieur Dambielle, your neighbor, but I'll wager a thousand pounds sterling that they weren't in praise of the English."

"You're right, Sir Walter, and..."

"Oh, of course! I understand your reflections. National arrogance is almost as detestable as individual arrogance. The comment thrown into our conversation by the honorable Mr. Catlen, Esquire, is calculated to aggravate the nerves of the man least equipped with patriotic fiber—even a simple subject of the Prince of Monaco or a meager citizen of the Republic of Andorra."

"However," said Harry Catlen, "the United Kingdom is..."

"Is the foremost nation in the world. Agreed, my dear Harry—but think, and don't repeat it so often. We must extend our amiability to foreigners if you want us to have any right to theirs."

"Well said, in the opinion of Will Tooke!" said an American from Kansas who had not yet opened his mouth.

"Your appreciation flatters me, Mr. Tooke," added Sir Walter Donderry, "for it is stupid prejudices that makes nations rivals."

"Personally," said Dambielle, "I approve of praising one's fatherland, even emphatically. You might find that ridiculous or humorous, Messieurs, but my conviction is unshakable."

"Every good Englishman," said Catlen, "ought to proclaim that the United Kingdom is..."

"The foremost nation in the world," added Dambielle, with vivacity. "Well, I can say as much of France, Monsieur Catlen."

¹ This location is significant; Arcachon was a newly-constructed town in 1875, commissioned by Napoléon III in 1857 specifically to accommodate and facilitate a new fashion for "bathing stations"—seaside resorts to which the rentiers of Paris frequently retreated in the hot month of August, by means of recently-constructed railways, and where they routinely mingled with foreign tourists. It is about 55 kilometers from Brown's home town of Bordeaux.

² "Esquire" is not a title limited in English usage to the rich, but Brown seems to be unfamiliar with its actual usage.

"No, because the United Kingdom is..."

"Please, gentlemen," Sir Walter interjected, "don't remain on that terrain any longer, for the best arguments are never appreciated in such cases, and sometimes degenerate into regrettable quarrels. The man who is indifferent to his fatherland is unworthy and despicable, but what can you do to grant that superiority justly, which each people claims solely for itself?"

"Why, then," asked Kisseloff, "did you assert just now that the English alone have boldness and perseverance enough to venture into unexplored regions?"

"Forgive me, Monsieur de Kisseloff; I did not intend to be exclusive. I know that all civilized nations furnish intelligent and courageous pioneers, but in England, the passion for long voyages and the research of the unknown preoccupies all minds; it's a fever, a frenzy! Among us, explorers are more numerous than anywhere else; I would make you a detailed list, but count and compare, and you'll be convinced that it's without the slightest vanity that we claim the first rank.

"Moreover, gentlemen, the scientists, journalists and conscientious and impartial writers of other nations render us justice. At this moment, I am reading with the keenest pleasure the works of Jules Verne, a French author whose merit is appreciated all over the world, and I notice that his heroes are almost always English. I'm not talking about the *voyages extraordinaires*, in which erudite fantasy and originality play the major role, but purely scientific and literary works in which the most difficult adventures are related. There is Captain Hatteras, an Englishman, who becomes the first to reach the cold Arctic regions; there is Dr. Ferguson, Kennedy and Joe, three Englishmen who, in *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, launch themselves into the air and cross the whole of Africa; there's Jasper Hobson, another Englishman, who is the hero of the dramatic plot of *The Fur Country*; and there is Phileas Fogg, still an Englishman, who goes *Around the World in Eighty Days*."

"I'll stop you there, Sir Walter," said Dambielle. "I beg you to note that Phileas Fogg is not alone—that his servant, Passepartout, a Frenchman, accompanies him and plays an important role in the course of the work."

"And I affirm," added Will Tooke, "that the Americans have got closer to the North Pole than the English."

"I know all that as well as you do, gentlemen," said Sir Walter Donderry. "For Arctic explorers, America can victoriously oppose to us Kane, Hayes and Captain Hall, who have all surpassed the eightieth degree of latitude. I also know that Passepartout, in *Around the World in Eighty Days*, relieves the monotony of a journey at full steam, if I might express it thus, but that certainly doesn't prevent the French author about whom we're talking from rendering justice to our nation in preferentially choosing the actors in his dramas from among the English."

"The English," said Dambielle, "are greatly encouraged by the scientific societies of their country and have more money to spend than we do. If money is the sinew of war, it's also that of the endeavors of peace and progress. In France, it's the scantiness of our resources that often stops us; without that, we'd be as good as the English."

"Better!" put in a man of about thirty leaning nonchalantly on the mantelpiece, and who had seemed until then to be listening to the conversation distractedly.

Everyone turned round. Each of them, by means of his expression, seemed to be demanding an explanation.

"Is it necessary to extol Phileas Fogg," continued the man who had interrupted, "because he went around the world in eighty days? Gentlemen, I'll wager that I can do it myself in forty days."

"Are you mad, Valdy?" asked Dambielle, moving closer to the man who had spoken so boldly.

Sir Walter Donderry was gripped by a fit of laughter that lifted up his abdomen in violent jerky somersaults. "Oh, Monsieur Valdy," he said, still laughing, "I wouldn't want to neglect, in your regard...the respect that...well brought-up people...owe to one another...but, truly, your proposition is so funny...oh, it's obvious that we're in Arcachon, and that Arcachon is Gascon territory..."

"Gascon territory, a former possession of the United Kingdom," Harry Catlen, Esquire, put in, peering curiously at Valdy. He too was surprised and bewildered.

"Messieurs," Valdy repeated, "I'm willing to bet. My proposal is quite serious."

"Have you the legs of an antelope?" asked Sir Walter Donderry. "Have you the powerful fins of a shark, or the wings of a bird?"

"Who knows?" Valdy replied, simply.

“But the most up-to-date and best-known means of transport don’t permit us to suppose a speed...”

“Messieurs, the bet is still on offer.”

“Well then, let’s bet!” cried Harry Catlen, Esquire.

“Not yet,” said Dambielle, “I’d like to believe that Monsieur Valdy will think about it and take back his rather boastful proposition.”

“Well, so be it!” Valdy said. “Twenty-four hours is sufficient to reflect. Tomorrow, I’ll renew my offer.”

“Do you intend to make this voyage of circumnavigation alone, Monsieur?” asked Will Tooke.

“No, certainly not—but I intend to choose those who will accompany me.”

“Your confidence is persuasive. With your permission, I’ll be one of your companions.”

“With pleasure, Monsieur Tooke, for you seem bold and resolute to me.”

“Thank you.” The American shook the Frenchman’s hand.

They continued chatting for a little while longer. Gradually, the drawing room emptied, and no one remained but Valdy and Dambielle. The latter employed all sorts of arguments to persuade his friend to retract, but Valdy was unshakable. The two young men separated slightly annoyed with one another.

The rain had stopped. Dambielle went out on to the terrace briefly and smoked—or, rather, chewed—a cigar. He was about to go back in to go to bed when he was accosted by Kisseloff.

“Forgive me, Monsieur Dambielle,” the Russian said to him, “but would you do me the honor of chatting with me briefly?”

“As much as you please, Monsieur Kisseloff—although I suppose you want to talk to me about Valdy and the ridiculous wager that he wants to make with Sir Walter Donderry.”

“It is, indeed, Monsieur Valdy about whom I want to talk, if you’ll permit. You’re his friend, I believe.”

“Since childhood.”

“Then you know him very well. Do you think that he is a man to carry his projects through?”

“If he affirms that he can travel around the world in forty days, he’s capable of doing it in thirty-nine. By what means? I don’t know—but take it from me that he’ll attempt the impossible in this reckless adventure, even if it costs him his life.”

“That reassures me, Monsieur Dambielle. For a moment, I thought that Monsieur Valdy was nothing but a vulgar charlatan.”

“No, no—Valdy is sometimes eccentric, but he’s serious and knowledgeable. Moreover, his eccentricities are no longer surprising when one knows the mental tortures that he’s endured. Take note—suffering has marked his forehead with an indelible trace. The fixity of his gaze, the pallor of his face and the sad smile that sometimes parts his lips inspire a profound pity.”

“And yet Monsieur Vardy is young, and despair has not yet entered his soul.”

“I hope you’re not mistaken, Monsieur—but I fear that a suicide might be hidden behind this crazy enterprise that he’s meditating. He’s like a soldier weary of life, who, not wanting to put an end to his days himself, throws himself into the thick of the action during a battle.”

“Would it be indiscreet to ask you the cause of your friend’s affliction? Perhaps I can help you to calm him down.”

“Thank you for your good and generous words, Monsieur Kisseloff; I’ll tell you everything about my friend without beating around the bush. Marcel Valdy and I were born in X , a small town situated a few leagues from Bordeaux, and went to school together. That explains, briefly, the friendship that unites us.

“A few years ago, Valdy wanted to marry Berthe Férandier, the daughter of a high-ranking judge who had recently retired. One cannot spend thirty to forty years in the latter profession without one’s character acquiring the spitefulness of a harpy. One day, Père Férandier slammed the door in Valdy’s face and told him not to come near his daughter again. Marcel loved Berthe, and she seemed delighted with her future husband. Nothing, in fact, seemed to presage a rupture; the fortune, honorability and proportionate age were very similar in the two fiancés.

“Soon, we had an explanation of the revolting actions of the former judge. As sly as a fox, and as crafty as a Norman, he had caught in his net one of his former colleagues, the Marquis de Béconnais, an insignificant magistrate but a worthy man, considerably enriched some time before by unexpected

inheritances. He was the son-in-law dreamed off by Monsieur Férandier—and his daughter would be a Marquise! Berthe allowed herself to become intoxicated by her suitor's large fortune—or was she yielding to the pleasure that certain women experience when they adorn themselves with trinkets and satisfy their vanity? I don't know, but she became the Marquise de Béconnais.

“It was a terrible blow for Marcel Valdy; he couldn't understand why a beautiful young woman, endowed with all the graces, would consent to marry a decrepit old man. I won't describe the fits of rage he had, during which he trembled like a madman. That state of continual agitation was succeeded by a malady of languor; for a time, we thought he was going to die. When fever gripped him, and delirium tortured him, he never ceased crying out for Berthe, his darling Berthe, his beloved Berthe.

“Finally, Monsieur, youth triumphed over dolor, and Valdy recovered rather suddenly. Since then, he has conserved a kind of misanthropic sadness, a surly tone that has sometimes distressed me; but Marcel was not one of those effeminate, romantic individuals who live in a perpetual affectation. His education was careful and extensive; so, in order to combat painful memories, he surrounded himself with books and instruments of physics and chemistry, set up a laboratory and worked with a feverish ardor.

“In order to distract himself, and perhaps to instruct himself, he traveled, and was away for here long years before returning to X***. When he came back, he was accompanied by two mariners named Cardounet and Pickerreek. He accommodated them for a long time and always treated them with the most perfect amity. Cardounet and Pickerreek were rough and rather coarse individuals, but they enjoyed life and were cheerful rogues. Whenever the two matelots left, Valdy urged them to return promptly, and they reappeared after each voyage, to rest from the fatigues of their long and perilous crossings.

“In company with the mariners, Valdy underwent a change that surprised us; a frank cheerfulness replaced his black sadness, and he became the most outgoing person one could meet. About two months ago, Pickerreek and Cardounet left my friend again, and he became more eccentric, odder and sadder than ever. I persuaded him to come and distract himself in Arcachon, and—should I confess it to you?—I'm here partly for his sake. I try to amuse him, hoping that time will make him forget Mademoiselle Férandier and...but the bet he wants to make with Sir Walter Donderry had just set all my plans back.

“That, Monsieur, is all I can tell you about Valdy.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Dambielle,” said Kisseloff.

The two young men walked for a few minutes without saying a word. Suddenly, the Russian stopped, and emerged from his reflections. “Monsieur Dambielle,” he said, “those whom the Lord puts to the proof are always the elect. Look at all the great men who honor the nations; they only produced their masterpieces, or made their astonishing discoveries, after having undergone ordeals in which weaker natures would have succumbed. Monsieur Valdy is not a vulgar individual. Suffering has weighed upon him, but he reacted with hard labor. He will show the woman who disdained him that talent is worth more than a title or a fortune. Who knows whether the fruit of his sleepless nights might not be manifest in an invention that will astonish all of humankind?”

“Your enthusiasm is admirable, Monsieur Kisseloff, but I fear that it might be a tacit approval of Valdy's projects.”

“That's true. The strangeness and unexpectedness of the proposal made a deep impression on me, and now, instead of trying to dissuade him, I shall be the first to encourage him.”

“But you'll be spreading oil on the fire.”

“No matter! Tomorrow, I shall ask Monsieur Valdy to accept me as a traveling companion. If he consents, he can count on a devotion proof against anything, and a gratitude that will only end with my life.”

“He might drag you into a perilous adventure...”

“Where would the merit of triumph be if there were not dangers to brave and obstacles to overcome? I shall accompany Monsieur Valdy and...but I shall impose one condition on him.”

“What?”

“That there are no Englishmen among us.”

“Has Harry Catlen, Esquire, filled you with disgust for his compatriots?”

“The English have all pretensions. It's necessary to show them what can be done without them, and better than them.”

“If you fail, they’ll laugh at you...and they’ll win your money, for I assume that you’re going to bet, along with Valdy.”

“My fortune is at your friend’s disposal.”

“You’re as crazy as he is, Monsieur Kisseloff, but your heart is good. Permit me to shake your hand.”

“With pleasure.”

The two young men walked for a while longer, chatting about insignificant things, and then went back in to go to bed. Before they parted, however, they heard Harry Catlen exclaiming: “In the entire United Kingdom there’s no one as mad as Mr. Valdy. Tomorrow, I’ll bet...and I’ll win.”

“Perhaps,” said the Russian.

I dare not affirm that Kisseloff’s sleep was untroubled and dreamless. As soon as dawn broke, he knocked discreetly on the door of Valdy’s room.

“Come in!” called the latter.

Valdy received his early visitor in very simple garb. Several maps were extended in front of him and, for want of compasses, he was measuring certain distances with a graduated meter rule. It was evident that he had sacrificed part of the night to geographical studies.

“I beg your pardon for disturbing you,” said Kisseloff, “but I’ve been waiting impatiently for daylight for two hours. The proposal you made yesterday has preoccupied me, and...”

“And you doubt too, don’t you?”

“On the contrary; I have the greatest confidence in you. At any rate, I’ll explain myself without bating around the bush. I’m Count Ivan Kisseloff, an officer on the staff on the Russian Ministry of War. I have an annual income of 25,000 roubles, and I’m putting my entire fortune, and my person, at your disposal.”

Odd and—let us say the word—eccentric as Valdy was, he could not master his astonishment or prevent himself from looking at his interlocutor in amazement.

“Well, Monsieur,” said the Russian. “Do you accept?”

“Monsieur Kisseloff,” Valdy replied, “the spontaneity of your generous offer moves me, but I ought not to, and cannot, draw you to your doom. Am I certain of success?”

“Yes, for you have faith in your work.”

“That’s true—I have faith in it, but also resignation. When I depart, I might never be seen again.”

“You didn’t present all those objections to Will Tooke.”

“Will Tooke is older than you are; then again, he’s an American from the Far West—which is to say, one of those powerful individualists that only the New World can furnish; one of those men who confront danger for the pleasure of confronting it and put all their abnegation into the pursuit of the smallest and greatest endeavors.”

“I know that people nurse prejudices against Russians. For you Occidentals, we are still, to some extent, the ancient Scythians.”

“No, Monsieur Kisseloff; in Russia, as everywhere, there are people for whom progress is not a vain word. You alone would serve to prove that, but I fear that you might be the dupe of your imagination. You have been seduced by the unexpectedness and boldness of my projects. Soon, lassitude and disgust might replace the effervescence of your spirit. Moreover, you’re an officer, bound by certain duties whose demands you cannot avoid with impunity.”

“Oh, Monsieur, that last consideration does not prevent your accepting me as a traveling companion! In Russia, we love adventures that are out of the ordinary; the Minister to whom I’m attached knows that science requires volunteers, and sometime victims. He’ll be eager to grant me the leave I need. Come on, Monsieur Valdy—don’t refuse my request.”

“Well, all right. You have the fine aspirations, the ardor and the courage of youth, which realize great things. You’ll be a useful auxiliary.”

Kisseloff thanked Valdy warmly and left him without referring to the condition he had mentioned the previous evening.

“Bah!” he said. “Monsieur Valdy is betting against the English; he won’t take any of them.” That judicious reflection soothed him and rendered him the happiest of mortals.

As one can imagine, all the conversations held in Arcachon on the second of September 187* revolved around Valdy. The latter, it must be admitted, encountered little approval. The English colony, in particular, jeered at the temerity of the Frenchman and promised to subject him to a humiliation that he would remember.

Sir Walter Donderry was thoughtful, however; he was seen walking with Dambielle and heard talking to him animatedly. Sir Walter was certainly a Englishman in the full meaning of the term, but if he possessed the qualities of his compatriots, he did not have the ridiculousness that characterizes them. Having traveled a great deal, and seen a great deal and leaned a great deal in consequence, he was exempt from certain weaknesses and a certain arrogance. He was an eminent man, owing the consideration he enjoyed to his broad education, his high intelligence and the benefits that he distributed discreetly around him. His generosity was extreme and he strove to put into practice the Scriptural dictum: *He passeth over the earth like a beneficent dew.*

He was, therefore, saddened that his provocations had driven Valdy to make the wager. His protruding belly seemed diminished by a third and his joyful and benevolent face, ordinarily crimson, took on violet tints—a sure sign, in him, of violent emotion and great irritation. He resolved to try anything to prevent Valdy from attempting his enterprise.

Finally, the impatiently-awaited evening arrived. The vicinity of the Grand Hotel, the vestibule and the conversation room were overflowing with people. It was generally believed that something extraordinary was about to happen. Commentaries followed their course; the most bizarre, baroque and guttural exclamations escaped the crowd for foreigners still holidaying in Arcachon.

Eight o'clock sounded. Valdy, accompanied by Dambielle, Ivan Kisseloff and Will Tooke, came into the conversation room. A near-religious silence immediately fell.

“Messieurs,” said Valdy, “I have wagered that I will go around the world in forty days, but I omitted to submit the condition essential to my departure. I request a year in order to make preparations.”

Sir Walter Donderry breathed more easily. He thought that the Frenchman was retreating, and he was delighted. Harry Catlen, Esquire, grimaced and sniggered.

“I have the habit of keeping my promises,” Valdy went on, severely. “You are perfectly at liberty not to wager, Monsieur Catlen, but I affirm to you that on September the first next year, I shall set out.”

“Setting out is nothing; coming back is the difficult thing,” said Harry Catlen.

“I shall come back if it pleases God,” Valdy added. “Now, Messieurs, I have another objection to present to you. I count on going around the world by traveling westwards; you are not unaware that, in that direction, the days are lengthened by four minutes per degree, which is twenty-four hours in 360°; I shall therefore lose the day that I would gain if I were to steer eastwards; I shall return on the eleventh of October and not the tenth. It is forty days that I request for my expedition, and it is forty days that you must grant me. My fortune amounts, in round figures to nearly a hundred thousand francs; I wager a hundred thousand francs.”

“I also wager a hundred thousand francs with Monsieur Valdy,” said Ivan Kisseloff.

“And me the same,” added Will Tooke.

A general rumor succeeded the silence so scrupulously observed until then. The members of the audience consulted one another. The Englishmen, and even blonde Englishwomen, initially amazed by the audacity and self-confidence of the Frenchman, were offering to wager sums larger than those proposed. Dambielle recorded the stakes. Harry Catlen, Esquire, would wager a hundred thousand francs, Sir Walter Donderry fifty thousand. The remaining hundred and fifty thousand francs would be divided among several individuals of various nationalities.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it was agreed that Marcel Valdy would be in Arcachon in a year's time, that he would leave on the first of September and return after having traveled around the world in forty days. For the return, a rendezvous was arranged at the Café de Bordeaux in Bordeaux on the evening of the eleventh of October. The proofs of the exact accomplishment of the rapid excursion would be furnished by letters and newspaper articles.

“Monsieur Marcel Valdy,” said Sir Walter Donderry, “I've wagered two thousand pounds against you, but I hope I shall lose them.”

“You have a noble character, Sir Walter, and I understand your apprehensions. Be assured that I am not engaging lightly in an adventure in which I have nothing to gain but money if I succeed, and

ruination if I fail. I am devoting myself to a scientific task, which might perhaps be destined to change all our social relations. Salomon de Caux was locked up as a madman,³ Galileo was persecuted, Denis Papin pauperized, Robert Fulton mocked by his compatriots and mistrusted by the governments of Europe—and yet those valiant minds endowed humankind with the most unexpected and marvelous discoveries. Shall I despair before the struggle? Shall I withdraw because no one has confidence in me? No, no—that shall not be.”

“You’re right, Monsieur Marcel; sternly-tempered natures triumph over everything. May it please God that you succeed, even if I have to sacrifice another two thousand pounds.”

Valdy was interrogated from all directions; he was begged to reveal the means he intended to employ in order to carry out his voyage, but he made no reply. Toward the end of the evening he met up with Kisseloff and Will Tooke, and spoke to them briefly.

“Messieurs,” he said, “I thank you for the confidence of which you have given evidence, and I count, with your aid, on confounding the mockers and the skeptics. At this moment, I can’t give you any explanation. Can you arrive at the Hôtel de Bayonne in Bordeaux on the first of February next year? I shall be entirely at your disposal, and we can draw up our plans.

“I’m traveling for some time in Syria and Egypt,” said Will Tooke, “but on the first of February, I’ll be in Bordeaux.”

“When he’s informed of the goal of my voyage,” Ivan Kisseloff added, “the Minister of War will grant me permission. Count on me.”

The Russian and the American shook Valdy’s hand cordially, and left.

³ The engineer Salomon de Caus, or Caux, published *Les Raisons des forces mouvantes* [The Principles of Motive Force] in 1615 containing a description of a steam-driven pump, which caused François Arago to name him as the true inventor of the steam engine. Like Denis Papin, who has a much more justified claim to that invention, he was a Huguenot, and religious prejudice played some part in determining that he did much of his work outside France, in England and Germany.