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WONDERFUL BALLOON ASCENTS

or, the Conquest of the Skies

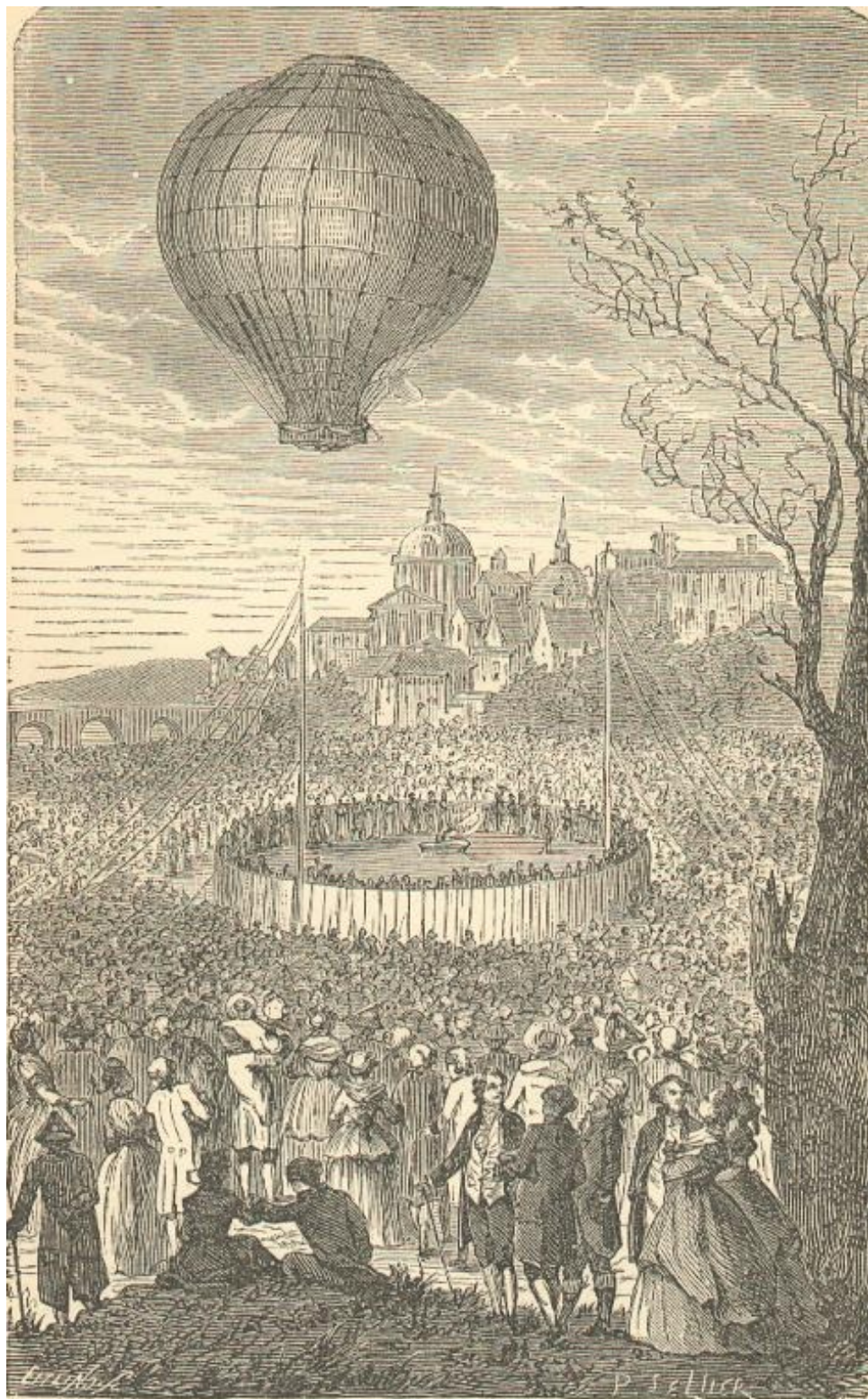
A History of Balloons and Balloon Voyages

By F. Marion

1870



BALLOON OF THE MARQUIS D'ARLANDES.



THE FIRST AERIAL VOYAGE.

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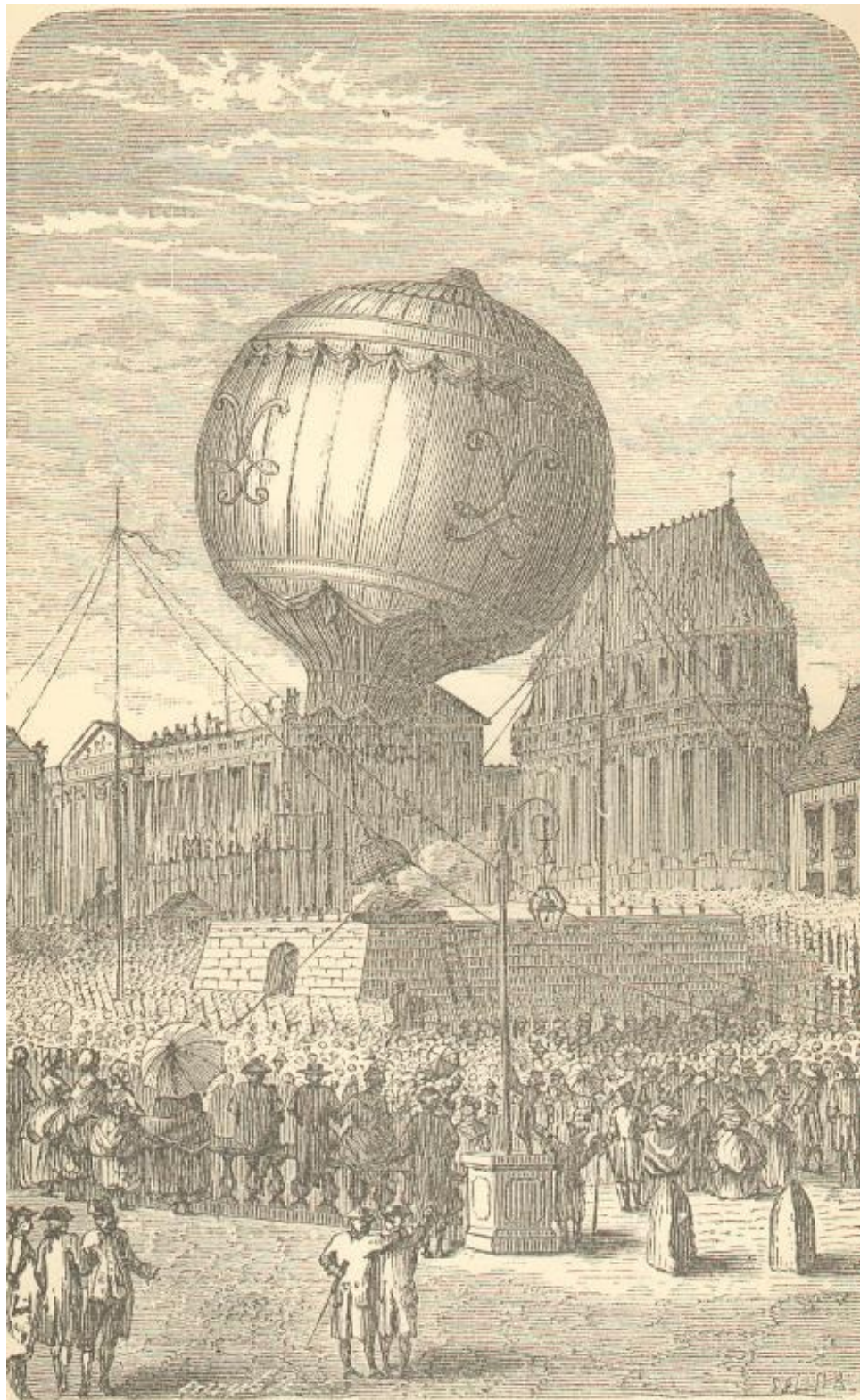
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PREFACE

“Let posterity know, and knowing be astonished, that on the fifteenth day of September, 1784, Vincent Lunardi of Lucca, in Tuscany, the first aerial traveller in Britain, mounting from the Artillery Ground in London, and traversing the regions of the air for two hours and fifteen minutes, on this spot revisited the earth. In this rude monument for ages be recorded this wondrous enterprise successfully achieved by the powers of chemistry and the fortitude of man, this improvement in science which the great Author of all Knowledge, patronising by his Providence the inventions of mankind, hath graciously permitted, to their benefit and his own eternal glory.”

The stone upon which the above inscription was carved, stands, or stood recently, near Collier’s End, in the parish of Standon, Hertfordshire; and it will possibly afford the English reader a more accurate idea of the feelings with which the world hailed the discovery of the balloon than any incident or illustration drawn from the annals of a foreign country.

The work which we now introduce to our readers does not exaggerate the case when it declares that no discovery of modern times has aroused so large an amount of enthusiasm, has excited so many hopes, has appeared to the human race to open up so many vistas of enterprise and research, as that for which we are mainly indebted to the Brothers Montgolfier. The discovery or the invention of the balloon, however, was one of those efforts of genius and enterprise which have no infancy. It had reached its full growth when it burst upon the world, and the ninety years which have since elapsed have witnessed no development of the original idea. The balloon of to-day—the balloon in which Coxwell and Glaisher have made their perilous trips into the remote regions of the air—is in almost every respect the same as the balloon with which “the physician Charles,” following in the footsteps of the Montgolfiers, astonished Paris in 1783. There are few more tantalising stories in the annals of invention than this. So much had been accomplished when Roziers made his first aerial voyage above the astonished capital of France that all the rest seemed easy. The new highway appeared to have been thrown open to the world, and the dullest imagination saw the air thronged with colossal chariots, bearing travellers in perfect safety, and with more than the speed of the eagle, from city to city, from country to country, reckless of all the obstacles—the seas, and rivers, and mountains—which Nature might have placed in the path of the wayfarer. But from that moment to the present the prospect which was thus opened up has remained a vision and nothing more. There are—as those

who visited the Crystal Palace two years ago have reason to know—not a few men who still believe in the practicability of journeying by air. But, with hardly an exception, those few have abandoned all idea of utilising the balloon for this purpose. The graceful “machine” which astonished the world at its birth remains to this day as beautiful, and as useless for the purposes of travel, as in the first hour of its history. The day may come when some one more fortunate than the Montgolfiers may earn the Duke of Sutherland’s offered reward by a successful flight from the Mall to the top of Stafford House; but when this comes to pass the balloon will have no share in the honour of the achievement. Not the less, however, is the story of this wonderful invention worthy of being recorded. It deserves a place in the history of human enterprise—if for nothing else—because of the daring courage which it has in so many cases brought to light. From the days of Roziers down to those of Coxwell, our aeronauts have fearlessly tempted dangers not less terrible than those which face the soldier as he enters the imminent deadly breach; and, as one of the chapters in this volume mournfully proves, not a few of their number have paid the penalty of their rash courage with their lives. All the more is it to be regretted that so little practical good has resulted from their labours and their sacrifices; and that so many of those who have perished in balloon voyages have done so whilst serving to better end than the amusement of a holiday crowd. There is, however, another aspect which makes at least the earlier history of the balloon well worth preserving. This is the influence which the invention had upon the generation which witnessed it. As these pages show, the people of Europe seem to have been absolutely intoxicated by the success of the Montgolfiers’ discovery. There is something bitterly suggestive in our knowledge of this fact. Whilst pensions and honours and popular applause were being showered upon the inventors of the balloon, Watt was labouring unnoticed at his improvements of the steam-engine—a very prosaic affair compared with the gilded globe which Montgolfier had caused to rise from earth amidst the acclamations of a hundred thousand spectators, but one which had before it a somewhat different history to that of the more startling invention. England, when it remembers the story of the steam-engine, has little need to grudge France the honour of discovering the balloon. After all, however, Great Britain had its share in that discovery. The early observations of Francis Bacon and Bishop Wilkins paved the way for the later achievement, whilst it was our own Cavendish who discovered that hydrogen gas was lighter than air; and Dr. Black of Edinburgh, who first employed that gas to raise a globe in which it was contained from the earth. The Scotch professor, we are told, thought that the discovery which he made when he sent his little tissue-paper balloon from his lecture-table to the ceiling of his classroom, was of no use except as affording the means of making an interesting experiment. Possibly

our readers, after they have perused this volume, may think that Dr Black was not after all so far wrong as people once imagined. Be this as it may, however, in these pages is the history of the balloon, and of the most memorable balloon voyages, and we comprehend the story to our readers not the less cordially that it comes from the land where the balloon had its birth.

London, January, 1870.

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