

On My Encounter with an Incredible Creature of the Air

by Henri Giffard

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To my fellow engineers, scientists, and aeronautical enthusiasts:

In this brief report to our excellent journal, I shall endeavor to render an account of a most unusual experience, a horrific and unexpected encounter with an as-yet unknown creature. This extraordinary incident occurred during one of my simple experiments in manned, powered, balloon flight.

Although the principal subject is in the realm of zoology, you can imagine that I would have little standing with the leading societies of naturalists in France. I beg your patience, my fellow aeronautical enthusiasts, as I feel obliged to bring for the details of my discovery to you. I shall proceed in an orderly manner.

MY BACKGROUND

As many of you know, I have, from an early age, spent my time in pursuit of powered balloon flight. I was determined to be an engineer, and by the age of sixteen, my experiments were well under way.

I was motivated, in part, by reading of the success of observation balloons at the Battle of Fleurus in 1794 and at the Siege of Mainz in 1795. Another motivation (a disappointment, actually) was my learning that Napoleon Bonaparte had disbanded the French Aerostatic Corps in 1799. Despite that, the fledgling science of flight has continued to evolve.

MY DEVICE

I determined that my airship would feature a rigid frame, be levitated by means of hydrogen gas in multiple ballonets, and be fully steerable. Ultimately, this engineering presented no serious problem. What I lacked was a satisfactory means of propulsion.

After some research, I determined to employ a small steam engine of perhaps three horsepower. It would drive an airscrew (which is now commonly styled a "propeller"). I obtained an engine of 180 kg weight, improved it, and installed it in the gondola of my airship. I shall provide details in a forthcoming report.



Fig 1. The airship, whimsically named The Albatross

LOCALE FOR THE TEST

I transported my device (uninflated, of course) by rail to Nantes, Brittany, as I planned a series of test flights over the sea. I would conduct these tests at La Plaine-sur-Mer.

What in part prompted this choice of locale was my growing friendship with Jules Gabriel Verne, who suggested it. He is three years my junior and studying in Paris to become a lawyer. But that says nothing of his keen mind and his profoundly rich imagination.

Verne was born in Nantes and knows the region well. In addition, we are both fascinated by powered flight. He posits that in the future the world will be filled with airships. They will provide tremendous advantage in both commerce and military operations.

He further believes that heavier-than-air flight is possible, and that someday a series of vertical “rotors” (as he calls them) will replace the gas bags of a balloon. This is a bit extreme, as it is well known that heavier-than-air flight is impossible, but on this point, I humor him.

The venue for testing admitted to other advantages, viz. flying over the ocean provided an element of secrecy and also, in the event of a crash, I believed that I might better survive a landing on water.

PREPARATIONS

We arrived in Nantes on Monday, September 1, 1845, and enjoyed the company of M. Verne’s parents, Pierre Verne and Sophie Allote de la Fuÿe. His brother Paul was there, and became our enthusiastic partner for the test.

On Wednesday, September 3, we set out for La Plaine-sur-Mer. The equipment took two wagons – one for the airship and one for the hydrogen generator and our baggage.

We spent the night at an inn at Arthon-en-Retz, 39 km west of Nantes. On Thursday, we completed our journey. We set up camp on the beach at La Plaine, and arrayed the equipment for employ on Friday morning.



Fig 2. La Plaine-sur-Mer.

THE FLIGHT

At precisely 7:00 am, we commenced generation of hydrogen. The generator combined iron filings and sulfuric acid to create hydrogen. By 8:30, we were able to begin filling the airship.

All was in readiness by 11:00 am. I fired the engine. Within 30 minutes, I judged I had a sufficient head of steam and asked Verne and his brother to loose the tethers.

I had a smooth ascension, benefited by a light east-west breeze, out toward the sea. I estimate my progress to be 6 kph as I began a slow climb.

When my Lucien Vidie aneroid barometer indicated my altitude to be about 2,000 metres, I leveled the airship to begin turning manoeuvres. All was well.

At this altitude, I found clouds of the genus stratocumulus, but there was no evidence of precipitation.

Through the wisps I spied a large bird, moving at a rapid pace, yet I discerned no flapping of wings. I assumed that the creature was taking advantage of various currents in the air and gliding. It passed by my airship at a distance of perhaps 100 metres.

It circled and came back. To my consternation, it approached my vessel quite closely.

A SURPRISE IN THE AIR

My airship is 10.5 metres in length. This creature was easily double that. *And it was not a bird.*

The animal bore a startling—dare I say shocking?—resemblance to the giant squid of the ocean (genus *Architeuthis*). It had fins for steering, and possibly propulsion. Its color was a match with the darker clouds.

I surmise that it achieved flotation by means of internal bladders. Only the element hydrogen, stored internally, could support such a creature.

Propulsion seemed to be from a jet of air. The squid must have intake and exhaust ports. The method allowed it to achieve speeds that I estimate at 20 kph.

Most disturbing, it was equipped eight arms of at least 10 metres in length, and two even longer tentacles. During the close pass of the squid, I could clearly see hundreds of spherical suction cups.



Fig 3. *The creature, as I first saw it.*

AN ATTACK

The monster (for I cannot refrain from using the term) dove close to me, close enough to brush the gasbag with its tentacles. Fortunately, it failed to obtain a purchase.

But I was not to escape unharmed. It entered the clouds, and I thought that perhaps it had left me. But it appeared again, and its course was directly toward my gasbag. This time the grip was successful, and it began to entwine its arms in my ship's rigging.

It would be only a moment before I was lost.

MY RESCUE

Fortunately, I had designed my airship with a means for escape. You see, the gondola featured two sections, with the small forward portion being detachable. The same was true of the gasbag; I had built it as well in two sections.

I entered the forward basket and pulled the release rope. As I hoped they would, two of the gasbag's ballonets and my small escape basket separated from the rest of the structure.

I began valving off hydrogen to begin my descent. However, I had no way of controlling my direction.
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To my amazement, the air squid did not loose its grip on the remainder of my airship. Instead, it began to tear the structure apart.

It encountered the firebox portion of my steam engine, and it no doubt received a surprise as big as mine had been. The creature was, as I surmised, kept afloat by hydrogen, and when it encountered fire, it was treated to a giant explosion!

My friends on the ground had no doubt seen the explosion. They probably thought me dead. However, I was most fortunate on three counts. First, my altitude was significantly lower than the explosion; secondly, a change wind direction was driving me toward the shore; and third, as the gas left my ballonets, the deflating gas bag formed an inverted sphere, which now slowed my descent.

This last innovation is by no means my own. I credit Louis-Sébastien Lenormand for the invention of a device that François Blanchard, the great balloonist, had dubbed a "parachute."

As I approached the shallow water near the beach, my friends were rowing toward me in a small boat. I landed in the water, sustaining no injury at all.

MY CONJECTURE

I have had the great pleasure of seeing a sight that few, if any, other men have seen—a new, strange creature of the air. I have these conjectures about what I saw:

I conclude that I encountered a giant flying sea creature. All observations indicate the anatomy of a squid. Therefore, I designate it a "squid of the air."

It mistook my ship for prey, and attempted to attack and eat it. This suggests that such creatures must hunt other, still unknown, creatures of the air.

If the animal's bladders indeed contained hydrogen, that would easily account for the vigorous explosion I witnessed.

The juxtaposition of sea life with airborne life appears to be quite startling. However, it is easy to surmise an origin in the sea, with a later metamorphosis from one form to another, much as a caterpillar turns into a butterfly.

Nota bene that in 1830, Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson of the United Kingdom of Great Britain published a popular poem, "The Kraken." This sonnet was based upon the Norwegian legend of sea monsters that might sink large sailing vessels. I therefore propose to dub "my" creature an "air kraken."

Perhaps my friend Jules Verne will write of this in *Musée des Familles*, as it is quite a popular magazine and he has a flair for telling tales of extraordinary adventures, laden with scientific and geographical fact. Perhaps he will one day write about a flying machine, like mine, or about a giant squid, as described here.

Respectfully submitted,
Baptiste Henri Jacques Giffard

[Editor: This document was discovered after Giffard's death in 1882. Barring the account here, it is commonly known that on September 24, 1852, Giffard made the first powered and controlled flight travelling 27 km from Paris to Trappes. In 1863 he was appointed a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur.]