CHAPTER VII.

A HIGH OLD TIME.

A new phenomenon, therefore, strange but logical, startling but admitting of easy explanation, was now presented to their view, affording a fresh subject for lively discussion. Not that they disputed much about it. They soon agreed on a principle from which they readily deducted the following general law: Every object thrown out of the Projectile should partake of the Projectile's motion: it should therefore follow the same path, and never cease to move until the Projectile itself came to a stand-still.

But, in sober truth, they were at anything but a loss of subjects of warm discussion. As the end of their journey began to approach, their senses became keener and their sensations vivider. Steeled against surprise, they looked for the unexpected, the strange, the startling; and the only thing at which they would have wondered would be to be five minutes without having something new to wonder at. Their excited imaginations flew far ahead of the Projectile, whose velocity, by the way, began to be retarded very decidedly by this time, though, of course, the travellers had as yet no means to become aware of it. The Moon's size on the sky was meantime getting larger and larger; her apparent distance was growing shorter and shorter, until at last they could almost imagine that by putting their hands out they could nearly touch her.

Next morning, December 5th, all were up and dressed at a very early hour. This was to be the last day of their journey, if all calculations were correct. That very night, at 12 o'clock, within nineteen hours at furthest, at the very moment of Full Moon, they were to reach her resplendent surface. At that hour was to be completed the most extraordinary journey ever undertaken by man in ancient or modern times. Naturally enough, therefore, they found themselves unable to sleep after four o'clock in the morning; peering upwards through the windows now visibly glittering under the rays of the Moon, they spent some very exciting hours in gazing at her slowly enlarging disc, and shouting at her with confident and joyful hurrahs.

The majestic Queen of the Stars had now risen so high in the spangled heavens that she could hardly rise higher. In a few degrees more she would reach the exact point of space where her junction with the Projectile was to be effected. According to his own observations, Barbican calculated that they should strike her in the northern hemisphere, where her plains, or seas as they are called, are immense, and her mountains are comparatively rare. This, of course, would be so much the more favorable, if, as was to be apprehended, the lunar atmosphere was confined exclusively to the low lands.

"Besides," as Ardan observed, "a plain is a more suitable landing place than a mountain. A Selenite deposited on the top of Mount Everest or even on Mont Blanc, could hardly be considered, in strict language, to have arrived on Earth."

"Not to talk," added M'Nicholl, "of the comfort of the thing! When you land on a plain, there you are. When you land on a peak or on a steep mountain side, where are you? Tumbling over an embankment with the train going forty miles an hour, would be nothing to it."

"Therefore, Captain Barbican," cried the Frenchman, "as we should like to appear before the Selenites in full skins, please land us in the snug though unromantic North. We shall have time enough to break our necks in the South."

Barbican made no reply to his companions, because a new reflection had begun to trouble him, to talk about which would have done no good. There was certainly something wrong. The Projectile was evidently heading towards the northern hemisphere of the Moon. What did this prove? Clearly, a deviation resulting from some cause. The bullet, lodged, aimed, and fired with the most careful mathematical precision, had been calculated to reach the very centre of the Moon's disc. Clearly it was not going to the centre now. What could have produced the deviation? This Barbican could not tell; nor could he even determine its extent, having no points of sight by which to make his observations. For the present he tried to console himself with the hope that the deviation of the Projectile would be followed by no worse consequence than carrying them towards the northern border of the Moon, where for several reasons it would be comparatively easier to alight. Carefully avoiding, therefore, the use of any expression which might needlessly alarm his companions, he continued to observe the Moon as carefully as he could,

hoping every moment to find some grounds for believing that the deviation from the centre was only a slight one. He almost shuddered at the thought of what would be their situation, if the bullet, missing its aim, should pass the Moon, and plunge into the interplanetary space beyond it.

As he continued to gaze, the Moon, instead of presenting the usual flatness of her disc, began decidedly to show a surface somewhat convex. Had the Sun been shining on her obliquely, the shadows would have certainly thrown the great mountains into strong relief. The eye could then bury itself deep in the yawning chasms of the craters, and easily follow the cracks, streaks, and ridges which stripe, flecker, and bar the immensity of her plains. But for the present all relief was lost in the dazzling glare. The Captain could hardly distinguish even those dark spots that impart to the full Moon some resemblance to the human face.

"Face!" cried Ardan: "well, a very fanciful eye may detect a face, though, for the sake of Apollo's beauteous sister, I regret to say, a terribly pockmarked one!"

The travellers, now evidently approaching the end of their journey, observed the rapidly increasing world above them with newer and greater curiosity every moment. Their fancies enkindled at the sight of the new and strange scenes dimly presented to their view. In imagination they climbed to the summit of this lofty peak. They let themselves down to the abyss of that yawning crater. Here they imagined they saw vast seas hardly kept in their basins by a rarefied atmosphere; there they thought

they could trace mighty rivers bearing to vast oceans the tribute of the snowy mountains. In the first promptings of their eager curiosity, they peered greedily into her cavernous depths, and almost expected, amidst the deathlike hush of inaudible nature, to surprise some sound from the mystic orb floating up there in eternal silence through a boundless ocean of never ending vacuum.

This last day of their journey left their memories stored with thrilling recollections. They took careful note of the slightest details. As they neared their destination, they felt themselves invaded by a vague, undefined restlessness. But this restlessness would have given way to decided uneasiness, if they had known at what a slow rate they were travelling. They would have surely concluded that their present velocity would never be able to take them as far as the neutral point, not to talk of passing it. The reason of such considerable retardation was, that by this time the Projectile had reached such a great distance from the Earth that it had hardly any weight. But even this weight, such as it was, was to be diminished still further, and finally, to vanish altogether as soon as the bullet reached the neutral point, where the two attractions, terrestrial and lunar, should counteract each other with new and surprising effects.

Notwithstanding the absorbing nature of his observations, Ardan never forgot to prepare breakfast with his usual punctuality. It was eaten readily and relished heartily. Nothing could be more exquisite than his calf's foot jelly liquefied and prepared by gas heat, except perhaps his meat biscuits of preserved Texas beef and Southdown mutton. A bottle of

Château Yquem and another of Clos de Vougeot, both of superlative excellence in quality and flavor, crowned the repast. Their vicinity to the Moon and their incessant glancing at her surface did not prevent the travellers from touching each other's glasses merrily and often. Ardan took occasion to remark that the lunar vineyards--if any existed--must be magnificent, considering the intense solar heat they continually experienced. Not that he counted on them too confidently, for he told his friends that to provide for the worst he had supplied himself with a few cases of the best vintages of Médoc and the Côte d'Or, of which the bottles, then under discussion, might be taken as very favorable specimens.

The Reiset and Regnault apparatus for purifying the air worked splendidly, and maintained the atmosphere in a perfectly sanitary condition. Not an atom of carbonic acid could resist the caustic potash; and as for the oxygen, according to M'Nicholl's expression, "it was A prime number one!"

The small quantity of watery vapor enclosed in the Projectile did no more harm than serving to temper the dryness of the air: many a splendid salon in New York, London, or Paris, and many an auditorium, even of theatre, opera house or Academy of Music, could be considered its inferior in what concerned its hygienic condition.

To keep it in perfect working order, the apparatus should be carefully attended to. This, Ardan looked on as his own peculiar occupation. He was never tired regulating the tubes, trying the taps, and testing the

heat of the gas by the pyrometer. So far everything had worked satisfactorily, and the travellers, following the example of their friend Marston on a previous occasion, began to get so stout that their own mothers would not know them in another month, should their imprisonment last so long. Ardan said they all looked so sleek and thriving that he was reminded forcibly of a nice lot of pigs fattening in a pen for a country fair. But how long was this good fortune of theirs going to last?

Whenever they took their eyes off the Moon, they could not help noticing that they were still attended outside by the spectre of Satellite's corpse and by the other refuse of the Projectile. An occasional melancholy howl also attested Diana's recognition of her companion's unhappy fate. The travellers saw with surprise that these waifs still seemed perfectly motionless in space, and kept their respective distances apart as mathematically as if they had been fastened with nails to a stone wall.

"I tell you what, dear boys;" observed Ardan, commenting on this curious phenomenon; "if the concussion had been a little too violent for one of us that night, his survivors would have been seriously embarrassed in trying to get rid of his remains. With no earth to cover him up, no sea to plunge him into, his corpse would never disappear from view, but would pursue us day and night, grim and ghastly like an avenging ghost!"

"Ugh!" said the Captain, shuddering at the idea.

"But, by the bye, Barbican!" cried the Frenchman, dropping the subject with his usual abruptness; "you have forgotten something else! Why didn't you bring a scaphander and an air pump? I could then venture out of the Projectile as readily and as safely as the diver leaves his boat and walks about on the bottom of the river! What fun to float in the midst of that mysterious ether! to steep myself, aye, actually to revel in the pure rays of the glorious sun! I should have ventured out on the very point of the Projectile, and there I should have danced and postured and kicked and bobbed and capered in a style that Taglioni never dreamed of!"

"Shouldn't I like to see you!" cried the Captain grimly, smiling at the idea.

"You would not see him long!" observed Barbican quietly. "The air confined in his body, freed from external pressure, would burst him like a shell, or like a balloon that suddenly rises to too great a height in the air! A scaphander would have been a fatal gift. Don't regret its absence, friend Michael; never forget this axiom: As long as we are floating in empty space, the only spot where safety is possible is inside the Projectile!"

The words "possible" and "impossible" always grated on Ardan's ears. If he had been a lexicographer, he would have rigidly excluded them from his dictionary, both as meaningless and useless. He was preparing an answer for Barbican, when he was cut out by a sudden observation from M'Nicholl.

"See here, friends!" cried the Captain; "this going to the Moon is all very well, but how shall we get back?"

His listeners looked at each other with a surprised and perplexed air. The question, though a very natural one, now appeared to have presented itself to their consideration absolutely for the first time.

"What do you mean by such a question, Captain?" asked Barbican in a grave judicial tone.

"Mac, my boy," said Ardan seriously, "don't it strike you as a little out of order to ask how you are to return when you have not got there yet?"

"I don't ask the question with any idea of backing out," observed the Captain quietly; "as a matter of purely scientific inquiry, I repeat my question: how are we to return?"

"I don't know," replied Barbican promptly.

"For my part," said Ardan; "if I had known how to get back, I should have never come at all!"

"Well! of all the answers!" said the Captain, lifting his hands and shaking his head.

"The best under the circumstances;" observed Barbican; "and I shall further observe that such a question as yours at present is both useless and uncalled for. On some future occasion, when we shall consider it advisable to return, the question will be in order, and we shall discuss it with all the attention it deserves. Though the Columbiad is at Stony Hill, the Projectile will still be in the Moon."

"Much we shall gain by that! A bullet without a gun!"

"The gun we can make and the powder too!" replied Barbican confidently. "Metal and sulphur and charcoal and saltpetre are likely enough to be present in sufficient quantities beneath the Moon's surface. Besides, to return is a problem of comparatively easy solution: we should have to overcome the lunar attraction only--a slight matter--the rest of the business would be readily done by gravity."

"Enough said on the subject!" exclaimed Ardan curtly; "how to get back is indefinitely postponed! How to communicate with our friends on the Earth, is another matter, and, as it seems to me, an extremely easy one."

"Let us hear the very easy means by which you propose to communicate with our friends on Earth," asked the Captain, with a sneer, for he was by this time a little out of humor.

"By means of bolides ejected from the lunar volcanoes," replied the Frenchman without an instant's hesitation.

"Well said, friend Ardan," exclaimed Barbican. "I am quite disposed to acknowledge the feasibility of your plan. Laplace has calculated that a force five times greater than that of an ordinary cannon would be sufficient to send a bolide from the Moon to the Earth. Now there is no cannon that can vie in force with even the smallest volcano."

"Hurrah!" cried Ardan, delighted at his success; "just imagine the pleasure of sending our letters postage free! But--oh! what a splendid idea!--Dolts that we were for not thinking of it sooner!"

"Let us have the splendid idea!" cried the Captain, with some of his old acrimony.

"Why didn't we fasten a wire to the Projectile?" asked Ardan, triumphantly, "It would have enabled us to exchange telegrams with the Earth!"

"Ho! ho! ho!" roared the Captain, rapidly recovering his good humor; "decidedly the best joke of the season! Ha! ha! ha! Of course you have calculated the weight of a wire 240 thousand miles long?"

"No matter about its weight!" cried the Frenchman impetuously; "we should have laughed at its weight! We could have tripled the charge of the Columbiad; we could have quadrupled it!--aye, quintupled it, if necessary!" he added in tones evidently increasing in loudness and violence.

"Yes, friend Michael," observed Barbican; "but there is a slight and unfortunately a fatal defect in your project. The Earth, by its rotation, would have wrapped our wire around herself, like thread around a spool, and dragged us back almost with the speed of lightning!"

"By the Nine gods of Porsena!" cried Ardan, "something is wrong with my head to-day! My brain is out of joint, and I am making as nice a mess of things as my friend Marston was ever capable of! By the bye--talking of Marston--if we never return to the Earth, what is to prevent him from following us to the Moon?"

"Nothing!" replied Barbican; "he is a faithful friend and a reliable comrade. Besides, what is easier? Is not the Columbiad still at Stony Hill? Cannot gun-cotton be readily manufactured on any occasion? Will not the Moon again pass through the zenith of Florida? Eighteen years from now, will she not occupy exactly the same spot that she does to-day?"

"Certainly!" cried Ardan, with increasing enthusiasm, "Marston will come! and Elphinstone of the torpedo! and the gallant Bloomsbury, and Billsby the brave, and all our friends of the Baltimore Gun Club! And we shall receive them with all the honors! And then we shall establish projectile trains between the Earth and the Moon! Hurrah for J.T. Marston!"

"Hurrah for Secretary Marston!" cried the Captain, with an enthusiasm

almost equal to Ardan's.

"Hurrah for my dear friend Marston!" cried Barbican, hardly less excited than his comrades.

Our old acquaintance, Marston, of course could not have heard the joyous acclamations that welcomed his name, but at that moment he certainly must have felt his ears most unaccountably tingling. What was he doing at the time? He was rattling along the banks of the Kansas River, as fast as an express train could take him, on the road to Long's Peak, where, by means of the great Telescope, he expected to find some traces of the Projectile that contained his friends. He never forgot them for a moment, but of course he little dreamed that his name at that very time was exciting their vividest recollections and their warmest applause.

In fact, their recollections were rather too vivid, and their applause decidedly too warm. Was not the animation that prevailed among the guests of the Projectile of a very unusual character, and was it not becoming more and more violent every moment? Could the wine have caused it? No; though not teetotallers, they never drank to excess. Could the Moon's proximity, shedding her subtle, mysterious influence over their nervous systems, have stimulated them to a degree that was threatening to border on frenzy? Their faces were as red as if they were standing before a hot fire; their breathing was loud, and their lungs heaved like a smith's bellows; their eyes blazed like burning coals; their voices sounded as loud and harsh as that of a stump speaker trying to make himself heard by an inattentive or hostile crowd; their words popped

from their lips like corks from Champagne bottles; their gesticulating became wilder and in fact more alarming--considering the little room left in the Projectile for muscular displays of any kind.

But the most extraordinary part of the whole phenomenon was that neither of them, not even Barbican, had the slightest consciousness of any strange or unusual ebullition of spirits either on his own part or on that of the others.

"See here, gentlemen!" said the Captain in a quick imperious manner--the roughness of his old life on the Mississippi would still break out--"See here, gentlemen! It seems I'm not to know if we are to return from the Moon. Well!--Pass that for the present! But there is one thing I must know!"

"Hear! hear the Captain!" cried Barbican, stamping with his foot, like an excited fencing master. "There is one thing he must know!"

"I want to know what we're going to do when we get there!"

"He wants to know what we're going to do when we get there! A sensible question! Answer it, Ardan!"

"Answer it yourself, Barbican! You know more about the Moon than I do! You know more about it than all the Nasmyths that ever lived!"

"I'm blessed if I know anything at all about it!" cried Barbican, with a

joyous laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! The first eastern shore Marylander or any other simpleton you meet in Baltimore, knows as much about the Moon as I do! Why we're going there, I can't tell! What we're going to do when we get there, can't tell either! Ardan knows all about it! He can tell! He's taking us there!"

"Certainly I can tell! should I have offered to take you there without a good object in view?" cried Ardan, husky with continual roaring. "Answer me that!"

"No conundrums!" cried the Captain, in a voice sourer and rougher than ever; "tell us if you can in plain English, what the demon we have come here for!"

"I'll tell you if I feel like it," cried Ardan, folding his arms with an aspect of great dignity; "and I'll not tell you if I don't feel like it!"

"What's that?" cried Barbican. "You'll not give us an answer when we ask you a reasonable question?"

"Never!" cried Ardan, with great determination. "I'll never answer a question reasonable or unreasonable, unless it is asked in a proper manner!"

"None of your French airs here!" exclaimed M'Nicholl, by this time almost completely out of himself between anger and excitement. "I don't

know where I am; I don't know where I'm going; I don't know why I'm going; you know all about it, Ardan, or at least you think you do! Well then, give me a plain answer to a plain question, or by the Thirty-eight States of our glorious Union, I shall know what for!"

"Listen, Ardan!" cried Barbican, grappling with the Frenchman, and with some difficulty restraining him from flying at M'Nicholl's throat; "You ought to tell him! It is only your duty! One day you found us both in St. Helena woods, where we had no more idea of going to the Moon than of sailing to the South Pole! There you twisted us both around your finger, and induced us to follow you blindly on the most formidable journey ever undertaken by man! And now you refuse to tell us what it was all for!"

"I don't refuse, dear old Barbican! To you, at least, I can't refuse anything!" cried Ardan, seizing his friend's hands and wringing them violently. Then letting them go and suddenly starting back, "you wish to know," he continued in resounding tones, "why we have followed out the grandest idea that ever set a human brain on fire! Why we have undertaken a journey that for length, danger, and novelty, for fascinating, soul-stirring and delirious sensations, for all that can attract man's burning heart, and satisfy the intensest cravings of his intellect, far surpasses the vividest realities of Dante's passionate dream! Well, I will tell you! It is to annex another World to the New One! It is to take possession of the Moon in the name of the United States of America! It is to add a thirty-ninth State to the glorious Union! It is to colonize the lunar regions, to cultivate them, to people them, to transport to them some of our wonders of art, science, and

industry! It is to civilize the Selenites, unless they are more civilized already than we are ourselves! It is to make them all good Republicans, if they are not so already!"

"Provided, of course, that there are Selenites in existence!" sneered the Captain, now sourer than ever, and in his unaccountable excitement doubly irritating.

"Who says there are no Selenites?" cried Ardan fiercely, with fists clenched and brows contracted.

"I do!" cried M'Nicholl stoutly; "I deny the existence of anything of the kind, and I denounce every one that maintains any such whim as a visionary, if not a fool!"

Ardan's reply to this taunt was a desperate facer, which, however, Barbican managed to stop while on its way towards the Captain's nose. M'Nicholl, seeing himself struck at, immediately assumed such a posture of defence as showed him to be no novice at the business. A battle seemed unavoidable; but even at this trying moment Barbican showed himself equal to the emergency.

"Stop, you crazy fellows! you ninnyhammers! you overgrown babies!" he exclaimed, seizing his companions by the collar, and violently swinging them around with his vast strength until they stood back to back; "what are you going to fight about? Suppose there are Lunarians in the Moon! Is that a reason why there should be Lunatics in the Projectile! But,

Ardan, why do you insist on Lunarians? Are we so shiftless that we can't do without them when we get to the Moon?"

"I don't insist on them!" cried Ardan, who submitted to Barbican like a child. "Hang the Lunarians! Certainly, we can do without them! What do I care for them? Down with them!"

"Yes, down with the Lunarians!" cried M'Nicholl as spitefully as if he had even the slightest belief in their existence.

"We shall take possession of the Moon ourselves!" cried Ardan. "Lunarians or no Lunarians!"

"We three shall constitute a Republic!" cried M'Nicholl.

"I shall be the House!" cried Ardan.

"And I the Senate!" answered the Captain.

"And Barbican our first President!" shrieked the Frenchman.

"Our first and last!" roared M'Nicholl.

"No objections to a third term!" yelled Ardan.

"He's welcome to any number of terms he pleases!" vociferated M'Nicholl.

"Hurrah for President Barbican of the Lunatic--I mean of the Lunar Republic!" screamed Ardan.

"Long may he wave, and may his shadow never grow less!" shouted Captain M'Nicholl, his eyes almost out of their sockets.

Then with voices reminding you of sand fiercely blown against the window panes, the President and the Senate chanted the immortal Yankee Doodle, whilst the House delivered itself of the Marseillaise, in a style which even the wildest Jacobins in Robespierre's day could hardly have surpassed.

But long before either song was ended, all three broke out into a dance, wild, insensate, furious, delirious, paroxysmatical. No Orphic festivals on Mount Cithaeron ever raged more wildly. No Bacchic revels on Mount Parnassus were ever more corybantic. Diana, demented by the maddening example, joined in the orgie, howling and barking frantically in her turn, and wildly jumping as high as the ceiling of the Projectile. Then came new accessions to the infernal din. Wings suddenly began to flutter, cocks to crow, hens to cluck; and five or six chickens, managing to escape out of their coop, flew backwards and forwards blindly, with frightened screams, dashing against each other and against the walls of the Projectile, and altogether getting up as demoniacal a hullabaloo as could be made by ten thousand bats that you suddenly disturbed in a cavern where they had slept through the winter.

Then the three companions, no longer able to withstand the overpowering

influence of the mysterious force that mastered them, intoxicated, more than drunk, burned by the air that scorched their organs of respiration, dropped at last, and lay flat, motionless, senseless as dabs of clay, on the floor of the Projectile.