

CHAPTER XX.

OFF THE PACIFIC COAST.

"Well, Lieutenant, how goes the sounding?"

"Pretty lively, Captain; we're nearly through," replied the Lieutenant.

"But it's a tremendous depth so near land. We can't be more than 250 miles from the California coast."

"The depression certainly is far deeper than I had expected," observed Captain Bloomsbury. "We have probably lit on a submarine valley channelled out by the Japanese Current."

"The Japanese Current, Captain?"

"Certainly; that branch of it which breaks on the western shores of North America and then flows southeast towards the Isthmus of Panama."

"That may account for it, Captain," replied young Brownson; "at least, I hope it does, for then we may expect the valley to get shallower as we leave the land. So far, there's no sign of a Telegraphic Plateau in this quarter of the globe."

"Probably not, Brownson. How is the line now?"

"We have paid out 3500 fathoms already, Captain, but, judging from the rate the reel goes at, we are still some distance from bottom."

As he spoke, he pointed to a tall derrick temporarily rigged up at the stern of the vessel for the purpose of working the sounding apparatus, and surrounded by a group of busy men. Through a block pulley strongly lashed to the derrick, a stout cord of the best Italian hemp, wound off a large reel placed amidships, was now running rapidly and with a slight whirring noise.

"I hope it's not the 'cup-lead' you are using, Brownson?" said the Captain, after a few minutes observation.

"Oh no, Captain, certainly not," replied the Lieutenant. "It's only Brooke's apparatus that is of any use in such depths."

"Clever fellow that Brooke," observed the Captain; "served with him under Maury. His detachment of the weight is really the starting point for every new improvement in sounding gear. The English, the French, and even our own, are nothing but modifications of that fundamental principle. Exceedingly clever fellow!"

"Bottom!" sang out one of the men standing near the derrick and watching the operations.

The Captain and the Lieutenant immediately advanced to question him.

"What's the depth, Coleman?" asked the Lieutenant.

"21,762 feet," was the prompt reply, which Brownson immediately inscribed in his note-book, handing a duplicate to the Captain.

"All right, Lieutenant," observed the Captain, after a moment's inspection of the figures. "While I enter it in the log, you haul the line aboard. To do so, I need hardly remind you, is a task involving care and patience. In spite of all our gallant little donkey engine can do, it's a six hours job at least. Meanwhile, the Chief Engineer had better give orders for firing up, so that we may be ready to start as soon as you're through. It's now close on to four bells, and with your permission I shall turn in. Let me be called at three. Good night!"

"Goodnight, Captain!" replied Brownson, who spent the next two hours pacing backward and forward on the quarter deck, watching the hauling in of the sounding line, and occasionally casting a glance towards all quarters of the sky.

It was a glorious night. The innumerable stars glittered with the brilliancy of the purest gems. The ship, hove to in order to take the soundings, swung gently on the faintly heaving ocean breast. You felt you were in a tropical clime, for, though no breath fanned your cheek, your senses easily detected the delicious odor of a distant garden of sweet roses. The sea sparkled with phosphorescence. Not a sound was heard except the panting of the hard-worked little donkey-engine and the whirr of the line as it came up taut and dripping from the ocean depths.

The lamp, hanging from the mast, threw a bright glare on deck, presenting the strongest contrast with the black shadows, firm and motionless as marble. The 11th day of December was now near its last hour.

The steamer was the *Susquehanna*, a screw, of the United States Navy, 4,000 in tonnage, and carrying 20 guns. She had been detached to take soundings between the Pacific coast and the Sandwich Islands, the initiatory movement towards laying down an Ocean Cable, which the Pacific Cable Company contemplated finally extending to China. She lay just now a few hundred miles directly south of San Diego, an old Spanish town in southwestern California, and the point which is expected to be the terminus of the great Texas and Pacific Railroad.

The Captain, John Bloomsbury by name, but better known as 'High-Low Jack' from his great love of that game--the only one he was ever known to play--was a near relation of our old friend Colonel Bloomsbury of the Baltimore Gun Club. Of a good Kentucky family, and educated at Annapolis, he had passed his meridian without ever being heard of, when suddenly the news that he had run the gauntlet in a little gunboat past the terrible batteries of Island Number Ten, amidst a perfect storm of shell, grape and canister discharged at less than a hundred yards distance, burst on the American nation on the sixth of April, 1862, and inscribed his name at once in deep characters on the list of the giants of the Great War. But war had never been his vocation. With the return of peace, he had sought and obtained employment on the Western Coast Survey, where every thing he did he looked on as a labor of love. The

Sounding Expedition he had particularly coveted, and, once entered upon it, he discharged his duties with characteristic energy.

He could not have had more favorable weather than the present for a successful performance of the nice and delicate investigations of sounding. His vessel had even been fortunate enough to have lain altogether out of the track of the terrible wind storm already alluded to, which, starting from somewhere southwest of the Sierra Madre, had swept away every vestige of mist from the summits of the Rocky Mountains and, by revealing the Moon in all her splendor, had enabled Belfast to send the famous despatch announcing that he had seen the Projectile. Every feature of the expedition was, in fact, advancing so favorably that the Captain expected to be able, in a month or two, to submit to the P.C. Company a most satisfactory report of his labors.

Cyrus W. Field, the life and soul of the whole enterprise, flushed with honors still in full bloom (the Atlantic Telegraph Cable having been just laid), could congratulate himself with good reason on having found a treasure in the Captain. High-Low Jack was the congenial spirit by whose active and intelligent aid he promised himself the pleasure of seeing before long the whole Pacific Ocean covered with a vast reticulation of electric cables. The practical part, therefore, being in such safe hands, Mr. Field could remain with a quiet conscience in Washington, New York or London, seeing after the financial part of the grand undertaking, worthy of the Nineteenth Century, worthy of the Great Republic, and eminently worthy of the illustrious CYRUS W. himself!

As already mentioned, the Susquehanna lay a few hundred miles south of San Diego, or, to be more accurate, in 27° 7' North Latitude and 118° 37' West Longitude (Greenwich).

It was now a little past midnight. The Moon, in her last quarter, was just beginning to peep over the eastern horizon. Lieutenant Brownson, leaving the quarter deck, had gone to the forecastle, where he found a crowd of officers talking together earnestly and directing their glasses towards her disc. Even here, out on the ocean, the Queen of the night, was as great an object of attraction as on the North American Continent generally, where, that very night and that very hour, at least 40 million pairs of eyes were anxiously gazing at her. Apparently forgetful that even the very best of their glasses could no more see the Projectile than angulate Sirius, the officers held them fast to their eyes for five minutes at a time, and then took them away only to talk with remarkable fluency on what they had not discovered.

"Any sign of them yet, gentlemen?" asked Brownson gaily as he joined the group. "It's now pretty near time for them to put in an appearance. They're gone ten days I should think."

"They're there, Lieutenant! not a doubt of it!" cried a young midshipman, fresh from Annapolis, and of course "thoroughly posted" in the latest revelations of Astronomy. "I feel as certain of their being there as I am of our being here on the forecastle of the Susquehanna!"

"I must agree with you of course, Mr. Midshipman," replied Brownson

with a slight smile; "I have no grounds whatever for contradicting you."

"Neither have I," observed another officer, the surgeon of the vessel.

"The Projectile was to have reached the Moon when at her full, which was at midnight on the 5th. To-day was the 11th. This gives them six days of clear light--time enough in all conscience not only to land safely but to install themselves quite comfortably in their new home. In fact, I see them there already--"

"In my mind's eye, Horatio!" laughed one of the group. "Though the Doc wears glasses, he can see more than any ten men on board."

--"Already"--pursued the Doctor, heedless of the interruption. "Scene, a stony valley near a Selenite stream; the Projectile on the right, half buried in volcanic scoriae, but apparently not much the worse for the wear; ring mountains, craters, sharp peaks, etc. all around; old MAC discovered taking observations with his levelling staff; BARBICAN perched on the summit of a sharp pointed rock, writing up his note-book; ARDAN, eye-glass on nose, hat under arm, legs apart, puffing at his Imperador, like a--"

--"A locomotive!" interrupted the young Midshipman, his excitable imagination so far getting the better of him as to make him forget his manners. He had just finished Locke's famous MOON HOAX, and his brain was still full of its pictures. "In the background," he went on, "can be seen thousands of Vespertiliones-Homines or Man-Bats, in all the various attitudes of curiosity, alarm, or consternation; some of them

peeping around the rocks, some fluttering from peak to peak, all gibbering a language more or less resembling the notes of birds. Enter LUNATICO, King of the Selenites--"

"Excuse us, Mr. Midshipman," interrupted Brownson with an easy smile, "Locke's authority may have great weight among the young Middies at Annapolis, but it does not rank very high at present in the estimation of practical scientists." This rebuff administered to the conceited little Midshipman, a rebuff which the Doctor particularly relished, Brownson continued: "Gentlemen, we certainly know nothing whatever regarding our friends' fate; guessing gives no information. How we ever are to hear from the Moon until we are connected with it by a lunar cable, I can't even imagine. The probability is that we shall never--"

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," interrupted the unrebuffed little Midshipman; "Can't Barbican write?"

A shout of derisive comments greeted this question.

"Certainly he can write, and send his letter by the Pony Express!" cried one.

"A Postal Card would be cheaper!" cried another.

"The New York Herald will send a reporter after it!" was the exclamation of a third.

"Keep cool, just keep cool, gentlemen," persisted the little Midshipman, not in the least abashed by the uproarious hilarity excited by his remarks. "I asked if Barbican couldn't write. In that question I see nothing whatever to laugh at. Can't a man write without being obliged to send his letters?"

"This is all nonsense," said the Doctor. "What's the use of a man writing to you if he can't send you what he writes?"

"What's the use of his sending it to you if he can have it read without that trouble?" answered the little Midshipman in a confident tone. "Is there not a telescope at Long's Peak? Doesn't it bring the Moon within a few miles of the Rocky Mountains, and enable us to see on her surface, objects as small as nine feet in diameter? Well! What's to prevent Barbican and his friends from constructing a gigantic alphabet? If they write words of even a few hundred yards and sentences a mile or two long, what is to prevent us from reading them? Catch the idea now, eh?"

They did catch the idea, and heartily applauded the little Middy for his smartness. Even the Doctor saw a certain kind of merit in it, and Brownson acknowledged it to be quite feasible. In fact, expanding on it, the Lieutenant assured his hearers that, by means of large parabolic reflectors, luminous groups of rays could be dispatched from the Earth, of sufficient brightness to establish direct communication even with Venus or Mars, where these rays would be quite as visible as the planet Neptune is from the Earth. He even added that those brilliant points of light, which have been quite frequently observed in Mars and Venus, are

perhaps signals made to the Earth by the inhabitants of these planets. He concluded, however, by observing that, though we might by these means succeed in obtaining news from the Moon, we could not possibly send any intelligence back in return, unless indeed the Selenites had at their disposal optical instruments at least as good as ours.

All agreed that this was very true, and, as is generally the case when one keeps all the talk to himself, the conversation now assumed so serious a turn that for some time it was hardly worth recording.

At last the Chief Engineer, excited by some remark that had been made, observed with much earnestness:

"You may say what you please, gentlemen, but I would willingly give my last dollar to know what has become of those brave men! Have they done anything? Have they seen anything? I hope they have. But I should dearly like to know. Ever so little success would warrant a repetition of the great experiment. The Columbiad is still to the good in Florida, as it will be for many a long day. There are millions of men to day as curious as I am upon the subject. Therefore it will be only a question of mere powder and bullets if a cargo of visitors is not sent to the Moon every time she passes our zenith.

"Marston would be one of the first of them," observed Brownson, lighting his cigar.

"Oh, he would have plenty of company!" cried the Midshipman. "I should

be delighted to go if he'd only take me."

"No doubt you would, Mr. Midshipman," said Brownson, "the wise men, you know, are not all dead yet."

"Nor the fools either, Lieutenant," growled old Frisby, the fourth officer, getting tired of the conversation.

"There is no question at all about it," observed another; "every time a Projectile started, it would take off as many as it could carry."

"I wish it would only start often enough to improve the breed!" growled old Frisby.

"I have no doubt whatever," added the Chief Engineer, "that the thing would get so fashionable at last that half the inhabitants of the Earth would take a trip to the Moon."

"I should limit that privilege strictly to some of our friends in Washington," said old Frisby, whose temper had been soured probably by a neglect to recognize his long services; "and most of them I should by all means insist on sending to the Moon. Every month I would ram a whole raft of them into the Columbiad, with a charge under them strong enough to blow them all to the--But--Hey!--what in creation's that?"

Whilst the officer was speaking, his companions had suddenly caught a sound in the air which reminded them immediately of the whistling scream

of a Lancaster shell. At first they thought the steam was escaping somewhere, but, looking upwards, they saw that the strange noise proceeded from a ball of dazzling brightness, directly over their heads, and evidently falling towards them with tremendous velocity. Too frightened to say a word, they could only see that in its light the whole ship blazed like fireworks, and the whole sea glittered like a silver lake. Quicker than tongue can utter, or mind can conceive, it flashed before their eyes for a second, an enormous bolide set on fire by friction with the atmosphere, and gleaming in its white heat like a stream of molten iron gushing straight from the furnace. For a second only did they catch its flash before their eyes; then striking the bowsprit of the vessel, which it shattered into a thousand pieces, it vanished in the sea in an instant with a hiss, a scream, and a roar, all equally indescribable. For some time the utmost confusion reigned on deck. With eyes too dazzled to see, ears still ringing with the frightful combination of unearthly sounds, faces splashed with floods of sea water, and noses stifled with clouds of scalding steam, the crew of the Susquehanna could hardly realize that their marvellous escape by a few feet from instant and certain destruction was an accomplished fact, not a frightful dream. They were still engaged in trying to open their eyes and to get the hot water out of their ears, when they suddenly heard the trumpet voice of Captain Bloomsbury crying, as he stood half dressed on the head of the cabin stairs:

"What's up, gentlemen? In heaven's name, what's up?"

The little Midshipman had been knocked flat by the concussion and

stunned by the uproar. But before any body else could reply, his voice was heard, clear and sharp, piercing the din like an arrow:

"It's **THEY**, Captain! Didn't I tell you so?"