

CHAPTER III.

EFFECT OF PRESIDENT BARBICANE'S COMMUNICATION.

It is impossible to depict the effect produced by the last words of the honourable president. What cries! what vociferations! What a succession of groans, hurrahs, cheers, and all the onomatopoeia of which the American language is so full. It was an indescribable hubbub and disorder. Mouths, hands, and feet made as much noise as they could. All the weapons in this artillery museum going off at once would not have more violently agitated the waves of sound. That is not surprising; there are cannoneers nearly as noisy as their cannons.

Barbicané remained calm amidst these enthusiastic clamours; perhaps he again wished to address some words to his colleagues, for his gestures asked for silence, and his fulminating bell exhausted itself in violent detonations; it was not even heard. He was soon dragged from his chair, carried in triumph, and from the hands of his faithful comrades he passed into those of the no less excited crowd.

Nothing can astonish an American. It has often been repeated that the word "impossible" is not French; the wrong dictionary must have been taken by mistake. In America everything is easy, everything is simple, and as to mechanical difficulties, they are dead before they are born. Between the Barbicané project and its realisation not one true Yankee

would have allowed himself to see even the appearance of a difficulty.
As soon said as done.

The triumphant march of the president was prolonged during the evening. A veritable torchlight procession--Irish, Germans, Frenchmen, Scotchmen--all the heterogeneous individuals that compose the population of Maryland--shouted in their maternal tongue, and the cheering was unanimous.

Precisely as if she knew it was all about her, the moon shone out then with serene magnificence, eclipsing other lights with her intense irradiation. All the Yankees directed their eyes towards the shining disc; some saluted her with their hands, others called her by the sweetest names; between eight o'clock and midnight an optician in Jones-Fall-street made a fortune by selling field-glasses. The Queen of Night was looked at through them like a lady of high life. The Americans acted in regard to her with the freedom of proprietors. It seemed as if the blonde Phoebe belonged to these enterprising conquerors and already formed part of the Union territory. And yet the only question was that of sending a projectile--a rather brutal way of entering into communication even with a satellite, but much in vogue amongst civilised nations.

Midnight had just struck, and the enthusiasm did not diminish; it was kept up in equal doses in all classes of the population; magistrates, savants, merchants, tradesmen, street-porters, intelligent as well as

"green" men were moved even in their most delicate fibres. It was a national enterprise; the high town, low town, the quays bathed by the waters of the Patapsco, the ships, imprisoned in their docks, overflowed with crowds intoxicated with joy, gin, and whisky; everybody talked, argued, perorated, disputed, approved, and applauded, from the gentleman comfortably stretched on the bar-room couch before his glass of "sherry-cobbler" to the waterman who got drunk upon "knock-me-down" in the dark taverns of Fell's Point.

However, about 2 a.m. the emotion became calmer. President Barbicane succeeded in getting home almost knocked to pieces. A Hercules could not have resisted such enthusiasm. The crowd gradually abandoned the squares and streets. The four railroads of Ohio, Susquehanna, Philadelphia, and Washington, which converge at Baltimore, took the heterogeneous population to the four corners of the United States, and the town reposed in a relative tranquillity.

It would be an error to believe that during this memorable evening Baltimore alone was agitated. The large towns of the Union, New York, Boston, Albany, Washington, Richmond, New Orleans, Charlestown, La Mobile of Texas, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Florida, all shared in the delirium. The thirty thousand correspondents of the Gun Club were acquainted with their president's letter, and awaited with equal impatience the famous communication of the 5th of October. The same evening as the orator uttered his speech it ran along the telegraph wires, across the states of the Union, with a speed of 348,447 miles a

second. It may, therefore, be said with absolute certainty that at the same moment the United States of America, ten times as large as France, cheered with a single voice, and twenty-five millions of hearts, swollen with pride, beat with the same pulsation.

The next day five hundred daily, weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly newspapers took up the question; they examined it under its different aspects--physical, meteorological, economical, or moral, from a political or social point of view. They debated whether the moon was a finished world, or if she was not still undergoing transformation. Did she resemble the earth in the time when the atmosphere did not yet exist? What kind of spectacle would her hidden hemisphere present to our terrestrial spheroid? Granting that the question at present was simply about sending a projectile to the Queen of Night, every one saw in that the starting-point of a series of experiments; all hoped that one day America would penetrate the last secrets of the mysterious orb, and some even seemed to fear that her conquest would disturb the balance of power in Europe.

The project once under discussion, not one of the papers suggested a doubt of its realisation; all the papers, treatises, bulletins, and magazines published by scientific, literary, or religious societies enlarged upon its advantages, and the "Natural History Society" of Boston, the "Science and Art Society" of Albany, the "Geographical and Statistical Society" of New York, the "American Philosophical Society" of Philadelphia, and the "Smithsonian Institution" of Washington sent in

a thousand letters their congratulations to the Gun Club, with immediate offers of service and money.

It may be said that no proposition ever had so many adherents; there was no question of hesitations, doubts, or anxieties. As to the jokes, caricatures, and comic songs that would have welcomed in Europe, and, above all, in France, the idea of sending a projectile to the moon, they would have been turned against their author; all the "life-preservers" in the world would have been powerless to guarantee him against the general indignation. There are things that are not to be laughed at in the New World.

Impey Barbicane became from that day one of the greatest citizens of the United States, something like a Washington of science, and one fact amongst several will serve to show the sudden homage which was paid by a nation to one man.

Some days after the famous meeting of the Gun Club the manager of an English company announced at the Baltimore Theatre a representation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, but the population of the town, seeing in the title a damaging allusion to the projects of President Barbicane, invaded the theatre, broke the seats, and forced the unfortunate manager to change the play. Like a sensible man, the manager, bowing to public opinion, replaced the offending comedy by *As You Like It*, and for several weeks he had fabulous houses.