

## CHAPTER XIII.

### STONY HILL.

Since the choice made by the members of the Gun Club to the detriment of Texas, every one in America--where every one knows how to read--made it his business to study the geography of Florida. Never before had the booksellers sold so many Bertram's Travels in Florida, Roman's Natural History of East and West Florida, Williams' Territory of Florida, and Cleland on the Culture of the Sugar Cane in East Florida. New editions of these works were required. There was quite a rage for them.

Barbican had something better to do than to read; he wished to see with his own eyes and choose the site of the Columbiad. Therefore, without losing a moment, he put the funds necessary for the construction of a telescope at the disposition of the Cambridge Observatory, and made a contract with the firm of Breadwill and Co., of Albany, for the making of the aluminium projectile; then he left Baltimore accompanied by J.T. Maston, Major Elphinstone, and the manager of the Goldspring Manufactory.

The next day the four travelling companions reached New Orleans. There they embarked on board the Tampico, a despatch-boat belonging to the Federal Navy, which the Government had placed at their disposal, and,

with all steam on, they quickly lost sight of the shores of Louisiana.

The passage was not a long one; two days after its departure the Tampico, having made four hundred and eighty miles, sighted the Floridian coast. As it approached, Barbicane saw a low, flat coast, looking rather unfertile. After coasting a series of creeks rich in oysters and lobsters, the Tampico entered the Bay of Espiritu-Santo.

This bay is divided into two long roadsteads, those of Tampa and Hillisboro, the narrow entrance to which the steamer soon cleared. A short time afterwards the batteries of Fort Brooke rose above the waves and the town of Tampa appeared, carelessly lying on a little natural harbour formed by the mouth of the river Hillisboro.

There the Tampico anchored on October 22nd, at seven p.m.; the four passengers landed immediately.

Barbicane felt his heart beat violently as he set foot on Floridian soil; he seemed to feel it with his feet like an architect trying the solidity of a house. J.T. Maston scratched the ground with his steel hook.

"Gentlemen," then said Barbicane, "we have no time to lose, and we will set off on horseback to-morrow to survey the country."

The minute Barbicane landed the three thousand inhabitants of Tampa Town

went out to meet him, an honour quite due to the president of the Gun Club, who had decided in their favour. They received him with formidable exclamations, but Barbicane escaped an ovation by shutting himself up in his room at the Franklin Hotel and refusing to see any one.

The next day, October 23rd, small horses of Spanish race, full of fire and vigour, pawed the ground under his windows. But, instead of four, there were fifty, with their riders. Barbicane went down accompanied by his three companions, who were at first astonished to find themselves in the midst of such a cavalcade. He remarked besides that each horseman carried a carbine slung across his shoulders and pistols in his holsters. The reason for such a display of force was immediately given him by a young Floridian, who said to him--

"Sir, the Seminoles are there."

"What Seminoles?"

"Savages who frequent the prairies, and we deemed it prudent to give you an escort."

"Pooh!" exclaimed J.T. Maston as he mounted his steed.

"It is well to be on the safe side," answered the Floridian.

"Gentlemen," replied Barbicane, "I thank you for your attention, and now

let us be off."

The little troop set out immediately, and disappeared in a cloud of dust. It was five a.m.; the sun shone brilliantly already, and the thermometer indicated 84°, but fresh sea breezes moderated this excessive heat.

Barbicané, on leaving Tampa Town, went down south and followed the coast to Alifia Creek. This small river falls into Hillisboro Bay, twelve miles below Tampa Town. Barbicané and his escort followed its right bank going up towards the east. The waves of the bay disappeared behind an inequality in the ground, and the Floridian country was alone in sight.

Florida is divided into two parts; the one to the north, more populous and less abandoned, has Tallahassee for capital, and Pensacola, one of the principal marine arsenals of the United States; the other, lying between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico, is only a narrow peninsula, eaten away by the current of the Gulf Stream--a little tongue of land lost amidst a small archipelago, which the numerous vessels of the Bahama Channel double continually. It is the advanced sentinel of the gulf of great tempests. The superficial area of this state measures 38,033,267 acres, amongst which one had to be chosen situated beyond the 28th parallel and suitable for the enterprise. As Barbicané rode along he attentively examined the configuration of the ground and its particular distribution.

Florida, discovered by Juan Ponce de Leon in 1512, on Palm Sunday, was first of all named Pascha Florida. It was well worthy of that designation with its dry and arid coasts. But a few miles from the shore the nature of the ground gradually changed, and the country showed itself worthy of its name; the soil was cut up by a network of creeks, rivers, watercourses, ponds, and small lakes; it might have been mistaken for Holland or Guiana; but the ground gradually rose and soon showed its cultivated plains, where all the vegetables of the North and South grow in perfection, its immense fields, where a tropical sun and the water conserved in its clayey texture do all the work of cultivating, and lastly its prairies of pineapples, yams, tobacco, rice, cotton, and sugarcanes, which extended as far as the eye could reach, spreading out their riches with careless prodigality.

Barbican appeared greatly satisfied on finding the progressive elevation of the ground, and when J.T. Maston questioned him on the subject,

"My worthy friend," said he, "it is greatly to our interest to cast our Columbiad on elevated ground."

"In order to be nearer the moon?" exclaimed the secretary of the Gun Club.

"No," answered Barbican, smiling. "What can a few yards more or less matter? No, but on elevated ground our work can be accomplished more

easily; we shall not have to struggle against water, which will save us long and expensive tubings, and that has to be taken into consideration when a well 900 feet deep has to be sunk."

"You are right," said Murchison, the engineer; "we must, as much as possible, avoid watercourses during the casting; but if we meet with springs they will not matter much; we can exhaust them with our machines or divert them from their course. Here we have not to work at an artesian well, narrow and dark, where all the boring implements have to work in the dark. No; we can work under the open sky, with spade and pickaxe, and, by the help of blasting, our work will not take long."

"Still," resumed Barbicane, "if by the elevation of the ground or its nature we can avoid a struggle with subterranean waters, we can do our work more rapidly and perfectly; we must, therefore, make our cutting in ground situated some thousands of feet above the level of the sea."

"You are right, Mr. Barbicane, and, if I am not mistaken, we shall soon find a suitable spot."

"I should like to see the first spadeful turned up," said the president.

"And I the last!" exclaimed J.T. Maston.

"We shall manage it, gentlemen," answered the engineer; "and, believe me, the Goldspring Company will not have to pay you any forfeit for

delay."

"Faith! it had better not," replied J.T. Maston; "a hundred dollars a day till the moon presents herself in the same conditions--that is to say, for eighteen years and eleven days--do you know that would make 658,000 dollars?"

"No, sir, we do not know, and we shall not need to learn."

About ten a.m. the little troop had journeyed about twelve miles; to the fertile country succeeded a forest region. There were the most varied perfumes in tropical profusion. The almost impenetrable forests were made up of pomegranates, orange, citron, fig, olive, and apricot trees, bananas, huge vines, the blossoms and fruit of which rivalled each other in colour and perfume. Under the perfumed shade of these magnificent trees sang and fluttered a world of brilliantly-coloured birds, amongst which the crab-eater deserved a jewel casket, worthy of its feathered gems, for a nest.

J.T. Maston and the major could not pass through such opulent nature without admiring its splendid beauty.

But President Barbicane, who thought little of these marvels, was in a hurry to hasten onwards; this country, so fertile, displeased him by its very fertility; without being otherwise hydropical, he felt water under his feet, and sought in vain the signs of incontestable aridity.

In the meantime they journeyed on. They were obliged to ford several rivers, and not without danger, for they were infested with alligators from fifteen to eighteen feet long. J.T. Maston threatened them boldly with his formidable hook, but he only succeeded in frightening the pelicans, phaetons, and teals that frequented the banks, while the red flamingoes looked on with a stupid stare.

At last these inhabitants of humid countries disappeared in their turn. The trees became smaller and more thinly scattered in smaller woods; some isolated groups stood amidst immense plains where ranged herds of startled deer.

"At last!" exclaimed Barbicane, rising in his stirrups. "Here is the region of pines."

"And savages," answered the major.

In fact, a few Seminoles appeared on the horizon. They moved about backwards and forwards on their fleet horses, brandishing long lances or firing their guns with a dull report. However, they confined themselves to these hostile demonstrations, which had no effect on Barbicane and his companions.

They were then in the middle of a rocky plain, a vast open space of several acres in extent which the sun covered with burning rays. It was



formed by a wide elevation of the soil, and seemed to offer to the members of the Gun Club all the required conditions for the construction of their Columbiad.

"Halt!" cried Barbicane, stopping. "Has this place any name?"

"It is called Stony Hill," answered the Floridians.

Barbicane, without saying a word, dismounted, took his instruments, and began to fix his position with extreme precision. The little troop drawn up around him watched him in profound silence.

At that moment the sun passed the meridian. Barbicane, after an interval, rapidly noted the result of his observation, and said--

"This place is situated 1,800 feet above the sea level in lat.  $27^{\circ} 7'$  and West long.  $5^{\circ} 7'$  by the Washington meridian. It appears to me by its barren and rocky nature to offer every condition favourable to our enterprise; we will therefore raise our magazines, workshops, furnaces, and workmen's huts here, and it is from this very spot," said he, stamping upon it with his foot, "the summit of Stony Hill, that our projectile will start for the regions of the solar world!"