

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE COLUMBIAD.

Had the operation of casting succeeded? People were reduced to mere conjecture. However, there was every reason to believe in its success, as the mould had absorbed the entire mass of metal liquefied in the furnaces. Still it was necessarily a long time impossible to be certain.

In fact, when Major Rodman cast his cannon of 160,000 lbs., it took no less than a fortnight to cool. How long, therefore, would the monstrous Columbiad, crowned with its clouds of vapour, and guarded by its intense heat, be kept from the eyes of its admirers? It was difficult to estimate.

The impatience of the members of the Gun Club was put to a rude test during this lapse of time. But it could not be helped. J.T. Maston was nearly roasted through his anxiety. A fortnight after the casting an immense column of smoke was still soaring towards the sky, and the ground burnt the soles of the feet within a radius of 200 feet round the summit of Stony Hill.

The days went by; weeks followed them. There were no means of cooling the immense cylinder. It was impossible to approach it. The members of

the Gun Club were obliged to wait with what patience they could muster.

"Here we are at the 10th of August," said J.T. Maston one morning. "It wants hardly four months to the 1st of December! There still remains the interior mould to be taken out, and the Columbiad to be loaded! We never shall be ready! One cannot even approach the cannon! Will it never get cool? That would be a cruel deception!"

They tried to calm the impatient secretary without succeeding. Barbicane said nothing, but his silence covered serious irritation. To see himself stopped by an obstacle that time alone could remove--time, an enemy to be feared under the circumstances--and to be in the power of an enemy was hard for men of war.

However, daily observations showed a certain change in the state of the ground. Towards the 15th of August the vapour thrown off had notably diminished in intensity and thickness. A few days after the earth only exhaled a slight puff of smoke, the last breath of the monster shut up in its stone tomb. By degrees the vibrations of the ground ceased, and the circle of heat contracted; the most impatient of the spectators approached; one day they gained ten feet, the next twenty, and on the 22nd of August Barbicane, his colleagues, and the engineer could take their place on the cast-iron surface which covered the summit of Stony Hill, certainly a very healthy spot, where it was not yet allowed to have cold feet.

"At last!" cried the president of the Gun Club with an immense sigh of satisfaction.

The works were resumed the same day. The extraction of the interior mould was immediately proceeded with in order to clear out the bore; pickaxes, spades, and boring-tools were set to work without intermission; the clay and sand had become exceedingly hard under the action of the heat; but by the help of machines they cleared away the mixture still burning at its contact with the iron; the rubbish was rapidly carted away on the railway, and the work was done with such spirit, Barbicane's intervention was so urgent, and his arguments, presented under the form of dollars, carried so much conviction, that on the 3rd of September all trace of the mould had disappeared.

The operation of boring was immediately begun; the boring-machines were set up without delay, and a few weeks later the interior surface of the immense tube was perfectly cylindrical, and the bore had acquired a high polish.

At last, on the 22nd of September, less than a year after the Barbicane communication, the enormous weapon, raised by means of delicate instruments, and quite vertical, was ready for use. There was nothing but the moon to wait for, but they were sure she would not fail.

J.T. Maston's joy knew no bounds, and he nearly had a frightful fall whilst looking down the tube of 900 feet. Without Colonel Blomsberry's

right arm, which he had happily preserved, the secretary of the Gun Club, like a modern Erostatus, would have found a grave in the depths of the Columbiad.

The cannon was then finished; there was no longer any possible doubt as to its perfect execution; so on the 6th of October Captain Nicholl cleared off his debt to President Barbicane, who inscribed in his receipt-column a sum of 2,000 dollars. It may be believed that the captain's anger reached its highest pitch, and cost him an illness. Still there were yet three bets of 3,000, 4,000, and 5,000 dollars, and if he only gained 2,000, his bargain would not be a bad one, though not excellent. But money did not enter into his calculations, and the success obtained by his rival in the casting of a cannon against which iron plates sixty feet thick would not have resisted was a terrible blow to him.

Since the 23rd of September the inclosure on Stony Hill had been quite open to the public, and the concourse of visitors will be readily imagined.

In fact, innumerable people from all points of the United States flocked to Florida. The town of Tampa was prodigiously increased during that year, consecrated entirely to the works of the Gun Club; it then comprised a population of 150,000 souls. After having surrounded Fort Brooke in a network of streets it was now being lengthened out on that tongue of land which separated the two harbours of Espiritu-Santo Bay;

new quarters, new squares, and a whole forest of houses had grown up in these formerly-deserted regions under the heat of the American sun. Companies were formed for the erection of churches, schools, private dwellings, and in less than a year the size of the town was increased tenfold.

It is well known that Yankees are born business men; everywhere that destiny takes them, from the glacial to the torrid zone, their instinct for business is usefully exercised. That is why simple visitors to Florida for the sole purpose of following the operations of the Gun Club allowed themselves to be involved in commercial operations as soon as they were installed in Tampa Town. The vessels freighted for the transport of the metal and the workmen had given unparalleled activity to the port. Soon other vessels of every form and tonnage, freighted with provisions and merchandise, ploughed the bay and the two harbours; vast offices of shipbrokers and merchants were established in the town, and the Shipping Gazette each day published fresh arrivals in the port of Tampa.

Whilst roads were multiplied round the town, in consequence of the prodigious increase in its population and commerce, it was joined by railway to the Southern States of the Union. One line of rails connected La Mobile to Pensacola, the great southern maritime arsenal; thence from that important point it ran to Tallahassee. There already existed there a short line, twenty-one miles long, to Saint Marks on the seashore. It was this loop-line that was prolonged as far as Tampa Town, awakening in

its passage the dead or sleeping portions of Central Florida. Thus Tampa, thanks to these marvels of industry due to the idea born one line day in the brain of one man, could take as its right the airs of a large town. They surnamed it "Moon-City," and the capital of Florida suffered an eclipse visible from all points of the globe.

Every one will now understand why the rivalry was so great between Texas and Florida, and the irritation of the Texicans when they saw their pretensions set aside by the Gun Club. In their long-sighted sagacity they had foreseen what a country might gain from the experiment attempted by Barbicane, and the wealth that would accompany such a cannon-shot. Texas lost a vast centre of commerce, railways, and a considerable increase of population. All these advantages had been given to that miserable Floridian peninsula, thrown like a pier between the waves of the Gulf and those of the Atlantic Ocean. Barbicane, therefore, divided with General Santa-Anna the Texan antipathy.

However, though given up to its commercial and industrial fury, the new population of Tampa Town took care not to forget the interesting operations of the Gun Club. On the contrary, the least details of the enterprise, every blow of the pickaxe, interested them. There was an incessant flow of people to and from Tampa Town to Stony Hill--a perfect procession, or, better still, a pilgrimage.

It was already easy to foresee that the day of the experiment the concourse of spectators would be counted by millions, for they came

already from all points of the earth to the narrow peninsula. Europe was emigrating to America.

But until then, it must be acknowledged, the curiosity of the numerous arrivals had only been moderately satisfied. Many counted upon seeing the casting who only saw the smoke from it. This was not much for hungry eyes, but Barbicane would allow no one to see that operation. Thereupon ensued grumbling, discontent, and murmurs; they blamed the president for what they considered dictatorial conduct. His act was stigmatised as "un-American." There was nearly a riot round Stony Hill, but Barbicane was not to be moved. When, however, the Columbiad was quite finished, this state of closed doors could no longer be kept up; besides, it would have been in bad taste, and even imprudent, to offend public opinion. Barbicane, therefore, opened the inclosure to all comers; but, in accordance with his practical character, he determined to coin money out of the public curiosity.

It was, indeed, something to even be allowed to see this immense Columbiad, but to descend into its depths seemed to the Americans the ne plus ultra of earthly felicity. In consequence there was not one visitor who was not willing to give himself the pleasure of visiting the interior of this metallic abyss. Baskets hung from steam-cranes allowed them to satisfy their curiosity. It became a perfect mania. Women, children, and old men all made it their business to penetrate the mysteries of the colossal gun. The price for the descent was fixed at five dollars a head, and, notwithstanding this high charge, during the

two months that preceded the experiment, the influx of visitors allowed the Gun Club to pocket nearly 500,000 dollars!

It need hardly be said that the first visitors to the Columbiad were the members of the Gun Club. This privilege was justly accorded to that illustrious body. The ceremony of reception took place on the 25th of September. A basket of honour took down the president, J.T. Maston, Major Elphinstone, General Morgan, Colonel Blomsberry, and other members of the Gun Club, ten in all. How hot they were at the bottom of that long metal tube! They were nearly stifled, but how delightful--how exquisite! A table had been laid for ten on the massive stone which formed the bottom of the Columbiad, and was lighted by a jet of electric light as bright as day itself. Numerous exquisite dishes, that seemed to descend from heaven, were successively placed before the guests, and the richest wines of France flowed profusely during this splendid repast, given 900 feet below the surface of the earth!

The festival was a gay, not to say a noisy one. Toasts were given and replied to. They drank to the earth and her satellite, to the Gun Club, the Union, the Moon, Diana, Phoebe, Selene, "the peaceful courier of the night." All the hurrahs, carried up by the sonorous waves of the immense acoustic tube, reached its mouth with a noise of thunder; then the multitude round Stony Hill heartily united their shouts to those of the ten revellers hidden from sight in the depths of the gigantic Columbiad.

J.T. Maston could contain himself no longer. Whether he shouted or ate,



gesticulated or talked most would be difficult to determine. Any way he would not have given up his place for an empire, "not even if the cannon--loaded, primed, and fired at that very moment--were to blow him in pieces into the planetary universe."