

CHAPTER XXVI.

FIRE!

The 1st of December came, the fatal day, for if the projectile did not start that very evening at 10h. 46m. and 40s. p.m., more than eighteen years would elapse before the moon would present the same simultaneous conditions of zenith and perigee.

The weather was magnificent; notwithstanding the approach of winter the sun shone brightly and bathed in its radiance that earth which three of its inhabitants were about to leave for a new world.

How many people slept badly during the night that preceded the ardently-longed-for day! How many breasts were oppressed with the heavy burden of waiting! All hearts beat with anxiety except only the heart of Michel Ardan. This impassible person went and came in his usual business-like way, but nothing in him denoted any unusual preoccupation. His sleep had been peaceful--it was the sleep of Turenne upon a gun-carriage the night before the battle.

From early dawn an innumerable crowd covered the prairie, which extended as far as the eye could reach round Stony Hill. Every quarter of an hour the railroad of Tampa brought fresh sightseers. According to the Tampa Town Observer, five millions of spectators were that day upon Floridian

soil.

The greater part of this crowd had been living in tents round the inclosure, and laid the foundations of a town which has since been called "Arden's Town." The ground bristled with huts, cabins, and tents, and these ephemeral habitations sheltered a population numerous enough to rival the largest cities of Europe.

Every nation upon earth was represented; every language was spoken at the same time. It was like the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. There the different classes of American society mixed in absolute equality. Bankers, cultivators, sailors, agents, merchants, cotton-planters, and magistrates elbowed each other with primitive ease. The creoles of Louisiana fraternised with the farmers of Indiana; the gentlemen of Kentucky and Tennessee, the elegant and haughty Virginians, joked with the half-savage trappers of the Lakes and the butchers of Cincinnati. They appeared in broad-brimmed white beavers and Panamas, blue cotton trousers, from the Opelousa manufactories, draped in elegant blouses of *écru* cloth, in boots of brilliant colours, and extravagant shirt-frills; upon shirt-fronts, cuffs, cravats, on their ten fingers, even in their ears, an assortment of rings, pins, diamonds, chains, buckles, and trinkets, the cost of which equalled the bad taste. Wife, children, servants, in no less rich dress, accompanied, followed, preceded, and surrounded their husbands, fathers, and masters, who resembled the patriarchs amidst their innumerable families.

At meal-times it was a sight to see all these people devour the dishes peculiar to the Southern States, and eat, with an appetite menacing to the provisioning of Florida, the food that would be repugnant to a European stomach, such as fricasseed frogs, monkey-flesh, fish-chowder, underdone opossum, and raccoon steaks.

The liquors that accompanied this indigestible food were numerous. Shouts and vociferations to buy resounded through the bar-rooms or taverns, decorated with glasses, tankards, decanters, and bottles of marvellous shapes, mortars for pounding sugar, and bundles of straws.

"Mint-julep!" roars out one of the salesmen.

"Claret sangaree!" shouts another through his nose.

"Gin-sling!" shouts one.

"Cocktail! Brandy-smash!" cries another.

"Who'll buy real mint-julep in the latest style?" shouted these skilful salesmen, rapidly passing from one glass to another the sugar, lemon, green mint, crushed ice, water, cognac, and fresh pine-apple which compose this refreshing drink.

Generally these sounds, addressed to throats made thirsty by the spices they consumed, mingled into one deafening roar. But on this 1st of

December these cries were rare. No one thought of eating and drinking, and at 4 p.m. there were many spectators in the crowd who had not taken their customary lunch! A much more significant fact, even the national passion for gaming was allayed by the general emotion. Thimbles, skittles, and cards were left in their wrappings, and testified that the great event of the day absorbed all attention.

Until nightfall a dull, noiseless agitation like that which precedes great catastrophes ran through the anxious crowd. An indescribable uneasiness oppressed all minds, and stopped the beating of all hearts. Every one wished it over.

However, about seven o'clock this heavy silence was suddenly broken. The moon rose above the horizon. Several millions of hurrahs saluted her apparition. She was punctual to the appointment. Shouts of welcome broke from all parts, whilst the blonde Phoebe shone peacefully in a clear sky, and caressed the enraptured crowd with her most affectionate rays.

At that moment the three intrepid travellers appeared. When they appeared the cries redoubled in intensity. Unanimously, instantaneously, the national song of the United States escaped from all the spectators, and "Yankee Doodle," sung by 5,000,000 of hearty throats, rose like a roaring tempest to the farthest limits of the atmosphere.

Then, after this irresistible outburst, the hymn was ended, the last harmonies died away by degrees, and a silent murmur floated over the

profoundly-excited crowd.

In the meantime the Frenchman and the two Americans had stepped into the inclosure round which the crowd was pressing. They were accompanied by the members of the Gun Club, and deputations sent by the European observatories. Barbicane was coolly and calmly giving his last orders. Nicholl, with compressed lips and hands crossed behind his back, walked with a firm and measured step. Michel Ardan, always at his ease, clothed in a perfect travelling suit, with leather gaiters on his legs, pouch at his side, in vast garment of maroon velvet, a cigar in his mouth, distributed shakes of the hand with princely prodigality. He was full of inexhaustible gaiety, laughing, joking, playing pranks upon the worthy J.T. Maston, and was, in a word, "French," and, what is worse, "Parisian," till the last second.

Ten o'clock struck. The moment had come to take their places in the projectile; the necessary mechanism for the descent the door-plate to screw down, the removal of the cranes and scaffolding hung over the mouth of the Columbiad, took some time.

Barbicane had set his chronometer to the tenth of a second by that of the engineer Murchison, who was entrusted with setting fire to the powder by means of the electric spark; the travellers shut up in the projectile could thus watch the impassive needle which was going to mark the precise instant of their departure.

The moment for saying farewell had come. The scene was touching; in spite of his gaiety Michel Ardan felt touched. J.T. Maston had found under his dry eyelids an ancient tear that he had, doubtless, kept for the occasion. He shed it upon the forehead of his dear president.

"Suppose I go too?" said he. "There is still time!"

"Impossible, old fellow," answered Barbicane.

A few moments later the three travelling companions were installed in the projectile, and had screwed down the door-plate, and the mouth of the Columbiad, entirely liberated, rose freely towards the sky.

Nicholl, Barbicane, and Michel Ardan were definitively walled up in their metal vehicle.

Who could predict the universal emotion then at its paroxysm?

The moon was rising in a firmament of limpid purity, outshining on her passage the twinkling fire of the stars; she passed over the constellation of the Twins, and was now nearly halfway between the horizon and the zenith.

A frightful silence hung over all that scene. There was not a breath of wind on the earth! Not a sound of breathing from the crowd! Hearts dared not beat. Every eye was fixed on the gaping mouth of the Columbiad.

Murchison watched the needle of his chronometer. Hardly forty seconds had to elapse before the moment of departure struck, and each one lasted a century!

At the twentieth there was a universal shudder, and the thought occurred to all the crowd that the audacious travellers shut up in the vehicle were likewise counting these terrible seconds! Some isolated cries were heard.

"Thirty-five!--thirty-six!--thirty-seven!--thirty--eight!--thirty-nine!--forty! Fire!!!"

Murchison immediately pressed his finger upon the electric knob and hurled the electric spark into the depths of the Columbiad.

A fearful, unheard-of, superhuman report, of which nothing could give an idea, not even thunder or the eruption of volcanoes, was immediately produced. An immense spout of fire sprang up from the bowels of the earth as if from a crater. The soil heaved and very few persons caught a glimpse of the projectile victoriously cleaving the air amidst the flaming smoke.