CHAPTER XXVII.

CLOUDY WEATHER.

At the moment when the pyramid of flame rose to a prodigious height in the air it lighted up the whole of Florida, and for an incalculable moment day was substituted for night over a considerable extent of country. This immense column of fire was perceived for a hundred miles out at sea, from the Gulf and from the Atlantic, and more than one ship's captain noted the apparition of this gigantic meteor in his log-book.

The discharge of the Columbiad was accompanied by a veritable earthquake. Florida was shaken to its very depths. The gases of the powder, expanded by heat, forced back the atmospheric strata with tremendous violence, passing like a waterspout through the air.

Not one spectator remained on his legs; men, women, and children were thrown down like ears of wheat in a storm; there was a terrible tumult, and a large number of people were seriously injured. J.T. Maston, who had very imprudently kept to the fore, was thrown twenty yards backwards like a bullet over the heads of his fellow-citizens. Three hundred thousand people were temporarily deafened and as though thunderstruck.

The atmospheric current, after throwing over huts and cabins, uprooting

trees within a radius of twenty miles, throwing the trains off the railway as far as Tampa, burst upon the town like an avalanche and destroyed a hundred houses, amongst others the church of St. Mary and the new edifice of the Exchange. Some of the vessels in the port were run against each other and sunk, and ten of them were stranded high and dry after breaking their chains like threads of cotton.

But the circle of these devastations extended farther still, and beyond the limits of the United States. The recoil, aided by the westerly winds, was felt on the Atlantic at more than 300 miles from the American shores. An unexpected tempest, which even Admiral Fitzroy could not have foreseen, broke upon the ships with unheard-of violence. Several vessels, seized by a sort of whirlwind before they had time to furl their sails, were sunk, amongst others the Childe Harold, of Liverpool, a regrettable catastrophe which was the object of lively recriminations.

Lastly--although the fact is not warranted except by the affirmation of a few natives--half-an-hour after the departure of the projectile the inhabitants of Sierra-Leone pretended that they heard a dull noise, the last displacement of the sonorous waves, which, after crossing the Atlantic, died away on the African coast.

But to return to Florida. The tumult once lessened, the wounded and deaf--in short, all the crowd--rose and shouted in a sort of frenzy, "Hurrah for Ardan! Hurrah for Barbicane! Hurrah for Nicholl!" Several

millions of men, nose in air, armed with telescopes and every species of field-glass, looked into space, forgetting contusions and feelings, in order to look at the projectile. But they sought in vain; it was not to be seen, and they resolved to await the telegrams from Long's Peak. The director of the Cambridge Observatory, M. Belfast, was at his post in the Rocky Mountains, and it was to this skilful and persevering astronomer that the observations had been entrusted.

But an unforeseen phenomenon, against which nothing could be done, soon came to put public impatience to a rude test.

The weather, so fine before, suddenly changed; the sky became covered with clouds. It could not be otherwise after so great a displacement of the atmospheric strata and the dispersion of the enormous quantity of gases from the combustion of 200,000 lbs. of pyroxyle. All natural order had been disturbed. There is nothing astonishing in that, for in sea-fights it has been noticed that the state of the atmosphere has been suddenly changed by the artillery discharge.

The next day the sun rose upon an horizon covered with thick clouds, a heavy and an impenetrable curtain hung between earth and sky, and which unfortunately extended as far as the regions of the Rocky Mountains. It was a fatality. A concert of complaints rose from all parts of the globe. But Nature took no notice, and as men had chosen to disturb the atmosphere with their gun, they must submit to the consequences.

During this first day every one tried to pierce the thick veil of clouds, but no one was rewarded for the trouble; besides, they were all mistaken in supposing they could see it by looking up at the sky, for on account of the diurnal movement of the globe the projectile was then, of course, shooting past the line of the antipodes.

However that might be, when night again enveloped the earth--a dark, impenetrable night--it was impossible to see the moon above the horizon; it might have been thought that she was hiding on purpose from the bold beings who had shot at her. No observation was, therefore, possible, and the despatches from Long's Peak confirmed the disastrous intelligence.

However, if the experiment had succeeded, the travellers, who had started on the 1st of December, at 10h. 46m. 40s. p.m., were due at their destination on the 4th at midnight; so that as up to that time it would, after all, have been difficult to observe a body so small, people waited with all the patience they could muster.

On the 4th of December, from 8 p.m. till midnight, it would have been possible to follow the trace of the projectile, which would have appeared like a black speck on the shining disc of the moon. But the weather remained imperturbably cloudy, and exasperated the public, who swore at the moon for not showing herself. Sic transit gloria mundi!

J.T. Maston, in despair, set out for Long's Peak. He wished to make an observation himself. He did not doubt that his friends had arrived at

the goal of their journey. No one had heard that the projectile had fallen upon any continent or island upon earth, and J.T. Maston did not admit for a moment that it could have fallen into any of the oceans with which the earth is three parts covered.

On the 5th the same weather. The large telescopes of the old world--those of Herschel, Rosse, and Foucault--were invariably fixed upon the Queen of Night, for the weather was magnificent in Europe, but the relative weakness of these instruments prevented any useful observation.

On the 6th the same weather reigned. Impatience devoured three parts of the globe. The most insane means were proposed for dissipating the clouds accumulated in the air.

On the 7th the sky seemed to clear a little. Hopes revived but did not last long, and in the evening thick clouds defended the starry vault against all eyes.

Things now became grave. In fact, on the 11th, at 9.11 a.m., the moon would enter her last quarter. After this delay she would decline every day, and even if the sky should clear the chances of observation would be considerably lessened--in fact, the moon would then show only a constantly-decreasing portion of her disc, and would end by becoming new--that is to say, she would rise and set with the sun, whose rays would make her quite invisible. They would, therefore, be obliged to

wait till the 3rd of January, at 12.43 p.m., till she would be full again and ready for observation.

The newspapers published these reflections with a thousand commentaries, and did not fail to tell the public that it must arm itself with angelic patience.

On the 8th no change. On the 9th the sun appeared for a moment, as if to jeer at the Americans. It was received with hisses, and wounded, doubtless, by such a reception, it was very miserly of its rays.

On the 10th no change. J.T. Maston nearly went mad, and fears were entertained for his brain until then so well preserved in its gutta-percha cranium.

But on the 11th one of those frightful tempests peculiar to tropical regions was let loose in the atmosphere. Terrific east winds swept away the clouds which had been so long there, and in the evening the half-disc of the moon rode majestically amidst the limpid constellations of the sky.