

CHAPTER VII.

A MOMENT OF INTOXICATION.

Thus a curious but logical, strange yet logical phenomenon took place under these singular conditions. Every object thrown out of the projectile would follow the same trajectory and only stop when it did. That furnished a text for conversation which the whole evening could not exhaust. The emotion of the three travellers increased as they approached the end of their journey. They expected unforeseen incidents, fresh phenomena, and nothing would have astonished them under present circumstances. Their excited imagination outdistanced the projectile, the speed of which diminished notably without their feeling it. But the moon grew larger before their eyes, and they thought they had only to stretch out their hands to touch it.

The next day, the 5th of December, they were all wide awake at 5 a.m. That day was to be the last of their journey if the calculations were exact. That same evening, at midnight, within eighteen hours, at the precise moment of full moon, they would reach her brilliant disc. The next midnight would bring them to the goal of their journey, the most extraordinary one of ancient or modern times. At early dawn, through the windows made silvery with her rays, they saluted the Queen of Night with a confident and joyful hurrah.

The moon was sailing majestically across the starry firmament. A few more degrees and she would reach that precise point in space where the projectile was to meet her. According to his own observations, Barbicane thought that he should accost her in her northern hemisphere, where vast plains extend and mountains are rare--a favourable circumstance if the lunar atmosphere was, according to received opinion, stored up in deep places only.

"Besides," observed Michel Ardan, "a plain is more suitable for landing upon than a mountain. A Selenite landed in Europe on the summit of Mont Blanc, or in Asia on a peak of the Himalayas, would not be precisely at his destination!"

"What is more," added Nicholl, "on a plain the projectile will remain motionless after it has touched the ground, whilst it would roll down a hill like an avalanche, and as we are not squirrels we should not come out safe and sound. Therefore all is for the best."

In fact, the success of the audacious enterprise no longer appeared doubtful. Still one reflection occupied Barbicane; but not wishing to make his two companions uneasy, he kept silence upon it.

The direction of the projectile towards the northern hemisphere proved that its trajectory had been slightly modified. The aim, mathematically calculated, ought to have sent the bullet into the very centre of the lunar disc. If it did not arrive there it would be because it had

deviated. What had caused it? Barbicane could not imagine nor determine the importance of this deviation, for there was no datum to go upon. He hoped, however, that the only result would be to take them towards the upper edge of the moon, a more suitable region for landing.

Barbicane, therefore, without saying anything to his friends, contented himself with frequently observing the moon, trying to see if the direction of the projectile would not change. For the situation would have been so terrible had the bullet, missing its aim, been dragged beyond the lunar disc and fallen into interplanetary space.

At that moment the moon, instead of appearing flat like a disc, already showed her convexity. If the sun's rays had reached her obliquely the shadow then thrown would have made the high mountains stand out. They could have seen the gaping craters and the capricious furrows that cut up the immense plains. But all relief was levelled in the intense brilliancy. Those large spots that give the appearance of a human face to the moon were scarcely distinguishable.

"It may be a face," said Michel Ardan, "but I am sorry for the amiable sister of Apollo, her face is so freckled!"

In the meantime the travellers so near their goal ceaselessly watched this new world. Their imagination made them take walks over these unknown countries. They climbed the elevated peaks. They descended to the bottom of the large amphitheatres. Here and there they thought they

saw vast seas scarcely kept together under an atmosphere so rarefied, and streams of water that poured them their tribute from the mountains. Leaning over the abyss they hoped to catch the noise of this orb for ever mute in the solitudes of the void.

This last day left them the liveliest remembrances. They noted down the least details. A vague uneasiness took possession of them as they approached their goal. This uneasiness would have been doubled if they had felt how slight their speed was. It appeared quite insufficient to take them to the end of their journey. This was because the projectile scarcely "weighed" anything. Its weight constantly decreased, and would be entirely annihilated on that line where the lunar and terrestrial attractions neutralise each other, causing surprising effects.

Nevertheless, in spite of his preoccupations, Michel Ardan did not forget to prepare the morning meal with his habitual punctuality. They ate heartily. Nothing was more excellent than their broth liquefied by the heat of the gas. Nothing better than these preserved meats. A few glasses of good French wine crowned the repast, and caused Michel Ardan to remark that the lunar vines, warmed by this ardent sun, ought to distil the most generous wines--that is, if they existed. Any way, the far-seeing Frenchman had taken care not to forget in his collection some precious cuttings of the Médoc and Côte d'Or, upon which he counted particularly.

The Reiset and Regnault apparatus always worked with extreme precision.

The air was kept in a state of perfect purity. Not a particle of carbonic acid resisted the potash, and as to the oxygen, that, as Captain Nicholl said, was of "first quality." The small amount of humidity in the projectile mixed with this air and tempered its dryness, and many Paris, London, or New York apartments and many theatres do not certainly fulfil hygienic conditions so well.

But in order to work regularly this apparatus had to be kept going regularly. Each morning Michel inspected the escape regulators, tried the taps, and fixed by the pyrometer the heat of the gas. All had gone well so far, and the travellers, imitating the worthy J.T. Maston, began to get so stout that they would not be recognisable if their imprisonment lasted several months. They behaved like chickens in a cage--they fattened.

Looking through the port lights Barbicane saw the spectre of the dog, and the different objects thrown out of the projectile, which obstinately accompanied it. Diana howled lamentably when she perceived the remains of Satellite. All the things seemed as motionless as if they had rested upon solid ground.

"Do you know, my friends," said Michel Ardan, "that if one of us had succumbed to the recoil shock at departure we should have been much embarrassed as to how to get rid of him? You see the accusing corpse would have followed us in space like remorse!"

"That would have been sad," said Nicholl.

"Ah!" continued Michel, "what I regret is our not being able to take a walk outside. What delight it would be to float in this radiant ether, to bathe in these pure rays of the sun! If Barbicane had only thought of furnishing us with diving-dresses and air-pumps I should have ventured outside, and have assumed the attitude of a flying-horse on the summit of the projectile."

"Ah, old fellow!" answered Barbicane, "you would not have stayed there long in spite of your diving-dress; you would have burst like an obus by the expansion of air inside you, or rather like a balloon that goes up too high. So regret nothing, and do not forget this: while we are moving in the void you must do without any sentimental promenade out of the projectile."

Michel Ardan allowed himself to be convinced in a certain measure. He agreed that the thing was difficult, but not "impossible;" that was a word he never uttered.

The conversation passed from this subject to another, and never languished an instant. It seemed to the three friends that under these conditions ideas came into their heads like leaves in the first warm days of spring.

Amidst the questions and answers that crossed each other during this

morning, Nicholl asked one that did not get an immediate solution.

"I say," said he, "it is all very well to go to the moon, but how shall we get back again?"

"What do you mean by that, Nicholl?" asked Barbicane gravely.

"It seems to me very inopportune to ask about getting away from a country before you get to it," added Michel.

"I don't ask that question because I want to draw back, but I repeat my question, and ask, 'How shall we get back?'"

"I have not the least idea," answered Barbicane.

"And as for me," said Michel, "if I had known how to come back I should not have gone."

"That is what you call answering," cried Nicholl.

"I approve of Michel's words, and add that the question has no actual interest. We will think about that later on, when we want to return. Though the Columbiad will not be there, the projectile will."

"Much good that will be, a bullet without a gun!"

"A gun can be made, and so can powder! Neither metal, saltpetre, nor coal can be wanting in the bowels of the moon. Besides, in order to return you have only the lunar attraction to conquer, and you will only have 8,000 leagues to go so as to fall on the terrestrial globe by the simple laws of weight."

"That is enough," said Michel, getting animated. "Let us hear no more about returning. As to communicating with our ancient colleagues upon earth, that will not be difficult."

"How are we to do that, pray?"

"By means of meteors hurled by the lunar volcanoes."

"A good idea, Michel," answered Barbicane. "Laplace has calculated that a force five times superior to that of our cannons would suffice to send a meteor from the moon to the earth. Now there is no volcano that has not a superior force of propulsion."

"Hurrah!" cried Michel. "Meteors will be convenient postmen and will not cost anything! And how we shall laugh at the postal service! But now I think--"

"What do you think?"

"A superb idea! Why did we not fasten a telegraph wire to our bullet? We

could have exchanged telegrams with the earth!"

"And the weight of a wire 86,000 leagues long," answered Nicholl, "does that go for nothing?"

"Yes, for nothing! We should have trebled the charge of the Columbiad! We could have made it four times--five times--greater!" cried Michel, whose voice became more and more violent.

"There is a slight objection to make to your project," answered Barbicane. "It is that during the movement of rotation of the globe our wire would have been rolled round it like a chain round a windlass, and it would inevitably have dragged us down to the earth again."

"By the thirty-nine stars of the Union!" said Michel, "I have nothing but impracticable ideas to-day--ideas worthy of J.T. Maston! But now I think of it, if we do not return to earth J.T. Maston will certainly come to us!"

"Yes! he will come," replied Barbicane; "he is a worthy and courageous comrade. Besides, what could be easier? Is not the Columbiad still lying in Floridian soil? Is cotton and nitric acid wanting wherewith to manufacture the projectile? Will not the moon again pass the zenith of Florida? In another eighteen years will she not occupy exactly the same place that she occupies to-day?"

"Yes," repeated Michel--"yes, Maston will come, and with him our friends Elphinstone, Blomsberry, and all the members of the Gun Club, and they will be welcome! Later on trains of projectiles will be established between the earth and the moon! Hurrah for J.T. Maston!"

It is probable that if the Honourable J.T. Maston did not hear the hurrahs uttered in his honour his ears tingled at least. What was he doing then? He was no doubt stationed in the Rocky Mountains at Long's Peak, trying to discover the invisible bullet gravitating in space. If he was thinking of his dear companions it must be acknowledged that they were not behindhand with him, and that, under the influence of singular exaltation, they consecrated their best thoughts to him.

But whence came the animation that grew visibly greater in the inhabitants of the projectile? Their sobriety could not be questioned. Must this strange erethismus of the brain be attributed to the exceptional circumstances of the time, to that proximity of the Queen of Night from which a few hours only separated them, or to some secret influence of the moon acting on their nervous system? Their faces became as red as if exposed to the reverberation of a furnace; their respiration became more active, and their lungs played like forge-bellows; their eyes shone with extraordinary flame, and their voices became formidably loud, their words escaped like a champagne-cork driven forth by carbonic acid gas; their gestures became disquieting, they wanted so much room to perform them in. And, strange to say, they in no wise perceived this excessive tension of the mind.

"Now," said Nicholl in a sharp tone--"now that I do not know whether we shall come back from the moon, I will know what we are going there for!"

"What we are going there for!" answered Barbicane, stamping as if he were in a fencing-room; "I don't know."

"You don't know!" cried Michel with a shout that provoked a sonorous echo in the projectile.

"No, I have not the least idea!" answered Barbicane, shouting in unison with his interlocutor.

"Well, then, I know," answered Michel.

"Speak, then," said Nicholl, who could no longer restrain the angry tones of his voice.

"I shall speak if it suits me!" cried Michel, violently seizing his companion's arm. "It must suit you!" said Barbicane, with eyes on fire and threatening hands. "It was you who drew us into this terrible journey, and we wish to know why!"

"Yes," said the captain, "now I don't know where I am going, I will know why I am going."

"Why?" cried Michel, jumping a yard high--"why? To take possession of the moon in the name of the United States! To add a fortieth State to the Union! To colonise the lunar regions, to cultivate them, people them, to take them all the wonders of art, science, and industry! To civilise the Selenites, unless they are more civilised than we are, and to make them into a republic if they have not already done it for themselves!"

"If there are any Selenites!" answered Nicholl, who under the empire of this inexplicable intoxication became very contradictory.

"Who says there are no Selenites?" cried Michel in a threatening tone.

"I do!" shouted Nicholl.

"Captain," said Michel, "do not repeat that insult or I will knock your teeth down your throat!"

The two adversaries were about to rush upon one another, and this incoherent discussion was threatening to degenerate into a battle, when Barbicane interfered.

"Stop, unhappy men," said he, putting his two companions back to back, "if there are no Selenites, we will do without them!"

"Yes!" exclaimed Michel, who did not care more about them than that. "We

have nothing to do with the Selenites! Bother the Selenites!"

"The empire of the moon shall be ours," said Nicholl. "Let us found a Republic of three!"

"I shall be the Congress," cried Michel.

"And I the Senate," answered Nicholl.

"And Barbicane the President," shouted Michel.

"No President elected by the nation!" answered Barbicane.

"Well, then, a President elected by the Congress," exclaimed Michel;

"and as I am the Congress I elect you unanimously."

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah for President Barbicane!" exclaimed Nicholl.

"Hip--hip--hip! hurrah!" vociferated Michel Ardan.

Then the President and Senate struck up "Yankee Doodle" as loudly as they could, whilst the Congress shouted the virile "Marseillaise."

Then began a frantic dance with maniacal gestures, mad stamping, and somersaults of boneless clowns. Diana took part in the dance, howling too, and jumped to the very roof of the projectile. An inexplicable

flapping of wings and cock-crows of singular sonority were heard. Five or six fowls flew about striking the walls like mad bats.

Then the three travelling companions, whose lungs were disorganised under some incomprehensible influence, more than intoxicated, burnt by the air that had set their breathing apparatus on fire, fell motionless upon the bottom of the projectile.