

CHAPTER XX.

THE SOUNDINGS OF THE SUSQUEHANNA.

Well, lieutenant, and what about those soundings?"

"I think the operation is almost over, sir. But who would have expected to find such a depth so near land, at 100 leagues only from the American coast?"

"Yes, Bronsfield, there is a great depression," said Captain Blomsberry.

"There exists a submarine valley here, hollowed out by Humboldt's current, which runs along the coasts of America to the Straits of Magellan."

"Those great depths," said the lieutenant, "are not favourable for the laying of telegraph cables. A smooth plateau is the best, like the one the American cable lies on between Valentia and Newfoundland."

"I agree with you, Bronsfield. And, may it please you, lieutenant, where are we now?"

"Sir," answered Bronsfield, "we have at this moment 21,500 feet of line out, and the bullet at the end of the line has not yet touched the bottom, for the sounding-lead would have come up again."

"Brook's apparatus is an ingenious one," said Captain Blomsberry. "It allows us to obtain very correct soundings."

"Touched!" cried at that moment one of the forecastle-men who was superintending the operation.

The captain and lieutenant went on to the forecastle-deck.

"What depth are we in?" asked the captain.

"Twenty-one thousand seven hundred and sixty-two feet," answered the lieutenant, writing it down in his pocket-book.

"Very well, Bronsfield," said the captain, "I will go and mark the result on my chart. Now have the sounding-line brought in--that is a work of several hours. Meanwhile the engineer shall have his fires lighted, and we shall be ready to start as soon as you have done. It is 10 p.m., and with your permission, lieutenant, I shall turn in."

"Certainly, sir, certainly!" answered Lieutenant Bronsfield amiably.

The captain of the *Susquehanna*, a worthy man if ever there was one, the very humble servant of his officers, went to his cabin, took his brandy-and-water with many expressions of satisfaction to the steward, got into bed, not before complimenting his servant on the way he made

beds, and sank into peaceful slumber.

It was then 10 p.m. The eleventh day of the month of December was going to end in a magnificent night.

The *Susquehanna*, a corvette of 500 horse power, of the United States Navy, was taking soundings in the Pacific at about a hundred leagues from the American coast, abreast of that long peninsula on the coast of New Mexico.

The wind had gradually fallen. There was not the slightest movement in the air. The colours of the corvette hung from the mast motionless and inert.

The captain, Jonathan Blomsberry, cousin-german to Colonel Blomsberry, one of the Gun Club members who had married a Horschbiden, the captain's aunt and daughter of an honourable Kentucky merchant--Captain Blomsberry could not have wished for better weather to execute the delicate operation of sounding. His corvette had felt nothing of that great tempest which swept away the clouds heaped up on the Rocky Mountains, and allowed the course of the famous projectile to be observed. All was going on well, and he did not forget to thank Heaven with all the fervour of a Presbyterian.

The series of soundings executed by the *Susquehanna* were intended for finding out the most favourable bottoms for the establishment of a

submarine cable between the Hawaiian Islands and the American coast.

It was a vast project set on foot by a powerful company. Its director, the intelligent Cyrus Field, meant even to cover all the islands of Oceania with a vast electric network--an immense enterprise worthy of American genius.

It was to the corvette *Susquehanna* that the first operations of sounding had been entrusted. During the night from the 11th to the 12th of December she was exactly in north lat. $27^{\circ} 7'$ and $41^{\circ} 37'$ long., west from the Washington meridian.

The moon, then in her last quarter, began to show herself above the horizon.

After Captain Blomsberry's departure, Lieutenant Bronsfield and a few officers were together on the poop. As the moon appeared their thoughts turned towards that orb which the eyes of a whole hemisphere were then contemplating. The best marine glasses could not have discovered the projectile wandering round the demi-globe, and yet they were all pointed at the shining disc which millions of eyes were looking at in the same moment.

"They started ten days ago," then said Lieutenant Bronsfield. "What can have become of them?"

"They have arrived, sir," exclaimed a young midshipman, "and they are doing what all travellers do in a new country, they are looking about them."

"I am certain of it as you say so, my young friend," answered Lieutenant Bronsfield, smiling.

"Still," said another officer, "their arrival cannot be doubted. The projectile must have reached the moon at the moment she was full, at midnight on the 5th. We are now at the 11th of December; that makes six days. Now in six times twenty-four hours, with no darkness, they have had time to get comfortably settled. It seems to me that I see our brave countrymen encamped at the bottom of a valley, on the borders of a Selenite stream, near the projectile, half buried by its fall, amidst volcanic remains, Captain Nicholl beginning his levelling operations, President Barbicane putting his travelling notes in order, Michel Ardan performing the lunar solitudes with his Londrès cigar--"

"Oh, it must be so; it is so!" exclaimed the young midshipman, enthusiastic at the ideal description of his superior.

"I should like to believe it," answered Lieutenant Bronsfield, who was seldom carried away. "Unfortunately direct news from the lunar world will always be wanting."

"Excuse me, sir," said the midshipman, "but cannot President Barbicane

write?"

A roar of laughter greeted this answer.

"Not letters," answered the young man quickly. "The post-office has nothing to do with that."

"Perhaps you mean the telegraph-office?" said one of the officers ironically.

"Nor that either," answered the midshipman, who would not give in. "But it is very easy to establish graphic communication with the earth."

"And how, pray?"

"By means of the telescope on Long's Peak. You know that it brings the moon to within two leagues only of the Rocky Mountains, and that it allows them to see objects having nine feet of diameter on her surface. Well, our industrious friends will construct a gigantic alphabet! They will write words 600 feet long, and sentences a league long, and then they can send up news!"

The young midshipman, who certainly had some imagination was loudly applauded. Lieutenant Bronsfield himself was convinced that the idea could have been carried out. He added that by sending luminous rays, grouped by means of parabolical mirrors, direct communications could

also be established--in fact, these rays would be as visible on the surface of Venus or Mars as the planet Neptune is from the earth. He ended by saying that the brilliant points already observed on the nearest planets might be signals made to the earth. But he said, that though by these means they could have news from the lunar world, they could not send any from the terrestrial world unless the Selenites have at their disposition instruments with which to make distant observations.

"That is evident," answered one of the officers, "but what has become of the travellers? What have they done? What have they seen? That is what interests us. Besides, if the experiment has succeeded, which I do not doubt, it will be done again. The Columbiad is still walled up in the soil of Florida. It is, therefore, now only a question of powder and shot, and every time the moon passes the zenith we can send it a cargo of visitors."

"It is evident," answered Lieutenant Bronsfield, "that J.T. Maston will go and join his friends one of these days."

"If he will have me," exclaimed the midshipman, "I am ready to go with him."

"Oh, there will be plenty of amateurs, and if they are allowed to go, half the inhabitants of the earth will soon have emigrated to the moon!"

This conversation between the officers of the *Susquehanna* was kept up till about 1 a.m. It would be impossible to transcribe the overwhelming systems and theories which were emitted by these audacious minds. Since Barbicane's attempt it seemed that nothing was impossible to Americans. They had already formed the project of sending, not another commission of savants, but a whole colony, and a whole army of infantry, artillery, and cavalry to conquer the lunar world.

At 1 a.m. the sounding-line was not all hauled in. Ten thousand feet remained out, which would take several more hours to bring in. According to the commander's orders the fires had been lighted, and the pressure was going up already. The *Susquehanna* might have started at once.

At that very moment--it was 1.17 a.m.--Lieutenant Bronsfield was about to leave his watch to turn in when his attention was attracted by a distant and quite unexpected hissing sound.

His comrades and he at first thought that the hissing came from an escape of steam, but upon lifting up his head he found that it was high up in the air.

They had not time to question each other before the hissing became of frightful intensity, and suddenly to their dazzled eyes appeared an enormous bolis, inflamed by the rapidity of its course, by its friction against the atmospheric strata.

This ignited mass grew huger as it came nearer, and fell with the noise of thunder upon the bowsprit of the corvette, which it smashed off close to the stem, and vanished in the waves.

A few feet nearer and the Susquehanna would have gone down with all on board.

At that moment Captain Blomsberry appeared half-clothed, and rushing in the fore-castle, where his officers had preceded him--

"With your permission, gentlemen, what has happened?" he asked.

And the midshipman, making himself the mouthpiece of them all, cried out--

"Commander, it is 'they' come back again."