

CHAPTER XXII.

PICKED UP.

The very spot where the projectile had disappeared under the waves was exactly known. The instruments for seizing it and bringing it to the surface of the ocean were still wanting. They had to be invented and then manufactured. American engineers could not be embarrassed by such a trifle. The grappling-irons once established and steam helping, they were assured of raising the projectile, notwithstanding its weight, which diminished the density of the liquid amidst which it was plunged.

But it was not enough to fish up the bullet. It was necessary to act promptly in the interest of the travellers. No one doubted that they were still living.

"Yes," repeated J.T. Maston incessantly, whose confidence inspired everybody, "our friends are clever fellows, and they cannot have fallen like imbeciles. They are alive, alive and well, but we must make haste in order to find them so. He had no anxiety about provisions and water. They had enough for a long time! But air!--air would soon fail them. Then they must make haste!"

And they did make haste. They prepared the *Susquehanna* for her new destination. Her powerful engines were arranged to be used for the

hauling machines. The aluminium projectile only weighed 19,250 lbs., a much less weight than that of the transatlantic cable, which was picked up under similar circumstances. The only difficulty lay in the smooth sides of the cylindro-conical bullet, which made it difficult to grapple.

With that end in view the engineer Murchison, summoned to San Francisco, caused enormous grappling-irons to be fitted upon an automatical system which would not let the projectile go again if they succeeded in seizing it with their powerful pincers. He also had some diving-dresses prepared, which, by their impermeable and resisting texture, allowed divers to survey the bottom of the sea. He likewise embarked on board the Susquehanna apparatuses for compressed air, very ingeniously contrived. They were veritable rooms, with port-lights in them, and which, by introducing the water into certain compartments, could be sunk to great depths. These apparatuses were already at San Francisco, where they had been used in the construction of a submarine dyke. This was fortunate, for there would not have been time to make them.

Yet notwithstanding the perfection of the apparatus, notwithstanding the ingenuity of the savants who were to use them, the success of the operation was anything but assured. Fishing up a bullet from 20,000 feet under water must be an uncertain operation. And even if the bullet should again be brought to the surface, how had the travellers borne the terrible shock that even 20,000 feet of water would not sufficiently deaden?

In short, everything must be done quickly. J.T. Maston hurried on his workmen day and night. He was ready either to buckle on the diver's dress or to try the air-apparatus in order to find his courageous friends.

Still, notwithstanding the diligence with which the different machines were got ready, notwithstanding the considerable sums which were placed at the disposition of the Gun Club by the Government of the Union, five long days (five centuries) went by before the preparations were completed. During that time public opinion was excited to the highest point. Telegrams were incessantly exchanged all over the world through the electric wires and cables. The saving of Barbicane, Nicholl, and Michel Ardan became an international business. All the nations that had subscribed to the enterprise of the Gun Club were equally interested in the safety of the travellers.

At last the grappling-chains, air-chambers, and automatic grappling-irons were embarked on board the *Susquehanna*. J.T. Maston, the engineer Murchison, and the Gun Club delegates already occupied their cabins. There was nothing to do but to start.

On the 21st of December, at 8 p.m., the corvette set sail on a calm sea with a rather cold north-east wind blowing. All the population of San Francisco crowded on to the quays, mute and anxious, reserving its hurrahs for the return.

The steam was put on to its maximum of tension, and the screw of the Susquehanna carried it rapidly out of the bay.

It would be useless to relate the conversations on board amongst the officers, sailors, and passengers. All these men had but one thought. Their hearts all beat with the same emotion. What were Barbicane and his companions doing whilst they were hastening to their succour? What had become of them? Had they been able to attempt some audacious manoeuvre to recover their liberty? No one could say. The truth is that any attempt would have failed. Sunk to nearly two leagues under the ocean, their metal prison would defy any effort of its prisoners.

On the 23rd of December, at 8 a.m., after a rapid passage, the Susquehanna ought to be on the scene of the disaster. They were obliged to wait till twelve o'clock to take their exact bearings. The buoy fastened on to the sounding-line had not yet been seen.

At noon Captain Blomsberry, helped by his officers, who controlled the observation, made his point in presence of the delegates of the Gun Club. That was an anxious moment. The Susquehanna was found to be at some minutes west of the very spot where the projectile had disappeared under the waves.

The direction of the corvette was therefore given in view of reaching the precise spot.

At 12.47 p.m. the buoy was sighted. It was in perfect order, and did not seem to have drifted far.

"At last!" exclaimed J.T. Maston.

"Shall we begin?" asked Captain Blomsberry.

"Without losing a second," answered J.T. Maston.

Every precaution was taken to keep the corvette perfectly motionless.

Before trying to grapple the projectile, the engineer, Murchison, wished to find out its exact position on the sea-bottom. The submarine apparatus destined for this search received their provision of air. The handling of these engines is not without danger, for at 20,000 feet below the surface of the water and under such great pressure they are exposed to ruptures the consequences of which would be terrible.

J.T. Maston, the commander's brother, and the engineer Murchison, without a thought of these dangers, took their places in the air-chambers. The commander, on his foot-bridge, presided over the operation, ready to stop or haul in his chains at the least signal. The screw had been taken off, and all the force of the machines upon the windlass would soon have brought up the apparatus on board.

The descent began at 1.25 p.m., and the chamber, dragged down by its reservoirs filled with water, disappeared under the surface of the ocean.

The emotion of the officers and sailors on board was now divided between the prisoners in the projectile and the prisoners of the submarine apparatus. These latter forgot themselves, and, glued to the panes of the port-lights, they attentively observed the liquid masses they were passing through.

The descent was rapid. At 2.17 p.m. J.T. Maston and his companions had reached the bottom of the Pacific; but they saw nothing except the arid desert which neither marine flora nor fauna any longer animated. By the light of their lamps, furnished with powerful reflectors, they could observe the dark layers of water in a rather large radius, but the projectile remained invisible in their eyes.

The impatience of these bold divers could hardly be described. Their apparatus being in electric communication with the corvette, they made a signal agreed upon, and the *Susquehanna* carried their chamber over a mile of space at one yard from the soil.

They thus explored all the submarine plain, deceived at every instant by optical delusions which cut them to the heart. Here a rock, there a swelling of the ground, looked to them like the much-sought-for projectile; then they would soon find out their error and despair again.

"Where are they? Where can they be?" cried J.T. Maston.

And the poor man called aloud to Nicholl, Barbicane, and Michel Ardan, as if his unfortunate friends could have heard him through that impenetrable medium!

The search went on under those conditions until the vitiated state of the air in the apparatus forced the divers to go up again.

The hauling in was begun at 6 p.m., and was not terminated before midnight.

"We will try again to-morrow," said J.T. Maston as he stepped on to the deck of the corvette.

"Yes," answered Captain Blomsberry.

"And in another place."

"Yes."

J.T. Maston did not yet doubt of his ultimate success, but his companions, who were no longer intoxicated with the animation of the first few hours, already took in all the difficulties of the enterprise.

What seemed easy at San Francisco in open ocean appeared almost

impossible. The chances of success diminished in a large proportion, and it was to chance alone that the finding of the projectile had to be left.

The next day, the 24th of December, notwithstanding the fatigues of the preceding day, operations were resumed. The corvette moved some minutes farther west, and the apparatus, provisioned with air again, took the same explorers to the depths of the ocean.

All that day was passed in a fruitless search. The bed of the sea was a desert. The day of the 25th brought no result, neither did that of the 26th.

It was disheartening. They thought of the unfortunate men shut up for twenty-six days in the projectile. Perhaps they were all feeling the first symptoms of suffocation, even if they had escaped the dangers of their fall. The air was getting exhausted, and doubtless with the air their courage and spirits.

"The air very likely, but their courage never," said J.T. Maston.

On the 28th, after two days' search, all hope was lost. This bullet was an atom in the immensity of the sea! They must give up the hope of finding it.

Still J.T. Maston would not hear about leaving. He would not abandon the

place without having at least found the tomb of his friends. But Captain Blomsberry could not stay on obstinately, and notwithstanding the opposition of the worthy secretary, he was obliged to give orders to set sail.

On the 29th of December, at 9 a.m., the *Susquehanna*, heading north-east, began to return to the bay of San Francisco.

It was 10 a.m. The corvette was leaving slowly and as if with regret the scene of the catastrophe, when the sailor at the masthead, who was on the look-out, called out all at once--

"A buoy on the lee bow!"

The officers looked in the direction indicated. They saw through their telescopes the object signalled, which did look like one of those buoys used for marking the openings of bays or rivers; but, unlike them, a flag floating in the wind surmounted a cone which emerged five or six feet. This buoy shone in the sunshine as if made of plates of silver.

The commander, Blomsberry, J.T. Maston, and the delegates of the Gun Club ascended the foot-bridge and examined the object thus drifting on the waves.

All looked with feverish anxiety, but in silence. None of them dared utter the thought that came into all their minds.

The corvette approached to within two cables' length of the object.

A shudder ran through the whole crew.

The flag was an American one!

At that moment a veritable roar was heard. It was the worthy J.T. Maston, who had fallen in a heap; forgetting on the one hand that he had only an iron hook for one arm, and on the other that a simple gutta-percha cap covered his cranium-box, he had given himself a formidable blow.

They rushed towards him and picked him up. They recalled him to life. And what were his first words?

"Ah! triple brutes! quadruple idiots! quintuple boobies that we are!"

"What is the matter?" every one round him exclaimed.

"What the matter is?"

"Speak, can't you?"

"It is, imbeciles," shouted the terrible secretary, "it is the bullet only weighs 19,250 lbs!"

"Well?"

"And it displaces 28 tons, or 56,000 lbs., consequently it floats!"

Ah! how that worthy man did underline the verb "to float!" And it was the truth! All, yes! all these savants had forgotten this fundamental law, that in consequence of its specific lightness the projectile, after having been dragged by its fall to the greatest depths of the ocean, had naturally returned to the surface; and now it was floating tranquilly whichever way the wind carried them.

The boats had been lowered. J.T. Maston and his friends rushed into them. The excitement was at its highest point. All hearts palpitated whilst the boats rowed towards the projectile. What did it contain--the living or the dead? The living. Yes! unless death had struck down Barbicane and his companions since they had hoisted the flag!

Profound silence reigned in the boats. All hearts stopped beating. Eyes no longer performed their office. One of the port-lights of the projectile was opened. Some pieces of glass remaining in the frame proved that it had been broken. This port-light was situated actually five feet above water.

A boat drew alongside--that of J.T. Maston. He rushed to the broken window.

At that moment the joyful and clear voice of Michel Ardan was heard exclaiming in the accents of victory--"Double blank, Barbicane, double blank!"

Barbicane, Michel Ardan, and Nicholl were playing at dominoes.