



THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE

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THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE

BOOK I

ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

THE RETURNED TRAVELER

"Gentlemen, this is America!"

The speaker cast upon the cloth-covered table a singular object, whose like none of those present had ever seen. They gathered about and bent over it curiously.

"This is that America," the speaker repeated. "Here you have it, barbaric, wonderful, abounding!"

With sudden gesture he swept his hand among the gold coin that lay on the gaming table. He thrust into the mouth of the object before him a handful of louis d'or and English sovereigns. "There is your America," said he. "It runs over with gold. No man may tell its richness. Its beauty you can not imagine."

"Faith," said Sir Arthur Pembroke, bending over the table with glass in eye, "if the ladies of that land have feet for this sort of shoon, methinks we might well emigrate. Take you the money of it. For me, I would see the dame could wear such shoe as this."

One after another this company of young Englishmen, hard players, hard drinkers, gathered about the table and bent over to examine the little shoe. It was an Indian moccasin, cut after the fashion of the Abenakis, from the skin of the wild buck, fashioned large and full for the spread of the foot, covered deep with the stained quills of the porcupine, and dotted here and there with the precious beads which, to the maker, had more worth than any gold. A little flap came up for cover to the ankle, and a thong fell from its upper edge. It was the ancient foot-covering of the red race of America, made for

the slight but effectual protection of the foot, while giving perfect freedom to the tread of the wearer. Light, dainty and graceful, its size was much less than that of the average woman's shoe of that time and place.

"Bah! Pembroke," said Castleton, pushing up the shade above his eyes till it rested on his forehead, "'tis a child's shoe."

"Not so," said the first speaker. "I give you my word 'tis the moccasin of my sweetheart, a princess in her own right, who waits my coming on the Ottawa. And so far from the shoe being too small, I say as a gentleman that she not only wore it so, but in addition used somewhat of grass therein in place of hose."

The earnestness of this speech in no wise prevented the peal of laughter that followed.

"There you have it, Pembroke," cried Castleton. "Would you move to a land where princesses use hay for hosiery?"

"'Tis curious done," said Pembroke, musingly, "none the less."

"And done by her own hand," said the owner of the shoe, with a certain proprietary pride.

Again the laughter broke out. "Do your princesses engage in shoemaking?" asked a third gamester as he pushed into the ring. "Sure it must be a rare land. Prithee, what doth the king in handicraft? Doth he take to saddlery, or, perhaps, smithing?"

"Have done thy jests, Wilson," cried Pembroke. "Mayhap there is somewhat to be learned here of this New World and of our dear cousins, the French. Go on, tell us, Monsieur du Mesne—as I think you call yourself, sir?—tell us more of your new country of ice and snow, of princesses and little shoes."

The original speaker went a bit sullen, what with his wine and the jests of his companions. "I'll tell ye naught," said he. "Go see for yourselves, by leave of Louis."

"Come now," said Pembroke, conciliatingly. "We'll all admit our ignorance. 'Tis little we know of our own province of Virginia, save that Virginia is a land of poverty and tobacco. Wealth—faith, if ye have wealth in your end of the continent, 'tis time we English fought ye for it."

"Methinks you English are having enough to do here close at home," sneered Du Mesne. "I have heard somewhat of Steinkirk, and how ye ran from the half-dressed gentlemen of France."

Dark looks followed this bold speech, which cut but too closely to the quick of English pride. Pembroke quelled the incipient outcry with calmer speech.

"Peace, friends," said he. "'Tis not arms we argue here, after all. We are but students at the feet of Monsieur du Mesne, who hath returned from foreign parts. Prithee, sir, tell us more."

"Tell ye more—and if I did, would ye believe it? What if I tell ye of great rivers far to the west of the Ottawa; of races as strange to my princess's people as we are to them; of streams whose sands run in gold, where diamonds and sapphires are to be picked up as ye like? If I told ye, would ye believe?"

The martial hearts and adventurous souls of the circle about him began to show in the heightened color and closer crowding of the young men to the table. Silence fell upon the group.

"Ye know nothing, in this old rotten world, of what there is yet to be found in America," cried Du Mesne. "For myself, I have been no farther than the great falls of the Ontoneagea—a mere trifle of a cataract, gentlemen, into which ye might pitch your tallest English cathedral and sink it beyond its pinnacle with ease. Yet I have spoke with the holy fathers who have journeyed far to the westward, even to the vast Messasebe, which is well known to run into the China sea upon some far-off coast not yet well charted. I have also read the story of Sagan, who was far to the west of that mighty river. Did not the latter see and pursue and kill in fair fight the giant unicorn, fabled of Scripture? Is not that animal known to be a creature of the East, and may we not, therefore, be advised that this new country takes hold upon the storied lands of the East? Why, this holy friar with whom I spoke, fresh back from his voyaging to the cold upper ways of the Northern tribes, who live beyond the far-off channel at Michilimackinac—did he not tell of a river of the name of the Blue Earth, and did he not himself see turquoises and diamonds and emeralds taken in handfuls from this same blue earth? Ah, bah! gentlemen, Europe for you if ye like, but for me, back I go, so soon as I may get proper passage and a connection which will warrant

me the voyage. Back I go to Canada, to America, to the woods and streams. I would see again my ancient Du L'hut, and my comrade Pierre Noir, and Tête Gris, the trapper from the Mistasing—free traders all. Life is there for the living, my comrades. This Old World, small and outworn, no more of it for me."

"And why came you back to this little Old World of ours, an you loved the New World so much?" asked the cynical voice of him who had been called Wilson.

"By the body of God!" cried Du Mesne, "think ye I came of my own free will? Look here, and find your reason." He stripped back the opening of his doublet and under waistcoat, and showed upon his broad shoulder the scar of a red tri-point, deep and livid upon his flesh. "Look! There is the fleur-de-lis of France. That is why I came. I have rowed in the galleys, me—me a free man, a man of the woods of New France!"

Murmurs of concern passed among the little group. Castleton rose from his chair and leaned with his hands upon the table, gazing now at the face and now at the bared shoulder of this stranger, who had by chance become a member of their nightly party.

"I have not been in London a fortnight since my escape," said the man with the brand. "I was none the less once a good servant of Louis in New France, for that I found many a new tribe and many a bale of furs that else had never come to the Mountain for the robbery of the lying officers who claim the robe of Louis. I was a soldier for the king as well as a traveler of the forest. Was I not with the Le Moynes and the band that crossed the icy North and destroyed your robbing English fur posts on the Bay of Hudson? I fought there and helped blow down your barriers. I packed my own robe on my back, and walked for the king, till the *raquette* thongs cut my ankles to the bone. For what? When I came back to the settlements at Quebec I was seized for a *coureur de bois*, a free trader. I was herded like a criminal into a French ship, sent over seas to a French prison, branded with a French iron, and set like a brute to pull without reason at a bar of wood in the king's galleys—the king's hell!"

"And yet you are a Frenchman," sneered Wilson.

"Yet am I not a Frenchman," cried the other. "Nor am I an Englishman. I am no man of a world of galleys and brands. I am a man of America!"

"'Tis true what he says," spoke Pembroke. "'Tis said the minister of Louis was feared to keep these men in the galleys, lest their fellows in New France should become too bitter, and should join the savages in their inroads on the starving settlements of Quebec and Montréal."

"True," exclaimed Du Mesne. "The *coureurs* care naught for the law and little for the king. As for a ruler, we have discovered that a man makes a most excellent sovereign for himself."

"And excellent said," cried Castleton.

"None of ye know the West," went on the *coureur*. "Your Virginia, we know well of it—a collection of beggars, prostitutes and thieves. Your New England—a lot of cod-fishing, starving snivelers, who are most concerned how to keep life in their bodies from year to year. New France herself, sitting ever on the edge of an icy death, with naught but bickerings at Quebec and naught but reluctant compliance from Paris—what hath she to hope? I tell ye, gentlemen, 'tis beyond, in the land of the Messasebe, where I shall for my part seek out my home; and no man shall set iron on my soul again."

He spoke bitterly. The group about him, half amused, half cynical and all ignorant, as were their kind at this time of the reign of William, were none the less impressed and thoughtful. Yet once more the sneering voice of Wilson broke in.

"A strange land, my friend," said he, "monstrous strange. Your unicorns are great, and your women are little. Methinks to give thy tale proportion thou shouldst have shown shoon somewhat larger."

"Peace! Beau," said Castleton, quickly. "As for the size of the human foot—gad! I'll lay a roll of louis d'or that there's one dame here in London town can wear this slipper of New France."

"Done!" cried Wilson. "Name the one."

"None other than the pretty Lawrence whom thou hast had under thine ancient wing for the past two seasons."

The face of Wilson gathered into a sudden frown at this speech. "What doth it matter" — he began.

"Have done, fellows!" cried Pembroke with some asperity. "Lay wagers more fit at best, and let us have no more of this thumb-biting. Gad! the first we know, we'll be up for fighting among ourselves, and we all know how the new court doth look on that."

"Come away," laughed Castleton, gaily. "I'm for a pint of ale and an apple; and then beware! 'Tis always my fortune, when I come to this country drink, to win like a very countryman. I need revenge upon Lady Betty and her lap-dog. I've lost since ever I saw them last."

CHAPTER II

AT SADLER'S WELLS

Sadler's Wells, on this mild and cheery spring morning, was a scene of fashion and of folly. Hither came the elite of London, after the custom of the day, to seek remedy in the reputed qualities of the springs for the weariness and lassitude resultant upon the long season of polite dissipations which society demanded of her votaries. Bewigged dandies, their long coats of colors well displayed as they strutted about in the open, paid court there, as they did within the city gates, to the powdered and painted beauties who sat in their couches waiting for their servants to bring out to them the draft of which they craved healing for crow's-feet and hollow eyes. Here and there traveling merchants called their wares, jugglers spread their carpets, bear dancers gave their little spectacles, and jockeys conferred as to the merits of horse or hound. Hawk-nosed Jews passed among the vehicles, cursed or kicked by the young gallants who stood about, hat in hand, at the steps of their idols' carriages.

"Buy my silks, pretty lady, buy my silks! Fresh from the Turkey walk on the Exchange, and cheaper than you can buy their like in all

the city — buy my silks, lady!" Thus the peddler with his little pack of finery.

"My philter, lady," cried the gipsy woman, who had left her donkey cart outside the line. "My philter! 'Twill keep-a your eyes bright and your cheeks red for ay. Secret of the Pharaohs, lady; and but a shilling!"

"Have ye a parrot, ma'am? Have ye never a parrot to keep ye free and give ye laughter every hour? Buy my parrot, lady. Just from the Gold Coast. He'll talk ye Spanish, Flemish or good city tongue. Buy my parrot at ten crowns, and so cheap, lady!" So spoke the ear-ringed sailor, who might never have seen a salter water than the Thames.

"Powder-puffs for the face, lady," whispered a lean and weazen-faced hawker, slipping among the crowd with secrecy. "See my puff, made from the foot of English hares. Rubs out all wrinkles, lady, and keeps ye young as when ye were a lass. But a shilling, a shilling. See!" And with the pretense of secrecy the seller would sidle up to a carriage of some dame, slip to her the hare's foot and take the shilling with an air as though no one could see what none could fail to notice.

Above these mingled cries of the hangers-on of this crowd of nobility and gentles rose the blare of crude music, and cries far off and confused. Above it all shone the May sun, brighter here than lower toward the Thames. In the edge of London town it was, all this little pageant, and from the residence squares below and far to the westward came the carriages and the riders, gathering at the spot which for the hour was the designated rendezvous of capricious fashion. No matter if the tower at the drinking curb was crowded, so that inmates of the coaches could not find way among the others. There was at least magic in the morning, even if one might not drink at the chalybeate spring. Cheeks did indeed grow rosy, and eyes brightened under the challenge not only of the dawn but of the ardent eyes that gazed impertinently bold or reproachfully imploring.

Far-reaching was the line of the gentility, to whose flanks clung the rabble of trade. Back upon the white road came yet other carriages, saluted by those departing. Low hedges of English green reached out into the distance, blending ultimately at the edge of the

pleasant sky. Merry enough it was, and gladsome, this spring day; for be sure the really ill did not brave the long morning ride to test the virtue of the waters of Sadler's Wells. It was for the most part the young, the lively, the full-blooded, perhaps the wearied, but none the less the vital and stirring natures which met in the decreed assemblage.

Back of Sadler's little court the country came creeping close up to the town. There were fields not so far away on these long highways. Wandering and rambling roads ran off to the westward and to the north, leading toward the straight old Roman road which once upon a time ran down to London town. Ill-kept enough were some of the lanes, with their hedges and shrubs overhanging the highways, if such the paths could be called which came braiding down toward the south. One needed not to go far outward beyond Sadler's Wells of a night-time to find adventure, or to lose a purse.

It was on one of these less crowded highways that there was this morning enacted a curious little drama. The sun was still young and not too strong for comfort, and as it rose back of the square of Sadler's it cast a shadow from a hedge which ran angling toward the southeast. Its rays, therefore, did not disturb the slumbers of two young men who were lying beneath the shelter of the hedge. Strange enough must have been the conclusions of the sun could it have looked over the barrier and peered into the faces of these youths. Evidently they were of good breeding and some station, albeit their garb was not of the latest fashion. The gray hose and the clumsy shoes plainly bespoke some northern residence. The wig of each lacked the latest turn, perhaps the collar of the coat was not all it should have been. There was but one coat visible, for the other, rolled up as a pillow, served to support the heads of both. The elder of the two was the one who had sacrificed his covering. The other was more restless in his attitude, and though thus the warmer for a coat, was more in need of comfort. A white bandage covered his wrist, and the linen was stained red. Yet the two slept on, well into the morn, well into the rout of Sadler's Wells. Evidently they were weary.

The elder man was the taller of the two; as he lay on the bank beneath the hedge, he might even in that posture have been seen to

own a figure of great strength and beauty. His face, bold of outline, with well curved, wide jaw and strong cheek bones, was shaded by the tangled mat of his wig, tousled in his sleep. His hands, long and graceful, lay idly at his side, though one rested lightly on the hilt of the sword which lay near him. The ruffles of his shirt were torn, and, indeed, had almost disappeared. By study one might have recognized them in the bandage about the hand of the other. Somewhat disheveled was this youth, yet his young, strong body, slender and shapely, seemed even in its rest strangely full of power and confidence.

The younger man was in some fashion an epitome of the other, and it had needed little argument to show the two were brothers. But why should two brothers, well-clad and apparently well-to-do, probably brothers from a country far to the north, be thus lying like common vagabonds beneath an English hedge?

Far down the roadway there rose a cloud of dust, which came steadily nearer, following the only vehicle in sight, probably the only one which had passed that morning. As this little dust-cloud came slowly nearer it might have been seen to rise from the wheels of a richly-built and well-appointed coach. Four dark horses obeyed the reins handled by a solemn-visaged lackey on the box, and there was a goodly footman at the back. Within the coach were two passengers such as might have set Sadler's Wells by the ears. They sat on the same seat, as equals, and their heads lay close together, as confidantes. The tongues of both ran fast and free. Long gloves covered the arms of these beauties, and their costumes showed them to be of station. The crinoline of the two filled all the body of the ample coach from seat to seat, and the folds of their figured muslins, flowing out over this ample outline, gave to the face of each a daintiness of contour and feature which was not ill relieved by the high head-dress of ribbons and powdered hair. Of the two ladies, one, even in despite of her crinoline, might have been seen to be of noble and queenly figure; the towering head-dress did not fully disguise the wealth of red-bronze hair. Tall and well-rounded, vigorous and young, not yet twenty, adored by many suitors, the Lady Catharine Knollys had rarely looked better than she did this morning as she drove out to Sadler's, for Providence alone knew what fault of a superb vital energy. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke,

and every gesture betokened rather the grand young creature that she was than the valetudinarian going forth for healing. Her cheek, turned now and again, showed a clear-cut and untouched soundness that meant naught but health. It showed also the one blemish upon a beauty which was toasted in the court as faultless. Upon the left cheek there was a *mouche*, excessive in its size. Strangers might have commented on it. Really it covered a deep-stained birth-mark, the one blur upon a peerless beauty. Yet even this might be forgotten, as it was now.

The companion of the Lady Catharine in her coach was a young woman, scarce so tall and more slender. The heavy hoop concealed much of the grace of figure which was her portion, but the poise of the upper body, free from the seat-back and erect with youthful strength as yet unspared, showed easily that here, too, was but an indifferent subject for Sadler's. Dark, where her companion was fair, and with the glossy texture of her own somber locks showing in the individual roll which ran back into the absurd *fontange* of false hair and falser powder, Mary Connyng made good foil for her bosom friend; though honesty must admit that neither had yet much concern for foils, since both had their full meed of gallants. Much seen together, they were commonly known, as the Morning and Eve, sometimes as Aurora and Eve. Never did daughter of the original Eve have deeper feminine guile than Mary Connyng. Soft of speech—as her friend, the Lady Catharine, was impulsive,—slow, suave, amber-eyed and innocent of visage, this young English woman, with no dower save that of beauty and of wit, had not failed of a sensation at the capital whither she had come as guest of the Lady Catharine. Three captains and a squire, to say nothing of a gouty colonel, had already fallen victims, and had heard their fate in her low, soft tones, which could whisper a fashionable oath in the accent of a hymn, and say "no" so sweetly that one could only beg to hear the word again. It was perhaps of some such incident that these two young maids of old London conversed as they trundled slowly out toward the suburb of the city.

"'Twould have killed you, Lady Kitty; sure 'twould have been your end to hear him speak! He walked the floor upon his knees, and clasped his hands, and followed me about like a dog in a spectacle. Lord! but I feared he would have thrown over the tabouret