

TOPSY-TURVY



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Topsy-Turvy

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"TOPSY-TURVY"

BY

JULES VERNE

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE NORTH POLAR PRACTICAL ASSOCIATION RUSHES A DOCUMENT ACROSS TWO WORLDS

"Then Mr Maston, you pretend that a woman has never been able to make mathematical or experimental-science progress?"

"To my extreme regret, I am obliged to, Mrs. Scorbitt," answered J.T. Maston.

"That there have been some very remarkable women in mathematics, especially in Russia, I fully and willingly agree with you. But, with her cerebral conformation, she cannot become an Archimedes, much less a Newton."

"Oh, Mr. Maston, allow me to protest in the name of my sex."

"A sex, Mrs. Scorbitt, much too charming to give itself up to the higher studies."

"Well then, according to your opinion, no woman seeing an apple fall could have discovered the law of universal gravitation, so that it would have made her the most illustrious scientific person of the seventeenth century?"

"In seeing an apple fall, Mrs. Scorbitt, a woman would have but the single idea-to eat it-for example, our mother Eve."

"Pshaw, I see very well that you deny us all aptitude for high speculations."

"All aptitude? No, Mrs. Scorbitt, and in the meanwhile I would like to prove to you that since there are inhabitants on earth, and consequently women, there has not one feminine brain been found yet to which we owe any discoveries like those of Aristotle, Euclid, Kepler, Laplace, etc."

"Is this a reason? And does the past always prove the future?"

"Well, a person who has done nothing in a thousand years, without a doubt, never will do anything."

"I see now that I have to take our part, Mr. Maston, and that we are not worth much."

"In regard to being worth something"-began Mr. Maston, with as much politeness as he could command.

But Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, who was perfectly willing to be satisfied, answered promptly: "Each one has his or her lot in this world. You may remain the extraordinary calculator which you are, give yourself up entirely to the immense work to which your friends and yourself will devote their existence. I will be the woman in the case and bring to it my pecuniary assistance."

"And we will owe you an eternal gratitude," answered Mr. Maston.

Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt blushed deliciously, for she felt, according to report, a singular sympathy for J.T. Maston. Besides, is not the heart of a woman an unfathomable gulf?

It was really an immense undertaking to which this rich American widow had resolved to devote large sums of money.

The scheme and its expected results, briefly outlined, were as follows:

The Arctic regions, accurately expressed, include according to Maltebrun, Roclus, Saint-Martin and other high authorities on geography:

1st. The northern Devon, including the ice-covered islands of Baffin's Sea and Lancaster Sound.

2d. The northern Georgia, made up of banks and numerous islands, such as the islands of Sabine, Byam-Martin, Griffith, Cornwallis, and Bathurst.

3d. The archipelago of Baffin-Parry, including different parts of the circumpolar continent, embracing Cumberland, Southampton, James-Sommerset, Boothia-Felix, Melville, and other parts nearly unknown. Of this great area, crossed by the 78th parallel, there are over 1,400,000 square miles of land and over 700,000 square miles of water.

Within this area intrepid modern discoverers have advanced to the 84th-degree of latitude, reaching seacoasts lost behind the high chain of icebergs which may be called the Arctic Highlands, given names to capes, to mountains, to gulfs, to bays, etc. But beyond this 84th degree is mystery. It is the terra incognita of the chart-makers, and nobody knows as yet whether behind is hidden land or water for a distance of 6 degrees over impassable heaps of ice to the North Pole.

It was in the year 189- that the Government of the United States conceived the idea of putting the as yet undiscovered countries around the North Pole up at auction sale, and an American society had just been formed with the plan of purchasing this Arctic area and has asked the concession.

For several years, it is true, the Conference at Berlin had formulated a special plan for the guidance of such of the great powers as might wish to appropriate rights under the claim of colonization or the opening of commercial markets. This code was not acceptable to all, and the Polar region had remained without inhabitants. As that which belongs to none belongs to every one, the new Society did not wish merely to occupy it, but to purchase it outright, and so avoid further claims.

There never is in the United States any project so bold as not to find people to regard it as practical and back it with large amounts of money. This was well shown a few years ago when the Gun Club of Baltimore tried to send a projectile to the moon, hoping to obtain a direct communication with our satellite. Was it not enterprising

Americans who furnished funds for this undertaking? Large amounts were necessary for this interesting trial and were promptly found. And, had it been realized, would we not have to thank the members of that club who had dared to take the risk of this super-human experience?

Should a Lesseps propose to dig a channel across Europe to Asia, from the banks of the Atlantic to the waters of China; should a well-sinker offer to bore from the curb-stones to reach the beds of molten silicates, to bring a supply to your fireplaces; should an enterprising electrician want to unite the scattered currents over the surface of the globe into one inexhaustible spring of heat and light; should a bold engineer conceive the idea of putting the excess of Summer temperature into large reservoirs for use during the Winter in our then frigid zones; should an anonymous society be founded to do any of a hundred different similar things, there would be found Americans ready to head the subscription lists and a regular stream of dollars would pour into the company safes as freely as the rivers of America flow into the ocean.

It is natural to expect that opinions were very varied when the news spread that the Arctic region was going to be sold at auction for the benefit of the highest and final bidder, particularly when no public subscription list was started in view of this purchase, as the capital had all been secured beforehand.

To use the Arctic region? Why, such an idea could "only be found in the brain of a fool," was the general verdict.

Nothing, however, was more serious than this project. A prospectus was sent to the papers of the two continents, to the European publications, to the African, Oceanic, Asiatic, and at the same time to the American journals. The American newspaper announcement read as follows:

To the Inhabitants of the Globe:

"The Arctic region situated within the eighty-fourth degree could not heretofore have been sold at auction for the very excellent reason that it had not been discovered as yet.

"The extreme points reached by navigators of different countries are the following:

"82° 45' , reached by the English explorer, Parry, in July, 1847, on the twenty-eighth meridian, west, to the north of Spitzberg.

"83° 20' 28" , reached by Markham, with the English expedition of Sir John Georges Nares, in May, 1867, on the fiftieth meridian, west, in the north of Grinnell Land.

"83° 35' latitude, reached by Lockwood and Brainard, of the American expedition under Lieut. Greely, in May, 1882, on the forty-second meridian, west in the north of Nares Land.

"The property extending from the eighty-fourth parallel to the pole on a surface of six degrees must be considered an undivided domain

among the different states of the globe and not liable to be transformed into private property through a public auction sale.

"No one is compelled to live in this section, and the United States, relying on this non-ownership, has resolved to provide for the settlement and use of the domain. A company has been founded at Baltimore under the name of the North Polar Practical Association, representing officially the American Union. This Company intends to purchase the said country according to the common law, which should then give them an absolute right of proprietorship to the continent, islands, inlets, waters, rivers, etc.; in fact, of everything of which the Arctic region is composed. It is well understood by the law of nations that this title of proprietorship cannot be touched under any circumstances, no matter what shall happen.

"These conditions having been laid before all the powers, the Arctic region is to be sold at public auction for the benefit of the highest and last bidder. The date of the sale is set for the 3d of December of the current year, in the Auction Hall at Baltimore, Maryland, United States of America.

"Address for information Mr. W.S. Forster, Temporary Agent for the North Polar Practical Association, 93 High Street, Baltimore."

The reader may imagine how this communication was received by the public at large. Most people considered it as an absurd idea. Some only saw in it a sample of characteristic American humbug. Others thought that the proposition deserved to be fairly considered, and

they pointed to the fact that the newly-founded company did not in any way appeal to the public for pecuniary help, but was willing to do everything with its own capital. It was with its own money that it wanted to purchase the Arctic region. The promoters did not try to put gold, silver, and bank-notes into their pockets and keep them for their own benefit. No, they only asked permission to pay for the land with their own money.

Some people who claimed to know said that the Company could have gone to work and taken possession of the country without any further ceremony, as it was their right as first occupants. But that is just where the difficulty came in, because until this time the Pole seemed to be forbidden ground to any one. Therefore, in case the United States should give possession of the country, the Company wanted a regular title to it without trouble about the matter in the future. It was unjust to blame them in any way, as in such an affair too many precautions cannot be taken. Besides, the circular had a paragraph which provided for all future chances. This paragraph was capable of so many interpretations that the exact meaning of it could not be rendered even by those who studied it closely. It was stipulated that the right of proprietorship should not depend upon any chances or changes in the country, no matter whether these changes were in the position or climate of the country.

What did this phrase mean? How could there ever be any changes in the geography or meteorology of a country like this one to be sold at

auction? "Evidently," said some shrewd ones, "there must be something behind it."

The commentators had free swing and exercised it with a will. One paper in Philadelphia published the following pleasant notice:

"Undoubtedly the future purchasers of the Arctic region have information that a hard stone comet will strike this world under such conditions that its blow will produce geographic and meteorologic changes such as the purchasers of the Arctic region will profit by."

The idea of a blow with a hard stone planet was not accepted by serious people. In any case it was not likely that the would-be purchasers would have been informed of such a coming event.

"Perhaps," said a New Orleans newspaper, "the new Company thinks the precession of the equinox will in time favor the conditions likely to lead to the utilization of this domain."

"And why not? Because this movement modifies the direction of the axis of our spheroid," observed another correspondent.

"Really," answered the Scientific Review, of Paris. "As Adhemar has predicted in his book on the ocean currents, the precession of the equinox, combined with the movement of the earth's axis, will be such as to modify in a long period the average temperature of the different parts of the earth and in the quantities of ice accumulated around the two poles."

"This is not certain," replied the Edinburgh Review, "and, besides, supposing that this would be the case, is not a lapse of 12,000 years necessary before Vega becomes our polar star in consequence of this movement and the situation of the Arctic territory consequently changed in regard to its climate?"

"Well," said the Copenhagen Dagblad, "in 12,000 years it will be time to make preparations, and before that time risk nothing-not even a cent."

It was possible that the Scientific Review was right with Adhemar. It was also very probable that the North Polar Practical Association had never counted on this modification of climate due to the precession of the equinox. In fact, nobody had clearly discovered what this last paragraph in the circular meant nor what kind of change it had in view.

Perhaps to know it, it would suffice to write to the Secretary of the new Society, or particularly its President. But the President was unknown. Unknown as much as the Secretary and all other members of the Council. It was not even known where the document came from. It was brought to the offices of the New York newspapers by a certain William S. Forster, a codfish dealer of Baltimore, a member of the house of Ardrinell & Co. Everything was so quiet and mysterious in the matter that the best reporters could not make out what it was all about. This North Polar Association had been so anonymous that it was impossible even to give it a definite name.

If, however, the promoters of this speculation persisted in making their personnel an absolute mystery, their intention was clearly indicated by the document spread before the public of two worlds.

Really, after all, the question was the purchase of that part of the arctic regions bounded by the 84th degree, and of which the North Pole was the central point. Nothing very exact concerning this region was known. The modern discoverers who had been nearest to this parallel were Parry, Markham, Lockwood and Brainard. In regard to the other navigators of the northern seas they stopped far short of the above-mentioned point—such as Payez, in 1874, to 82° 15' north of the land of Francis Joseph, of New Zemble; Leout, in 1870, to 72° 74' above Siberia; De Long in the Jeanette expedition, in 1879, to 78° 45' around the islands which bear his name. Others went around New Siberia and Greenland to the end of the Cape Bismarck, but had not passed the 76th, 77th, or 78th degree of latitude. The North Polar Practical Association wanted then a country which had never been touched before by mankind or discoverers, and which was absolutely uninhabited.

The length of this portion of the globe surrounded by the 84th degree, extending from the 84th to the 90th, making six degrees, which at sixty miles each make a radius of 360 miles and a diameter of 720 miles. The circumference therefore is, 2,260 miles and the surface 407 [square] miles. This is about the tenth part of the whole of Europe. A very desirable slice of land indeed. The document, as we have seen, also stated that these regions were not yet known geographically,

belonged to no one and therefore belonged to everyone. But it could be foreseen that the adjoining States at least would consider these regions as the prolongation of their own possession towards the north and would consequently claim the right of ownership. Their pretensions would have more justice than those of discoverers who operated upon the whole of the Arctic countries and made explorations only for the glory of their own nation. The Federal Government represented in the new Society intended to make their rights valuable and to indemnify them for the price of their purchase. However it was the partisans of the North Polar Practical Association did not announce; the proprietorship was clear, and nobody being compelled to live there could object to the auction sale of this vast domain.

The countries whose rights were absolutely established as much as those of any countries could be were six in number-America, England, Russia, Denmark, Sweden-Norway and Holland.

Other countries could claim discoveries made by their mariners and their travellers.

France could interfere because some of her children had taken part in the expeditions sent out to conquer the territories around the pole.

Among the others the courageous Bellot, who died in 1853, in the islands of Beechey, during the Phoenix Expedition sent in search of Sir John Franklin. Nor must one forget Dr. Octave Pavy, who died in 1884, near Cape Sabine, while the Greely Mission was at Fort Conger. And

the expedition which, in 1838-39, had gone to the Sea of Spitzberg with Charles Marmier, Bravais and his courageous companions, would it not be unfair to forget them. But despite all this France did not care to interfere in this commercial rather than scientific matter, and she abandoned all her rights for a share of the polar pie. The same of Germany. It had sent since 1671 the Hamburg expedition of Frederic Martens to the Spitsbergen, and in 1869 and '70 the expeditions of the Germania and of the Hansa, commanded by Koldervey and Hegeman, which went as far as Cape Bismarck by going along the coast of Greenland. But even if they had made so many brilliant discoveries they did not care to add a piece of the polar empire to that of Germany. The same was true with Austria, which was already possessor of the land of Francis Joseph, situated north of Siberia.

In regard to Italy having no right to interfere, she did not interfere at all; which is as strange as it is true. Then, also, there were the Esquimaux, which are at home in those places, and the inhabitants of Greenland, of Labrador, of Baffin's Archipelago and of the Aleutian Islands, situated between Asia and America, and also the tribe of Tchouktchis, who inhabited the old Russian Alaska and who became Americans in 1867. These people, in reality the real aborigines, had nothing at all to say about the matter. And how could these poor wretches have said anything, as they did not even have any sum of money, no matter how small, with which to pay for the land which the North Polar Practical Association was going to buy. Perhaps they could have paid a small sum by giving skins, teeth or oil, and yet the land belonged to them more than to any others, as they were the first

occupants of this domain which was going to be sold on auction. But the Esquimaux, the Tchouktchis, the Samoyedes were not consulted at all. So runs the world.