

XXIV. LIQUID SUNLIGHT.

PETROLEUM.

THE history of the search for native oil is romantic. Known for ages, it remained a mere curiosity till 1859. Even in America, where popular intelligence is supposed to utilize every possible advantage, petroleum rose only to the importance of a quack remedy for aches and other evils. But suddenly it assumed the scepter of king. It ruled the plans and lives of thousands; it sent men blindly and stupidly in herds, to the forks of streams in search of imaginary "ranges" and fanciful "oil belts." The smell of petroleum was a craze. Men pursued it with the sound and fury of dogs on the track of their prey. They lost their power of reasoning on the subject. They could not be convinced that mineral oil is a geological product, fixed in its relations to the earth and to the strata, as unchangeably and as intelligibly as iron or salt. They would not listen to the counsel of science. Every man was confident in his self-wisdom, and never inquired on what grounds he believed and acted as he did. Repudiating the advice of those whose special business it was to know something on the subject, they preferred the dictates of their own ignorance; they went by the scent of the stuff; they were led by the nose; they put their money in the ground with the assurance of infallibility—and many of them have kept it there, as the souvenir of a happy intoxication. There was oil—millions of barrels of it; and many investors were fortunate if not wise; and many, though wise, were not fortunate.

It was a new situation. It must be confessed that geology took up the subject as a novice; though with the great advantage of a knowledge of certain geological principles to which the generation and accumulation of petroleum must necessarily conform. But the geologist's inexperience in the actual behavior of the product led to errors of judgment and confessions of ignorance. Few geologists, however, manifested that strength of confidence in opinions which is the characteristic of weak or ignorant minds. Many, however, who ad-