

CHAPTER TWELFTH

Crossing the Strait.--The Mrima.--Dick's Remark and Joe's Proposition.--A Recipe for Coffee-making.--The Uzaramo.--The Unfortunate Maizan.--Mount Dathumi.--The Doctor's Cards.--Night under a Nopal.

The air was pure, the wind moderate, and the balloon ascended almost perpendicularly to a height of fifteen hundred feet, as indicated by a depression of two inches in the barometric column.

At this height a more decided current carried the balloon toward the southwest. What a magnificent spectacle was then outspread beneath the gaze of the travellers! The island of Zanzibar could be seen in its entire extent, marked out by its deeper color upon a vast planisphere; the fields had the appearance of patterns of different colors, and thick clumps of green indicated the groves and thickets.

The inhabitants of the island looked no larger than insects. The huzzaing and shouting were little by little lost in the distance, and only the discharge of the ship's guns could be heard in the concavity beneath the balloon, as the latter sped on its flight.

"How fine that is!" said Joe, breaking silence for the first time.

He got no reply. The doctor was busy observing the variations of the barometer and noting down the details of his ascent.

Kennedy looked on, and had not eyes enough to take in all that he saw.

The rays of the sun coming to the aid of the heating cylinder, the tension of the gas increased, and the Victoria attained the height of twenty-five hundred feet.

The Resolute looked like a mere cockle-shell, and the African coast could be distinctly seen in the west marked out by a fringe of foam.

"You don't talk?" said Joe, again.

"We are looking!" said the doctor, directing his spy-glass toward the mainland.

"For my part, I must talk!"

"As much as you please, Joe; talk as much as you like!"

And Joe went on alone with a tremendous volley of exclamations. The "ohs!" and the "ahs!" exploded one after the other, incessantly, from his lips.

During his passage over the sea the doctor deemed it best to keep at his present elevation. He could thus reconnoitre a greater stretch of the coast. The thermometer and the barometer, hanging up inside of the half-opened awning, were always within sight, and a second barometer suspended outside was to serve during the night watches.

At the end of about two hours the Victoria, driven along at a speed of a little more than eight miles, very visibly neared the coast of the mainland. The doctor, thereupon, determined to descend a little nearer to the ground. So he moderated the flame of his cylinder, and the balloon, in a few moments, had descended to an altitude only three hundred feet above the soil.

It was then found to be passing just over the Mrima country, the name of this part of the eastern coast of Africa. Dense borders of mango-trees protected its margin, and the ebb-tide disclosed to view their thick roots, chafed and gnawed by the teeth of the Indian Ocean. The sands which, at an earlier period, formed the coast-line, rounded away along the distant horizon, and Mount Nguru reared aloft its sharp summit in the northwest.

The Victoria passed near to a village which the doctor found marked upon his chart as Kaole. Its entire population had assembled in crowds, and were yelling with anger and fear, at the same time vainly directing their arrows against this monster of the air that swept along so majestically away above all their powerless fury.

The wind was setting to the southward, but the doctor felt no concern on that score, since it enabled him the better to follow the route traced by Captains Burton and Speke.

Kennedy had, at length, become as talkative as Joe, and the two kept up a continual interchange of admiring interjections and exclamations.

"Out upon stage-coaches!" said one.

"Steamers indeed!" said the other.

"Railroads! eh? rubbish!" put in Kennedy, "that you travel on, without seeing the country!"

"Balloons! they're the sort for me!" Joe would add.

"Why, you don't feel yourself going, and Nature takes the trouble to spread herself out before one's eyes!"

"What a splendid sight! What a spectacle! What a delight! a dream in a hammock!"

"Suppose we take our breakfast?" was Joe's unpoetical change of tune, at last, for the keen, open air had mightily sharpened his appetite.

"Good idea, my boy!"

"Oh! it won't take us long to do the cooking--biscuit and potted meat?"

"And as much coffee as you like," said the doctor. "I give you leave to borrow a little heat from my cylinder. There's enough and to spare, for that matter, and so we shall avoid the risk of a conflagration."

"That would be a dreadful misfortune!" ejaculated Kennedy. "It's the same as a powder-magazine suspended over our heads."

"Not precisely," said Ferguson, "but still if the gas were to take fire it would burn up gradually, and we should settle down on the ground, which would be disagreeable; but never fear--our balloon is hermetically sealed."

"Let us eat a bite, then," replied Kennedy.

"Now, gentlemen," put in Joe, "while doing the same as you, I'm going to get you up a cup of coffee that I think you'll have something to say about."

"The fact is," added the doctor, "that Joe, along with a thousand other virtues, has a remarkable talent for the preparation of that delicious beverage: he compounds it of a mixture of various origin, but he never would reveal to me the ingredients."

"Well, master, since we are so far above-ground, I can tell you the secret. It is just to mix equal quantities of Mocha, of Bourbon coffee, and of Rio Nunez."

A few moments later, three steaming cups of coffee were served, and topped off a substantial breakfast, which was additionally seasoned by the jokes and repartees of the guests. Each one then resumed his post of observation.

The country over which they were passing was remarkable for its fertility. Narrow, winding paths plunged in beneath the overarching verdure. They swept along above cultivated fields of tobacco, maize, and barley, at full maturity, and here and there immense rice-fields, full of straight stalks and purple blossoms. They could

distinguish sheep and goats too, confined in large cages, set up on piles to keep them out of reach of the leopards' fangs. Luxuriant vegetation spread in wild profuseness over this prodigal soil.

Village after village rang with yells of terror and astonishment at the sight of the Victoria, and Dr. Ferguson prudently kept her above the reach of the barbarian arrows. The savages below, thus baffled, ran together from their huddle of huts and followed the travellers with their vain imprecations while they remained in sight.

At noon, the doctor, upon consulting his map, calculated that they were passing over the Uzaramo* country. The soil was thickly studded with cocoa-nut, papaw, and cotton-wood trees, above which the balloon seemed to disport itself like a bird. Joe found this splendid vegetation a matter of course, seeing that they were in Africa. Kennedy descried some hares and quails that asked nothing better than to get a good shot from his fowling-piece, but it would have been powder wasted, since there was no time to pick up the game.

* U and Ou signify country in the language of that region.

The aeronauts swept on with the speed of twelve miles per hour, and soon were passing in thirty-eight degrees

twenty minutes east longitude, over the village of Tounda.

"It was there," said the doctor, "that Burton and Speke were seized with violent fevers, and for a moment thought their expedition ruined. And yet they were only a short distance from the coast, but fatigue and privation were beginning to tell upon them severely."

In fact, there is a perpetual malaria reigning throughout the country in question. Even the doctor could hope to escape its effects only by rising above the range of the miasma that exhales from this damp region whence the blazing rays of the sun pump up its poisonous vapors. Once in a while they could descry a caravan resting in a "kraal," awaiting the freshness and cool of the evening to resume its route. These kraals are wide patches of cleared land, surrounded by hedges and jungles, where traders take shelter against not only the wild beasts, but also the robber tribes of the country. They could see the natives running and scattering in all directions at the sight of the Victoria. Kennedy was keen to get a closer look at them, but the doctor invariably held out against the idea.

"The chiefs are armed with muskets," he said, "and our balloon would be too conspicuous a mark for their bullets."

"Would a bullet-hole bring us down?" asked Joe.

"Not immediately; but such a hole would soon become a large torn orifice through which our gas would escape."

"Then, let us keep at a respectful distance from yon miscreants. What must they think as they see us sailing in the air? I'm sure they must feel like worshipping us!"

"Let them worship away, then," replied the doctor, "but at a distance. There is no harm done in getting as far away from them as possible. See! the country is already changing its aspect: the villages are fewer and farther between; the mango-trees have disappeared, for their growth ceases at this latitude. The soil is becoming hilly and portends mountains not far off."

"Yes," said Kennedy, "it seems to me that I can see some high land on this side."

"In the west--those are the nearest ranges of the Ourizara--Mount Duthumi, no doubt, behind which I hope to find shelter for the night. I'll stir up the heat in the cylinder a little, for we must keep at an elevation of five or six hundred feet."

"That was a grant idea of yours, sir," said Joe. "It's

mighty easy to manage it; you turn a cock, and the thing's done."

"Ah! here we are more at our ease," said the sportsman, as the balloon ascended; "the reflection of the sun on those red sands was getting to be insupportable."

"What splendid trees!" cried Joe. "They're quite natural, but they are very fine! Why a dozen of them would make a forest!"

"Those are baobabs," replied Dr. Ferguson. "See, there's one with a trunk fully one hundred feet in circumference. It was, perhaps, at the foot of that very tree that Maizan, the French traveller, expired in 1845, for we are over the village of Deje-la-Mhora, to which he pushed on alone. He was seized by the chief of this region, fastened to the foot of a baobab, and the ferocious black then severed all his joints while the war-song of his tribe was chanted; he then made a gash in the prisoner's neck, stopped to sharpen his knife, and fairly tore away the poor wretch's head before it had been cut from the body. The unfortunate Frenchman was but twenty-six years of age."

"And France has never avenged so hideous a crime?" said Kennedy.

"France did demand satisfaction, and the Said of Zanzibar did all in his power to capture the murderer, but in vain."

"I move that we don't stop here!" urged Joe; "let us go up, master, let us go up higher by all means."

"All the more willingly, Joe, that there is Mount Duthumi right ahead of us. If my calculations be right we shall have passed it before seven o'clock in the evening."

"Shall we not travel at night?" asked the Scotchman.

"No, as little as possible. With care and vigilance we might do so safely, but it is not enough to sweep across Africa. We want to see it."

"Up to this time we have nothing to complain of, master. The best cultivated and most fertile country in the world instead of a desert! Believe the geographers after that!"

Let us wait, Joe! we shall see by-and-by."

About half-past six in the evening the Victoria was directly opposite Mount Duthumi; in order to pass, it had to ascend to a height of more than three thousand feet, and to accomplish that the doctor had only to raise the temperature of his gas

eighteen degrees. It might have been correctly said that he held his balloon in his hand. Kennedy had only to indicate to him the obstacles to be surmounted, and the Victoria sped through the air, skimming the summits of the range.

At eight o'clock it descended the farther slope, the acclivity of which was much less abrupt. The anchors were thrown out from the car and one of them, coming in contact with the branches of an enormous nopal, caught on it firmly. Joe at once let himself slide down the rope and secured it. The silk ladder was then lowered to him and he remounted to the car with agility. The balloon now remained perfectly at rest sheltered from the eastern winds.

The evening meal was got ready, and the aeronauts, excited by their day's journey, made a heavy onslaught upon the provisions.

"What distance have we traversed to-day?" asked Kennedy, disposing of some alarming mouthfuls.

The doctor took his bearings, by means of lunar observations, and consulted the excellent map that he had with him for his guidance. It belonged to the Atlas of "Der Neuester Entdeckungen in Afrika" ("The Latest Discoveries in Africa"), published at Gotha by his learned friend

Dr. Petermann, and by that savant sent to him. This Atlas was to serve the doctor on his whole journey; for it contained the itinerary of Burton and Speke to the great lakes; the Soudan, according to Dr. Barth; the Lower Senegal, according to Guillaume Lejean; and the Delta of the Niger, by Dr. Blaikie.

Ferguson had also provided himself with a work which combined in one compilation all the notions already acquired concerning the Nile. It was entitled "The Sources of the Nile; being a General Survey of the Basin of that River and of its Head-Stream, with the History of the Nilotic Discovery, by Charles Beke, D.D."

He also had the excellent charts published in the "Bulletins of the Geographical Society of London;" and not a single point of the countries already discovered could, therefore, escape his notice.

Upon tracing on his maps, he found that his latitudinal route had been two degrees, or one hundred and twenty miles, to the westward.

Kennedy remarked that the route tended toward the south; but this direction was satisfactory to the doctor, who desired to reconnoitre the tracks of his predecessors as much as possible. It was agreed that the night should

be divided into three watches, so that each of the party should take his turn in watching over the safety of the rest. The doctor took the watch commencing at nine o'clock; Kennedy, the one commencing at midnight; and Joe, the three o'clock morning watch.

So Kennedy and Joe, well wrapped in their blankets, stretched themselves at full length under the awning, and slept quietly; while Dr. Ferguson kept on the lookout.