

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH.

The Forest of Gum-Trees.--The Blue Antelope.--The Rallying-Signal.
--An Unexpected Attack.--The Kanyeme.--A Night in the Open Air.--The
Mabunguru.--Jihoue-la-Mkoa.--A Supply of Water.--Arrival at Kazeh.

The country, dry and parched as it was, consisting of a clayey soil that cracked open with the heat, seemed, indeed, a desert: here and there were a few traces of caravans; the bones of men and animals, that had been half-gnawed away, mouldering together in the same dust.

After half an hour's walking, Dick and Joe plunged into a forest of gum-trees, their eyes alert on all sides, and their fingers on the trigger. There was no foreseeing what they might encounter. Without being a rifleman, Joe could handle fire-arms with no trifling dexterity.

"A walk does one good, Mr. Kennedy, but this isn't the easiest ground in the world," he said, kicking aside some fragments of quartz with which the soil was bestrewn.

Kennedy motioned to his companion to be silent and to halt. The present case compelled them to dispense with hunting-dogs, and, no matter what Joe's agility might be, he could not be expected to have the scent of a setter or a greyhound.

A herd of a dozen antelopes were quenching their thirst in the bed of a torrent where some pools of water had lodged. The graceful creatures, snuffing danger in the breeze, seemed to be disturbed and uneasy. Their beautiful heads could be seen between every draught, raised in the air with quick and sudden motion as they sniffed the wind in the direction of our two hunters, with their flexible nostrils.

Kennedy stole around behind some clumps of shrubbery, while Joe remained motionless where he was. The former, at length, got within gunshot and fired.

The herd disappeared in the twinkling of an eye; one male antelope only, that was hit just behind the shoulder-joint, fell headlong to the ground, and Kennedy leaped toward his booty.

It was a blauwbok, a superb animal of a pale-bluish color shading upon the gray, but with the belly and the inside of the legs as white as the driven snow.

"A splendid shot!" exclaimed the hunter. "It's a very rare species of the antelope, and I hope to be able to prepare his skin in such a way as to keep it."

"Indeed!" said Joe, "do you think of doing that, Mr. Kennedy?"

"Why, certainly I do! Just see what a fine hide it is!"

"But Dr. Ferguson will never allow us to take such an extra weight!"

"You're right, Joe. Still it is a pity to have to leave such a noble animal."

"The whole of it? Oh, we won't do that, sir; we'll take all the good eatable parts of it, and, if you'll let me, I'll cut him up just as well as the chairman of the honorable corporation of butchers of the city of London could do."

"As you please, my boy! But you know that in my hunter's way I can just as easily skin and cut up a piece of game as kill it."

"I'm sure of that, Mr. Kennedy. Well, then, you can build a fireplace with a few stones; there's plenty of dry dead-wood, and I can make the hot coals tell in a few minutes."

"Oh! that won't take long," said Kennedy, going to work on the fireplace, where he had a brisk flame crackling and sparkling in a minute or two.

Joe had cut some of the nicest steaks and the best parts of the tenderloin from the carcass of the antelope, and these were quickly transformed to the most savory of broils.

"There, those will tickle the doctor!" said Kennedy.

"Do you know what I was thinking about?" said Joe.

"Why, about the steaks you're broiling, to be sure!" replied Dick.

"Not the least in the world. I was thinking what a figure we'd cut if we couldn't find the balloon again."

"By George, what an idea! Why, do you think the doctor would desert us?"

"No; but suppose his anchor were to slip!"

"Impossible! and, besides, the doctor would find no difficulty in coming down again with his balloon; he handles it at his ease."

"But suppose the wind were to sweep it off, so that he couldn't come back toward us?"

"Come, come, Joe! a truce to your suppositions;

they're any thing but pleasant."

"Ah! sir, every thing that happens in this world is natural, of course; but, then, any thing may happen, and we ought to look out beforehand."

At this moment the report of a gun rang out upon the air.

"What's that?" exclaimed Joe.

"It's my rifle, I know the ring of her!" said Kennedy.

"A signal!"

"Yes; danger for us!"

"For him, too, perhaps."

"Let's be off!"

And the hunters, having gathered up the product of their expedition, rapidly made their way back along the path that they had marked by breaking boughs and bushes when they came. The density of the underbrush prevented their seeing the balloon, although they could not be far from it.

A second shot was heard.

"We must hurry!" said Joe.

"There! a third report!"

"Why, it sounds to me as if he was defending himself against something."

"Let us make haste!"

They now began to run at the top of their speed.

When they reached the outskirts of the forest, they, at first glance, saw the balloon in its place and the doctor in the car.

"What's the matter?" shouted Kennedy.

"Good God!" suddenly exclaimed Joe.

"What do you see?"

"Down there! look! a crowd of blacks surrounding the balloon!"

And, in fact, there, two miles from where they were, they saw some thirty wild natives close together, yelling,

gesticulating, and cutting all kinds of antics at the foot of the sycamore. Some, climbing into the tree itself, were making their way to the topmost branches. The danger seemed pressing.

"My master is lost!" cried Joe.

"Come! a little more coolness, Joe, and let us see how we stand. We hold the lives of four of those villains in our hands. Forward, then!"

They had made a mile with headlong speed, when another report was heard from the car. The shot had, evidently, told upon a huge black demon, who had been hoisting himself up by the anchor-rope. A lifeless body fell from bough to bough, and hung about twenty feet from the ground, its arms and legs swaying to and fro in the air.

"Ha!" said Joe, halting, "what does that fellow hold by?"

"No matter what!" said Kennedy; "let us run! let us run!"

"Ah! Mr. Kennedy," said Joe, again, in a roar of laughter, "by his tail! by his tail! it's an ape! They're all apes!"

"Well, they're worse than men!" said Kennedy, as he dashed into the midst of the howling crowd.

It was, indeed, a troop of very formidable baboons of the dog-faced species. These creatures are brutal, ferocious, and horrible to look upon, with their dog-like muzzles and savage expression. However, a few shots scattered them, and the chattering horde scampered off, leaving several of their number on the ground.

In a moment Kennedy was on the ladder, and Joe, clambering up the branches, detached the anchor; the car then dipped to where he was, and he got into it without difficulty. A few minutes later, the Victoria slowly ascended and soared away to the eastward, wafted by a moderate wind.

"That was an attack for you!" said Joe.

"We thought you were surrounded by natives."

"Well, fortunately, they were only apes," said the doctor.

"At a distance there's no great difference," remarked Kennedy.

"Nor close at hand, either," added Joe.

"Well, however that may be," resumed Ferguson, "this attack of apes might have had the most serious consequences. Had the anchor yielded to their repeated efforts, who knows whither the wind would have carried me?"

"What did I tell you, Mr. Kennedy?"

"You were right, Joe; but, even right as you may have been, you were, at that moment, preparing some antelope-steaks, the very sight of which gave me a monstrous appetite."

"I believe you!" said the doctor; "the flesh of the antelope is exquisite."

"You may judge of that yourself, now, sir, for supper's ready."

"Upon my word as a sportsman, those venison-steaks have a gamy flavor that's not to be sneezed at, I tell you."

"Good!" said Joe, with his mouth full, "I could live on antelope all the days of my life; and all the better with a glass of grog to wash it down."

So saying, the good fellow went to work to prepare a jorum of that fragrant beverage, and all hands tasted it

with satisfaction.

"Every thing has gone well thus far," said he.

"Very well indeed!" assented Kennedy.

"Come, now, Mr. Kennedy, are you sorry that you came with us?"

"I'd like to see anybody prevent my coming!"

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon. The Victoria had struck a more rapid current. The face of the country was gradually rising, and, ere long, the barometer indicated a height of fifteen hundred feet above the level of the sea. The doctor was, therefore, obliged to keep his balloon up by a quite considerable dilation of gas, and the cylinder was hard at work all the time.

Toward seven o'clock, the balloon was sailing over the basin of Kanyeme. The doctor immediately recognized that immense clearing, ten miles in extent, with its villages buried in the midst of baobab and calabash trees.

It is the residence of one of the sultans of the Ugogo country, where civilization is, perhaps, the least backward. The natives there are less addicted to selling members of their own families, but still, men and animals all live

together in round huts, without frames, that look like haystacks.

Beyond Kanyeme the soil becomes arid and stony, but in an hour's journey, in a fertile dip of the soil, vegetation had resumed all its vigor at some distance from Mdaburu. The wind fell with the close of the day, and the atmosphere seemed to sleep. The doctor vainly sought for a current of air at different heights, and, at last, seeing this calm of all nature, he resolved to pass the night afloat, and, for greater safety, rose to the height of one thousand feet, where the balloon remained motionless. The night was magnificent, the heavens glittering with stars, and profoundly silent in the upper air.

Dick and Joe stretched themselves on their peaceful couch, and were soon sound asleep, the doctor keeping the first watch. At twelve o'clock the latter was relieved by Kennedy.

"Should the slightest accident happen, waken me," said Ferguson, "and, above all things, don't lose sight of the barometer. To us it is the compass!"

The night was cold. There were twenty-seven degrees of difference between its temperature and that of the daytime. With nightfall had begun the nocturnal concert

of animals driven from their hiding-places by hunger and thirst. The frogs struck in their guttural soprano, redoubled by the yelping of the jackals, while the imposing bass of the African lion sustained the accords of this living orchestra.

Upon resuming his post, in the morning, the doctor consulted his compass, and found that the wind had changed during the night. The balloon had been bearing about thirty miles to the northwest during the last two hours. It was then passing over Mabunguru, a stony country, strewn with blocks of syenite of a fine polish, and knobbed with huge bowlders and angular ridges of rock; conic masses, like the rocks of Karnak, studded the soil like so many Druidic dolmens; the bones of buffaloes and elephants whitened it here and there; but few trees could be seen, excepting in the east, where there were dense woods, among which a few villages lay half concealed.

Toward seven o'clock they saw a huge round rock nearly two miles in extent, like an immense tortoise.

"We are on the right track," said Dr. Ferguson.

"There's Jihoue-la-Mkoa, where we must halt for a few minutes. I am going to renew the supply of water necessary for my cylinder, and so let us try to anchor somewhere."

"There are very few trees," replied the hunger.

"Never mind, let us try. Joe, throw out the anchors!"

The balloon, gradually losing its ascensional force, approached the ground; the anchors ran along until, at last, one of them caught in the fissure of a rock, and the balloon remained motionless.

It must not be supposed that the doctor could entirely extinguish his cylinder, during these halts. The equilibrium of the balloon had been calculated at the level of the sea; and, as the country was continually ascending, and had reached an elevation of from six to seven hundred feet, the balloon would have had a tendency to go lower than the surface of the soil itself. It was, therefore, necessary to sustain it by a certain dilation of the gas. But, in case the doctor, in the absence of all wind, had let the car rest upon the ground, the balloon, thus relieved of a considerable weight, would have kept up of itself, without the aid of the cylinder.

The maps indicated extensive ponds on the western slope of the Jihoue-la-Mkoa. Joe went thither alone with a cask that would hold about ten gallons. He found the place pointed out to him, without difficulty, near to a deserted village; got his stock of water, and returned in

less than three-quarters of an hour. He had seen nothing particular excepting some immense elephant-pits. In fact, he came very near falling into one of them, at the bottom of which lay a half-eaten carcass.

He brought back with him a sort of clover which the apes eat with avidity. The doctor recognized the fruit of the "mbenbu"-tree which grows in profusion, on the western part of Jihoue-la-Mkoa. Ferguson waited for Joe with a certain feeling of impatience, for even a short halt in this inhospitable region always inspires a degree of fear.

The water was got aboard without trouble, as the car was nearly resting on the ground. Joe then found it easy to loosen the anchor and leaped lightly to his place beside the doctor. The latter then replenished the flame in the cylinder, and the balloon majestically soared into the air.

It was then about one hundred miles from Kazeh, an important establishment in the interior of Africa, where, thanks to a south-southeasterly current, the travellers might hope to arrive on that same day. They were moving at the rate of fourteen miles per hour, and the guidance of the balloon was becoming difficult, as they dared not rise very high without extreme dilation of the gas, the country itself being at an average height of three thousand

feet. Hence, the doctor preferred not to force the dilation, and so adroitly followed the sinuosities of a pretty sharply-inclined plane, and swept very close to the villages of Thembo and Tura-Wels. The latter forms part of the Unyamwezy, a magnificent country, where the trees attain enormous dimensions; among them the cactus, which grows to gigantic size.

About two o'clock, in magnificent weather, but under a fiery sun that devoured the least breath of air, the balloon was floating over the town of Kazeh, situated about three hundred and fifty miles from the coast.

"We left Zanzibar at nine o'clock in the morning," said the doctor, consulting his notes, "and, after two days' passage, we have, including our deviations, travelled nearly five hundred geographical miles. Captains Burton and Speke took four months and a half to make the same distance!"