

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH.

The Mountains of the Moon.--An Ocean of Verdure.--They cast Anchor.--The Towing Elephant.--A Running Fire.--Death of the Monster.--The Field-Oven.--A Meal on the Grass.--A Night on the Ground.

About four in the morning, Monday, the sun reappeared in the horizon; the clouds had dispersed, and a cheery breeze refreshed the morning dawn.

The earth, all redolent with fragrant exhalations, reappeared to the gaze of our travellers. The balloon, whirled about by opposing currents, had hardly budged from its place, and the doctor, letting the gas contract, descended so as to get a more northerly direction. For a long while his quest was fruitless; the wind carried him toward the west until he came in sight of the famous Mountains of the Moon, which grouped themselves in a semicircle around the extremity of Lake Tanganayika; their ridges, but slightly indented, stood out against the bluish horizon, so that they might have been mistaken for a natural fortification, not to be passed by the explorers of the centre of Africa. Among them were a few isolated cones, revealing the mark of the eternal snows.

"Here we are at last," said the doctor, "in an unexplored country! Captain Burton pushed very far to the westward,

but he could not reach those celebrated mountains; he even denied their existence, strongly as it was affirmed by Speke, his companion. He pretended that they were born in the latter's fancy; but for us, my friends, there is no further doubt possible."

"Shall we cross them?" asked Kennedy.

"Not, if it please God. I am looking for a wind that will take me back toward the equator. I will even wait for one, if necessary, and will make the balloon like a ship that casts anchor, until favorable breezes come up."

But the foresight of the doctor was not long in bringing its reward; for, after having tried different heights, the Victoria at length began to sail off to the northeastward with medium speed.

"We are in the right track," said the doctor, consulting his compass, "and scarcely two hundred feet from the surface; lucky circumstances for us, enabling us, as they do, to reconnoitre these new regions. When Captain Speke set out to discover Lake Ukereoue, he ascended more to the eastward in a straight line above Kazeh."

"Shall we keep on long in this way?" inquired the Scot.

"Perhaps. Our object is to push a point in the direction of the sources of the Nile; and we have more than six hundred miles to make before we get to the extreme limit reached by the explorers who came from the north."

"And we shan't set foot on the solid ground?" murmured Joe; "it's enough to cramp a fellow's legs!"

"Oh, yes, indeed, my good Joe," said the doctor, reassuring him; "we have to economize our provisions, you know; and on the way, Dick, you must get us some fresh meat."

"Whenever you like, doctor."

"We shall also have to replenish our stock of water. Who knows but we may be carried to some of the dried-up regions? So we cannot take too many precautions."

At noon the Victoria was at twenty-nine degrees fifteen minutes east longitude, and three degrees fifteen minutes south latitude. She passed the village of Uyofu, the last northern limit of the Unyamwezi, opposite to the Lake Ukereoue, which could still be seen.

The tribes living near to the equator seem to be a little more civilized, and are governed by absolute monarchs, whose control is an unlimited despotism. Their most compact union

of power constitutes the province of Karagwah.

It was decided by the aeronauts that they would alight at the first favorable place. They found that they should have to make a prolonged halt, and take a careful inspection of the balloon: so the flame of the cylinder was moderated, and the anchors, flung out from the car, ere long began to sweep the grass of an immense prairie, that, from a certain height, looked like a shaven lawn, but the growth of which, in reality, was from seven to eight feet in height.

The balloon skimmed this tall grass without bending it, like a gigantic butterfly: not an obstacle was in sight; it was an ocean of verdure without a single breaker.

"We might proceed a long time in this style," remarked Kennedy; "I don't see one tree that we could approach, and I'm afraid that our hunt's over."

"Wait, Dick; you could not hunt anyhow in this grass, that grows higher than your head. We'll find a favorable place presently."

In truth, it was a charming excursion that they were making now--a veritable navigation on this green, almost transparent sea, gently undulating in the breath of the

wind. The little car seemed to cleave the waves of verdure, and, from time to time, coveys of birds of magnificent plumage would rise fluttering from the tall herbage, and speed away with joyous cries. The anchors plunged into this lake of flowers, and traced a furrow that closed behind them, like the wake of a ship.

All at once a sharp shock was felt--the anchor had caught in the fissure of some rock hidden in the high grass.

"We are fast!" exclaimed Joe.

These words had scarcely been uttered when a shrill cry rang through the air, and the following phrases, mingled with exclamations, escaped from the lips of our travellers:

"What's that?"

"A strange cry!"

"Look! Why, we're moving!"

"The anchor has slipped!"

"No; it holds, and holds fast too!" said Joe, who was tugging at the rope.

"It's the rock, then, that's moving!"

An immense rustling was noticed in the grass, and soon an elongated, winding shape was seen rising above it.

"A serpent!" shouted Joe.

"A serpent!" repeated Kennedy, handling his rifle.

"No," said the doctor, "it's an elephant's trunk!"

"An elephant, Samuel?"

And, as Kennedy said this, he drew his rifle to his shoulder.

"Wait, Dick; wait!"

"That's a fact! The animal's towing us!"

"And in the right direction, Joe--in the right direction."

The elephant was now making some headway, and soon reached a clearing where his whole body could be seen. By his gigantic size, the doctor recognized a male of a superb species. He had two whitish tusks, beautifully curved, and about eight feet in length; and in these the shanks of the anchor had firmly caught. The animal was vainly trying with

his trunk to disengage himself from the rope that attached him to the car.

"Get up--go ahead, old fellow!" shouted Joe, with delight, doing his best to urge this rather novel team. "Here is a new style of travelling!--no more horses for me. An elephant, if you please!"

"But where is he taking us to?" said Kennedy, whose rifle itched in his grasp.

"He's taking us exactly to where we want to go, my dear Dick. A little patience!"

"Wig-a-more! wig-a-more!" as the Scotch country folks say," shouted Joe, in high glee. "Gee-up! gee-up there!"

The huge animal now broke into a very rapid gallop. He flung his trunk from side to side, and his monstrous bounds gave the car several rather heavy thumps. Meanwhile the doctor stood ready, hatchet in hand, to cut the rope, should need arise.

"But," said he, "we shall not give up our anchor until the last moment."

This drive, with an elephant for the team, lasted about

an hour and a half; yet the animal did not seem in the least fatigued. These immense creatures can go over a great deal of ground, and, from one day to another, are found at enormous distances from there they were last seen, like the whales, whose mass and speed they rival.

"In fact," said Joe, "it's a whale that we have harpooned; and we're only doing just what whalers do when out fishing."

But a change in the nature of the ground compelled the doctor to vary his style of locomotion. A dense grove of calmadores was descried on the horizon, about three miles away, on the north of the prairie. So it became necessary to detach the balloon from its draught-animal at last.

Kennedy was intrusted with the job of bringing the elephant to a halt. He drew his rifle to his shoulder, but his position was not favorable to a successful shot; so that the first ball fired flattened itself on the animal's skull, as it would have done against an iron plate. The creature did not seem in the least troubled by it; but, at the sound of the discharge, he had increased his speed, and now was going as fast as a horse at full gallop.

"The deuce!" ejaculated Kennedy.

"What a solid head!" commented Joe.

"We'll try some conical balls behind the shoulder-joint," said Kennedy, reloading his rifle with care. In another moment he fired.

The animal gave a terrible cry, but went on faster than ever.

"Come!" said Joe, taking aim with another gun, "I must help you, or we'll never end it." And now two balls penetrated the creature's side.

The elephant halted, lifted his trunk, and resumed his run toward the wood with all his speed; he shook his huge head, and the blood began to gush from his wounds.

"Let us keep up our fire, Mr. Kennedy."

"And a continuous fire, too," urged the doctor, "for we are close on the woods."

Ten shots more were discharged. The elephant made a fearful bound; the car and balloon cracked as though every thing were going to pieces, and the shock made the doctor drop his hatchet on the ground.

The situation was thus rendered really very alarming; the anchor-rope, which had securely caught, could not be disengaged, nor could it yet be cut by the knives of our aeronauts, and the balloon was rushing headlong toward the wood, when the animal received a ball in the eye just as he lifted his head. On this he halted, faltered, his knees bent under him, and he uncovered his whole flank to the assaults of his enemies in the balloon.

"A bullet in his heart!" said Kennedy, discharging one last rifle-shot.

The elephant uttered a long bellow of terror and agony, then raised himself up for a moment, twirling his trunk in the air, and finally fell with all his weight upon one of his tusks, which he broke off short. He was dead.

"His tusk's broken!" exclaimed Kennedy--"ivory too that in England would bring thirty-five guineas per hundred pounds."

"As much as that?" said Joe, scrambling down to the ground by the anchor-rope.

"What's the use of sighing over it, Dick?" said the doctor. "Are we ivory merchants? Did we come hither to make money?"

Joe examined the anchor and found it solidly attached to the unbroken tusk. The doctor and Dick leaped out on the ground, while the balloon, now half emptied, hovered over the body of the huge animal.

"What a splendid beast!" said Kennedy, "what a mass of flesh! I never saw an elephant of that size in India!"

"There's nothing surprising about that, my dear Dick; the elephants of Central Africa are the finest in the world. The Andersons and the Cummings have hunted so incessantly in the neighborhood of the Cape, that these animals have migrated to the equator, where they are often met with in large herds."

"In the mean while, I hope," added Joe, "that we'll taste a morsel of this fellow. I'll undertake to get you a good dinner at his expense. Mr. Kennedy will go off and hunt for an hour or two; the doctor will make an inspection of the balloon, and, while they're busy in that way, I'll do the cooking."

"A good arrangement!" said the doctor; "so do as you like, Joe."

"As for me," said the hunter, "I shall avail myself of the

two hours' recess that Joe has condescended to let me have."

"Go, my friend, but no imprudence! Don't wander too far away."

"Never fear, doctor!" and, so saying, Dick, shouldering his gun, plunged into the woods.

Forthwith Joe went to work at his vocation. At first he made a hole in the ground two feet deep; this he filled with the dry wood that was so abundantly scattered about, where it had been strewn by the elephants, whose tracks could be seen where they had made their way through the forest. This hole filled, he heaped a pile of fagots on it a foot in height, and set fire to it.

Then he went back to the carcass of the elephant, which had fallen only about a hundred feet from the edge of the forest; he next proceeded adroitly to cut off the trunk, which might have been two feet in diameter at the base; of this he selected the most delicate portion, and then took with it one of the animal's spongy feet. In fact, these are the finest morsels, like the hump of the bison, the paws of the bear, and the head of the wild boar.

When the pile of fagots had been thoroughly consumed, inside and outside, the hole, cleared of the cinders

and hot coals, retained a very high temperature. The pieces of elephant-meat, surrounded with aromatic leaves, were placed in this extempore oven and covered with hot coals. Then Joe piled up a second heap of sticks over all, and when it had burned out the meat was cooked to a turn.

Then Joe took the viands from the oven, spread the savory mess upon green leaves, and arranged his dinner upon a magnificent patch of greensward. He finally brought out some biscuit, some coffee, and some cognac, and got a can of pure, fresh water from a neighboring streamlet.

The repast thus prepared was a pleasant sight to behold, and Joe, without being too proud, thought that it would also be pleasant to eat.

"A journey without danger or fatigue," he soliloquized; "your meals when you please; a swinging hammock all the time! What more could a man ask? And there was Kennedy, who didn't want to come!"

On his part, Dr. Ferguson was engrossed in a serious and thorough examination of the balloon. The latter did not appear to have suffered from the storm; the silk and the gutta percha had resisted wonderfully, and, upon estimating the exact height of the ground and the ascensional

force of the balloon, our aeronaut saw, with satisfaction, that the hydrogen was in exactly the same quantity as before. The covering had remained completely waterproof.

It was now only five days since our travellers had quitted Zanzibar; their pemmican had not yet been touched; their stock of biscuit and potted meat was enough for a long trip, and there was nothing to be replenished but the water.

The pipes and spiral seemed to be in perfect condition, since, thanks to their india-rubber jointings, they had yielded to all the oscillations of the balloon. His examination ended, the doctor betook himself to setting his notes in order. He made a very accurate sketch of the surrounding landscape, with its long prairie stretching away out of sight, the forest of calmadores, and the balloon resting motionless over the body of the dead elephant.

At the end of his two hours, Kennedy returned with a string of fat partridges and the haunch of an oryx, a sort of gemsbok belonging to the most agile species of antelopes. Joe took upon himself to prepare this surplus stock of provisions for a later repast.

"But, dinner's ready!" he shouted in his most musical voice.

And the three travellers had only to sit down on the green turf. The trunk and feet of the elephant were declared to be exquisite. Old England was toasted, as usual, and delicious Havanas perfumed this charming country for the first time.

Kennedy ate, drank, and chatted, like four; he was perfectly delighted with his new life, and seriously proposed to the doctor to settle in this forest, to construct a cabin of boughs and foliage, and, there and then, to lay the foundation of a Robinson Crusoe dynasty in Africa.

The proposition went no further, although Joe had, at once, selected the part of Man Friday for himself.

The country seemed so quiet, so deserted, that the doctor resolved to pass the night on the ground, and Joe arranged a circle of watch-fires as an indispensable barrier against wild animals, for the hyenas, cougars, and jackals, attracted by the smell of the dead elephant, were prowling about in the neighborhood. Kennedy had to fire his rifle several times at these unceremonious visitors, but the night passed without any untoward occurrence.