

CHAPTER NINETEENTH.

The Nile.--The Trembling Mountain.--A Remembrance of the Country.--The Narratives of the Arabs.--The Nyam-Nyams.--Joe's Shrewd Cogitations.--The Balloon runs the Gantlet.--Aerostatic Ascensions.--Madame Blanchard.

"Which way do we head?" asked Kennedy, as he saw his friend consulting the compass.

"North-northeast."

"The deuce! but that's not the north?"

"No, Dick; and I'm afraid that we shall have some trouble in getting to Gondokoro. I am sorry for it; but, at last, we have succeeded in connecting the explorations from the east with those from the north; and we must not complain."

The balloon was now receding gradually from the Nile.

"One last look," said the doctor, "at this impassable latitude, beyond which the most intrepid travellers could not make their way. There are those intractable tribes, of whom Petherick, Arnaud, Miuni, and the young traveller Lejean, to whom we are indebted for the best work on the Upper Nile, have spoken."

"Thus, then," added Kennedy, inquiringly, "our discoveries agree with the speculations of science."

"Absolutely so. The sources of the White Nile, of the Bahr-el-Abiad, are immersed in a lake as large as a sea; it is there that it takes its rise. Poesy, undoubtedly, loses something thereby. People were fond of ascribing a celestial origin to this king of rivers. The ancients gave it the name of an ocean, and were not far from believing that it flowed directly from the sun; but we must come down from these flights from time to time, and accept what science teaches us. There will not always be scientific men, perhaps; but there always will be poets."

"We can still see cataracts," said Joe.

"Those are the cataracts of Makedo, in the third degree of latitude. Nothing could be more accurate. Oh, if we could only have followed the course of the Nile for a few hours!"

"And down yonder, below us, I see the top of a mountain," said the hunter.

"That is Mount Longwek, the Trembling Mountain of the Arabs. This whole country was visited by Debono, who went through it under the name of Latif-Effendi.

The tribes living near the Nile are hostile to each other, and are continually waging a war of extermination. You may form some idea, then, of the difficulties he had to encounter."

The wind was carrying the balloon toward the northwest, and, in order to avoid Mount Longwek, it was necessary to seek a more slanting current.

"My friends," said the doctor, "here is where OUR passage of the African Continent really commences; up to this time we have been following the traces of our predecessors. Henceforth we are to launch ourselves upon the unknown. We shall not lack the courage, shall we?"

"Never!" said Dick and Joe together, almost in a shout.

"Onward, then, and may we have the help of Heaven!"

At ten o'clock at night, after passing over ravines, forests, and scattered villages, the aeronauts reached the side of the Trembling Mountain, along whose gentle slopes they went quietly gliding. In that memorable day, the 23d of April, they had, in fifteen hours, impelled by a rapid breeze, traversed a distance of more than three hundred and fifteen miles.

But this latter part of the journey had left them in dull spirits, and complete silence reigned in the car. Was Dr. Ferguson absorbed in the thought of his discoveries? Were his two companions thinking of their trip through those unknown regions? There were, no doubt, mingled with these reflections, the keenest reminiscences of home and distant friends. Joe alone continued to manifest the same careless philosophy, finding it QUITE NATURAL that home should not be there, from the moment that he left it; but he respected the silent mood of his friends, the doctor and Kennedy.

About ten the balloon anchored on the side of the Trembling Mountain, so called, because, in Arab tradition, it is said to tremble the instant that a Mussulman sets foot upon it. The travellers then partook of a substantial meal, and all quietly passed the night as usual, keeping the regular watches.

On awaking the next morning, they all had pleasanter feelings. The weather was fine, and the wind was blowing from the right quarter; so that a good breakfast, seasoned with Joe's merry pranks, put them in high good-humor.

The region they were now crossing is very extensive. It borders on the Mountains of the Moon on one side, and those of Darfur on the other--a space about as

broad as Europe.

"We are, no doubt, crossing what is supposed to be the kingdom of Usoga. Geographers have pretended that there existed, in the centre of Africa, a vast depression, an immense central lake. We shall see whether there is any truth in that idea," said the doctor.

"But how did they come to think so?" asked Kennedy.

"From the recitals of the Arabs. Those fellows are great narrators--too much so, probably. Some travellers, who had got as far as Kazeih, or the great lakes, saw slaves that had been brought from this region; interrogated them concerning it, and, from their different narratives, made up a jumble of notions, and deduced systems from them. Down at the bottom of it all there is some appearance of truth; and you see that they were right about the sources of the Nile."

"Nothing could be more correct," said Kennedy. "It was by the aid of these documents that some attempts at maps were made, and so I am going to try to follow our route by one of them, rectifying it when need be."

"Is all this region inhabited?" asked Joe.

"Undoubtedly; and disagreeably inhabited, too."

"I thought so."

"These scattered tribes come, one and all, under the title of Nyam-Nyams, and this compound word is only a sort of nickname. It imitates the sound of chewing."

"That's it! Excellent!" said Joe, champing his teeth as though he were eating; "Nyam-Nyam."

"My good Joe, if you were the immediate object of this chewing, you wouldn't find it so excellent."

"Why, what's the reason, sir?"

"These tribes are considered man-eaters."

"Is that really the case?"

"Not a doubt of it! It has also been asserted that these natives had tails, like mere quadrupeds; but it was soon discovered that these appendages belonged to the skins of animals that they wore for clothing."

"More's the pity! a tail's a nice thing to chase away mosquitoes."

"That may be, Joe; but we must consign the story to the domain of fable, like the dogs' heads which the traveller, Brun-Rollet, attributed to other tribes."

"Dogs' heads, eh? Quite convenient for barking, and even for man-eating!"

"But one thing that has been, unfortunately, proven true, is, the ferocity of these tribes, who are really very fond of human flesh, and devour it with avidity."

"I only hope that they won't take such a particular fancy to mine!" said Joe, with comic solemnity.

"See that!" said Kennedy.

"Yes, indeed, sir; if I have to be eaten, in a moment of famine, I want it to be for your benefit and my master's; but the idea of feeding those black fellows--gracious! I'd die of shame!"

"Well, then, Joe," said Kennedy, "that's understood; we count upon you in case of need!"

"At your service, gentlemen!"

"Joe talks in this way so as to make us take good care of him, and fatten him up."

"Maybe so!" said Joe. "Every man for himself."

In the afternoon, the sky became covered with a warm mist, that oozed from the soil; the brownish vapor scarcely allowed the beholder to distinguish objects, and so, fearing collision with some unexpected mountain-peak, the doctor, about five o'clock, gave the signal to halt.

The night passed without accident, but in such profound obscurity, that it was necessary to use redoubled vigilance.

The monsoon blew with extreme violence during all the next morning. The wind buried itself in the lower cavities of the balloon and shook the appendage by which the dilating-pipes entered the main apparatus. They had, at last, to be tied up with cords, Joe acquitting himself very skilfully in performing that operation.

He had occasion to observe, at the same time, that the orifice of the balloon still remained hermetically sealed.

"That is a matter of double importance for us," said the doctor; "in the first place, we avoid the escape of precious gas, and then, again, we do not leave behind us

an inflammable train, which we should at last inevitably set fire to, and so be consumed."

"That would be a disagreeable travelling incident!"
said Joe.

"Should we be hurled to the ground?" asked Kennedy.

"Hurled! No, not quite that. The gas would burn quietly, and we should descend little by little. A similar accident happened to a French aeronaut, Madame Blanchard. She ignited her balloon while sending off fireworks, but she did not fall, and she would not have been killed, probably, had not her car dashed against a chimney and precipitated her to the ground."

"Let us hope that nothing of the kind may happen to us," said the hunter. "Up to this time our trip has not seemed to me very dangerous, and I can see nothing to prevent us reaching our destination."

"Nor can I either, my dear Dick; accidents are generally caused by the imprudence of the aeronauts, or the defective construction of their apparatus. However, in thousands of aerial ascensions, there have not been twenty fatal accidents. Usually, the danger is in the moment of leaving the ground, or of alighting, and therefore at those

junctures we should never omit the utmost precaution."

"It's breakfast-time," said Joe; "we'll have to put up with preserved meat and coffee until Mr. Kennedy has had another chance to get us a good slice of venison."