

## CHAPTER TWENTIETH.

The Celestial Bottle.--The Fig-Palms.--The Mammoth Trees.--The Tree of War.--The Winged Team.--Two Native Tribes in Battle.--A Massacre.--An Intervention from above.

The wind had become violent and irregular; the balloon was running the gantlet through the air. Tossed at one moment toward the north, at another toward the south, it could not find one steady current.

"We are moving very swiftly without advancing much," said Kennedy, remarking the frequent oscillations of the needle of the compass.

"The balloon is rushing at the rate of at least thirty miles an hour. Lean over, and see how the country is gliding away beneath us!" said the doctor.

"See! that forest looks as though it were precipitating itself upon us!"

"The forest has become a clearing!" added the other.

"And the clearing a village!" continued Joe, a moment or two later. "Look at the faces of those astonished darkys!"

"Oh! it's natural enough that they should be astonished," said the doctor. "The French peasants, when they first saw a balloon, fired at it, thinking that it was an aerial monster. A Soudan negro may be excused, then, for opening his eyes VERY wide!"

"Faith!" said Joe, as the Victoria skimmed closely along the ground, at scarcely the elevation of one hundred feet, and immediately over a village, "I'll throw them an empty bottle, with your leave, doctor, and if it reaches them safe and sound, they'll worship it; if it breaks, they'll make talismans of the pieces."

So saying, he flung out a bottle, which, of course, was broken into a thousand fragments, while the negroes scampered into their round huts, uttering shrill cries.

A little farther on, Kennedy called out: "Look at that strange tree! The upper part is of one kind and the lower part of another!"

"Well!" said Joe, "here's a country where the trees grow on top of each other."

"It's simply the trunk of a fig-tree," replied the doctor, "on which there is a little vegetating earth. Some fine day, the wind left the seed of a palm on it, and the

seed has taken root and grown as though it were on the plain ground."

"A fine new style of gardening," said Joe, "and I'll import the idea to England. It would be just the thing in the London parks; without counting that it would be another way to increase the number of fruit-trees. We could have gardens up in the air; and the small house-owners would like that!"

At this moment, they had to raise the balloon so as to pass over a forest of trees that were more than three hundred feet in height--a kind of ancient banyan.

"What magnificent trees!" exclaimed Kennedy. "I never saw any thing so fine as the appearance of these venerable forests. Look, doctor!"

"The height of these banyans is really remarkable, my dear Dick; and yet, they would be nothing astonishing in the New World."

"Why, are there still loftier trees in existence?"

"Undoubtedly; among the 'mammoth trees' of California, there is a cedar four hundred and eighty feet in height. It would overtop the Houses of Parliament, and

even the Great Pyramid of Egypt. The trunk at the surface of the ground was one hundred and twenty feet in circumference, and the concentric layers of the wood disclosed an age of more than four thousand years."

"But then, sir, there was nothing wonderful in it! When one has lived four thousand years, one ought to be pretty tall!" was Joe's remark.

Meanwhile, during the doctor's recital and Joe's response, the forest had given place to a large collection of huts surrounding an open space. In the middle of this grew a solitary tree, and Joe exclaimed, as he caught sight of it:

"Well! if that tree has produced such flowers as those, for the last four thousand years, I have to offer it my compliments, anyhow," and he pointed to a gigantic sycamore, whose whole trunk was covered with human bones. The flowers of which Joe spoke were heads freshly severed from the bodies, and suspended by daggers thrust into the bark of the tree.

"The war-tree of these cannibals!" said the doctor; "the Indians merely carry off the scalp, but these negroes take the whole head."

"A mere matter of fashion!" said Joe. But, already, the village and the bleeding heads were disappearing on the horizon. Another place offered a still more revolting spectacle--half-devoured corpses; skeletons mouldering to dust; human limbs scattered here and there, and left to feed the jackals and hyenas.

"No doubt, these are the bodies of criminals; according to the custom in Abyssinia, these people have left them a prey to the wild beasts, who kill them with their terrible teeth and claws, and then devour them at their leisure.

"Not a whit more cruel than hanging!" said the Scot; "filthier, that's all!"

"In the southern regions of Africa, they content themselves," resumed the doctor, "with shutting up the criminal in his own hut with his cattle, and sometimes with his family. They then set fire to the hut, and the whole party are burned together. I call that cruel; but, like friend Kennedy, I think that the gallows is quite as cruel, quite as barbarous."

Joe, by the aid of his keen sight, which he did not fail to use continually, noticed some flocks of birds of prey flitting about the horizon.

"They are eagles!" exclaimed Kennedy, after reconnoitring them through the glass, "magnificent birds, whose flight is as rapid as ours."

"Heaven preserve us from their attacks!" said the doctor, "they are more to be feared by us than wild beasts or savage tribes."

"Bah!" said the hunter, "we can drive them off with a few rifle-shots."

"Nevertheless, I would prefer, dear Dick, not having to rely upon your skill, this time, for the silk of our balloon could not resist their sharp beaks; fortunately, the huge birds will, I believe, be more frightened than attracted by our machine."

"Yes! but a new idea, and I have dozens of them," said Joe; "if we could only manage to capture a team of live eagles, we could hitch them to the balloon, and they'd haul us through the air!"

"The thing has been seriously proposed," replied the doctor, "but I think it hardly practicable with creatures naturally so restive."

"Oh! we'd tame them," said Joe. "Instead of driving

them with bits, we'd do it with eye-blinkers that would cover their eyes. Half blinded in that way, they'd go to the right or to the left, as we desired; when blinded completely, they would stop."

"Allow me, Joe, to prefer a favorable wind to your team of eagles. It costs less for fodder, and is more reliable."

"Well, you may have your choice, master, but I stick to my idea."

It now was noon. The Victoria had been going at a more moderate speed for some time; the country merely passed below it; it no longer flew.

Suddenly, shouts and whistlings were heard by our aeronauts, and, leaning over the edge of the car, they saw on the open plain below them an exciting spectacle.

Two hostile tribes were fighting furiously, and the air was dotted with volleys of arrows. The combatants were so intent upon their murderous work that they did not notice the arrival of the balloon; there were about three hundred mingled confusedly in the deadly struggle: most of them, red with the blood of the wounded, in which they fairly wallowed, were horrible to behold.

As they at last caught sight of the balloon, there was a momentary pause; but their yells redoubled, and some arrows were shot at the Victoria, one of them coming close enough for Joe to catch it with his hand.

"Let us rise out of range," exclaimed the doctor; "there must be no rashness! We are forbidden any risk."

Meanwhile, the massacre continued on both sides, with battle-axes and war-clubs; as quickly as one of the combatants fell, a hostile warrior ran up to cut off his head, while the women, mingling in the fray, gathered up these bloody trophies, and piled them together at either extremity of the battle-field. Often, too, they even fought for these hideous spoils.

"What a frightful scene!" said Kennedy, with profound disgust.

"They're ugly acquaintances!" added Joe; "but then, if they had uniforms they'd be just like the fighters of all the rest of the world!"

"I have a keen hankering to take a hand in at that fight," said the hunter, brandishing his rifle.

"No! no!" objected the doctor, vehemently; "no,



let us not meddle with what don't concern us. Do you know which is right or which is wrong, that you would assume the part of the Almighty? Let us, rather, hurry away from this revolting spectacle. Could the great captains of the world float thus above the scenes of their exploits, they would at last, perhaps, conceive a disgust for blood and conquest."

The chieftain of one of the contending parties was remarkable for his athletic proportions, his great height, and herculean strength. With one hand he plunged his spear into the compact ranks of his enemies, and with the other mowed large spaces in them with his battle-axe. Suddenly he flung away his war-club, red with blood, rushed upon a wounded warrior, and, chopping off his arm at a single stroke, carried the dissevered member to his mouth, and bit it again and again.

"Ah!" ejaculated Kennedy, "the horrible brute! I can hold back no longer," and, as he spoke, the huge savage, struck full in the forehead with a rifle-ball, fell headlong to the ground.

Upon this sudden mishap of their leader, his warriors seemed struck dumb with amazement; his supernatural death awed them, while it reanimated the courage and ardor of their adversaries, and, in a twinkling, the field

was abandoned by half the combatants.

"Come, let us look higher up for a current to bear us away. I am sick of this spectacle," said the doctor.

But they could not get away so rapidly as to avoid the sight of the victorious tribe rushing upon the dead and the wounded, scrambling and disputing for the still warm and reeking flesh, and eagerly devouring it.

"Faugh!" uttered Joe, "it's sickening."

The balloon rose as it expanded; the howlings of the brutal horde, in the delirium of their orgy, pursued them for a few minutes; but, at length, borne away toward the south, they were carried out of sight and hearing of this horrible spectacle of cannibalism.

The surface of the country was now greatly varied, with numerous streams of water, bearing toward the east. The latter, undoubtedly, ran into those affluents of Lake Nu, or of the River of the Gazelles, concerning which M. Guillaume Lejean has given such curious details.

At nightfall, the balloon cast anchor in twenty-seven degrees east longitude, and four degrees twenty minutes north latitude, after a day's trip of one hundred and fifty

miles.