

CHAPTER TWENTY-SECOND.

The Jet of Light.--The Missionary.--The Rescue in a Ray of Electricity.--A Lazarist Priest.--But little Hope.--The Doctor's Care.--A Life of Self-Denial.--Passing a Volcano.

Dr. Ferguson darted his powerful electric jet toward various points of space, and caused it to rest on a spot from which shouts of terror were heard. His companions fixed their gaze eagerly on the place.

The baobab, over which the balloon was hanging almost motionless, stood in the centre of a clearing, where, between fields of Indian-corn and sugar-cane, were seen some fifty low, conical huts, around which swarmed a numerous tribe.

A hundred feet below the balloon stood a large post, or stake, and at its foot lay a human being--a young man of thirty years or more, with long black hair, half naked, wasted and wan, bleeding, covered with wounds, his head bowed over upon his breast, as Christ's was, when He hung upon the cross.

The hair, cut shorter on the top of his skull, still indicated the place of a half-effaced tonsure.

"A missionary! a priest!" exclaimed Joe.

"Poor, unfortunate man!" said Kennedy.

"We must save him, Dick!" responded the doctor;

"we must save him!"

The crowd of blacks, when they saw the balloon over their heads, like a huge comet with a train of dazzling light, were seized with a terror that may be readily imagined.

Upon hearing their cries, the prisoner raised his head. His eyes gleamed with sudden hope, and, without too thoroughly comprehending what was taking place, he stretched out his hands to his unexpected deliverers.

"He is alive!" exclaimed Ferguson. "God be praised!

The savages have got a fine scare, and we shall save him!

Are you ready, friends?"

"Ready, doctor, at the word."

"Joe, shut off the cylinder!"

The doctor's order was executed. An almost imperceptible breath of air impelled the balloon directly over the prisoner, at the same time that it gently lowered with the contraction of the gas. For about ten minutes it remained

floating in the midst of luminous waves, for Ferguson continued to flash right down upon the throng his glowing sheaf of rays, which, here and there, marked out swift and vivid sheets of light. The tribe, under the influence of an indescribable terror, disappeared little by little in the huts, and there was complete solitude around the stake. The doctor had, therefore, been right in counting upon the fantastic appearance of the balloon throwing out rays, as vivid as the sun's, through this intense gloom.

The car was approaching the ground; but a few of the savages, more audacious than the rest, guessing that their victim was about to escape from their clutches, came back with loud yells, and Kennedy seized his rifle. The doctor, however, besought him not to fire.

The priest, on his knees, for he had not the strength to stand erect, was not even fastened to the stake, his weakness rendering that precaution superfluous. At the instant when the car was close to the ground, the brawny Scot, laying aside his rifle, and seizing the priest around the waist, lifted him into the car, while, at the same moment, Joe tossed over the two hundred pounds of ballast.

The doctor had expected to ascend rapidly, but, contrary to his calculations, the balloon, after going up some three or four feet, remained there perfectly motionless.

"What holds us?" he asked, with an accent of terror.

Some of the savages were running toward them, uttering ferocious cries.

"Ah, ha!" said Joe, "one of those cursed blacks is hanging to the car!"

"Dick! Dick!" cried the doctor, "the water-tank!"

Kennedy caught his friend's idea on the instant, and, snatching up with desperate strength one of the water-tanks weighing about one hundred pounds, he tossed it overboard. The balloon, thus suddenly lightened, made a leap of three hundred feet into the air, amid the howlings of the tribe whose prisoner thus escaped them in a blaze of dazzling light.

"Hurrah!" shouted the doctor's comrades.

Suddenly, the balloon took a fresh leap, which carried it up to an elevation of a thousand feet.

"What's that?" said Kennedy, who had nearly lost his balance.

"Oh! nothing; only that black villain leaving us!"
replied the doctor, tranquilly, and Joe, leaning over, saw
the savage that had clung to the car whirling over and
over, with his arms outstretched in the air, and presently
dashed to pieces on the ground. The doctor then separated
his electric wires, and every thing was again buried
in profound obscurity. It was now one o'clock in the
morning.

The Frenchman, who had swooned away, at length
opened his eyes.

"You are saved!" were the doctor's first words.

"Saved!" he with a sad smile replied in English,
"saved from a cruel death! My brethren, I thank you,
but my days are numbered, nay, even my hours, and I
have but little longer to live."

With this, the missionary, again yielding to exhaustion,
relapsed into his fainting-fit.

"He is dying!" said Kennedy.

"No," replied the doctor, bending over him, "but he
is very weak; so let us lay him under the awning."

And they did gently deposit on their blankets that poor, wasted body, covered with scars and wounds, still bleeding where fire and steel had, in twenty places, left their agonizing marks. The doctor, taking an old handkerchief, quickly prepared a little lint, which he spread over the wounds, after having washed them. These rapid attentions were bestowed with the celerity and skill of a practised surgeon, and, when they were complete, the doctor, taking a cordial from his medicine-chest, poured a few drops upon his patient's lips.

The latter feebly pressed his kind hands, and scarcely had the strength to say, "Thank you! thank you!"

The doctor comprehended that he must be left perfectly quiet; so he closed the folds of the awning and resumed the guidance of the balloon.

The latter, after taking into account the weight of the new passenger, had been lightened of one hundred and eighty pounds, and therefore kept aloft without the aid of the cylinder. At the first dawn of day, a current drove it gently toward the west-northwest. The doctor went in under the awning for a moment or two, to look at his still sleeping patient.

"May Heaven spare the life of our new companion!"

Have you any hope?" said the Scot.

"Yes, Dick, with care, in this pure, fresh atmosphere."

"How that man has suffered!" said Joe, with feeling.

"He did bolder things than we've done, in venturing all alone among those savage tribes!"

"That cannot be questioned," assented the hunter.

During the entire day the doctor would not allow the sleep of his patient to be disturbed. It was really a long stupor, broken only by an occasional murmur of pain that continued to disquiet and agitate the doctor greatly.

Toward evening the balloon remained stationary in the midst of the gloom, and during the night, while Kennedy and Joe relieved each other in carefully tending the sick man, Ferguson kept watch over the safety of all.

By the morning of the next day, the balloon had moved, but very slightly, to the westward. The dawn came up pure and magnificent. The sick man was able to call his friends with a stronger voice. They raised the curtains of the awning, and he inhaled with delight the keen morning air.

"How do you feel to-day?" asked the doctor.

"Better, perhaps," he replied. "But you, my friends, I have not seen you yet, excepting in a dream! I can, indeed, scarcely recall what has occurred. Who are you --that your names may not be forgotten in my dying prayers?"

"We are English travellers," replied Ferguson. "We are trying to cross Africa in a balloon, and, on our way, we have had the good fortune to rescue you."

"Science has its heroes," said the missionary.

"But religion its martyrs!" rejoined the Scot.

"Are you a missionary?" asked the doctor.

"I am a priest of the Lazarist mission. Heaven sent you to me--Heaven be praised! The sacrifice of my life had been accomplished! But you come from Europe; tell me about Europe, about France! I have been without news for the last five years!"

"Five years! alone! and among these savages!" exclaimed Kennedy with amazement.

"They are souls to redeem! ignorant and barbarous brethren, whom religion alone can instruct and civilize."

Dr. Ferguson, yielding to the priest's request, talked to him long and fully about France. He listened eagerly, and his eyes filled with tears. He seized Kennedy's and Joe's hands by turns in his own, which were burning with fever. The doctor prepared him some tea, and he drank it with satisfaction. After that, he had strength enough to raise himself up a little, and smiled with pleasure at seeing himself borne along through so pure a sky.

"You are daring travellers!" he said, "and you will succeed in your bold enterprise. You will again behold your relatives, your friends, your country--you--"

At this moment, the weakness of the young missionary became so extreme that they had to lay him again on the bed, where a prostration, lasting for several hours, held him like a dead man under the eye of Dr. Ferguson. The latter could not suppress his emotion, for he felt that this life now in his charge was ebbing away. Were they then so soon to lose him whom they had snatched from an agonizing death? The doctor again washed and dressed the young martyr's frightful wounds, and had to sacrifice nearly his whole stock of water to refresh his burning limbs. He surrounded him with the tenderest and most

intelligent care, until, at length, the sick man revived, little by little, in his arms, and recovered his consciousness if not his strength.

The doctor was able to gather something of his history from his broken murmurs.

"Speak in your native language," he said to the sufferer; "I understand it, and it will fatigue you less."

The missionary was a poor young man from the village of Aradon, in Brittany, in the Morbihan country. His earliest instincts had drawn him toward an ecclesiastical career, but to this life of self-sacrifice he was also desirous of joining a life of danger, by entering the mission of the order of priesthood of which St. Vincent de Paul was the founder, and, at twenty, he quitted his country for the inhospitable shores of Africa. From the sea-coast, overcoming obstacles, little by little, braving all privations, pushing onward, afoot, and praying, he had advanced to the very centre of those tribes that dwell among the tributary streams of the Upper Nile. For two years his faith was spurned, his zeal denied recognition, his charities taken in ill part, and he remained a prisoner to one of the cruelest tribes of the Nyambarra, the object of every species of maltreatment. But still he went on teaching, instructing, and praying. The tribe having been dispersed

and he left for dead, in one of those combats which are so frequent between the tribes, instead of retracing his steps, he persisted in his evangelical mission. His most tranquil time was when he was taken for a madman. Meanwhile, he had made himself familiar with the idioms of the country, and he catechised in them. At length, during two more long years, he traversed these barbarous regions, impelled by that superhuman energy that comes from God. For a year past he had been residing with that tribe of the Nyam-Nyams known as the Barafri, one of the wildest and most ferocious of them all. The chief having died a few days before our travellers appeared, his sudden death was attributed to the missionary, and the tribe resolved to immolate him. His sufferings had already continued for the space of forty hours, and, as the doctor had supposed, he was to have perished in the blaze of the noonday sun. When he heard the sound of fire-arms, nature got the best of him, and he had cried out, "Help! help!" He then thought that he must have been dreaming, when a voice, that seemed to come from the sky, had uttered words of consolation.

"I have no regrets," he said, "for the life that is passing away from me; my life belongs to God!"

"Hope still!" said the doctor; "we are near you, and we will save you now, as we saved you from the tortures

of the stake."

"I do not ask so much of Heaven," said the priest, with resignation. "Blessed be God for having vouchsafed to me the joy before I die of having pressed your friendly hands, and having heard, once more, the language of my country!"

The missionary here grew weak again, and the whole day went by between hope and fear, Kennedy deeply moved, and Joe drawing his hand over his eyes more than once when he thought that no one saw him.

The balloon made little progress, and the wind seemed as though unwilling to jostle its precious burden.

Toward evening, Joe discovered a great light in the west. Under more elevated latitudes, it might have been mistaken for an immense aurora borealis, for the sky appeared on fire. The doctor very attentively examined the phenomenon.

"It is, perhaps, only a volcano in full activity," said he.

"But the wind is carrying us directly over it," replied Kennedy.

"Very well, we shall cross it then at a safe height!"
said the doctor.

Three hours later, the Victoria was right among the mountains. Her exact position was twenty-four degrees fifteen minutes east longitude, and four degrees forty-two minutes north latitude, and four degrees forty-two minutes north latitude. In front of her a volcanic crater was pouring forth torrents of melted lava, and hurling masses of rock to an enormous height. There were jets, too, of liquid fire that fell back in dazzling cascades--a superb but dangerous spectacle, for the wind with unswerving certainty was carrying the balloon directly toward this blazing atmosphere.

This obstacle, which could not be turned, had to be crossed, so the cylinder was put to its utmost power, and the balloon rose to the height of six thousand feet, leaving between it and the volcano a space of more than three hundred fathoms.

From his bed of suffering, the dying missionary could contemplate that fiery crater from which a thousand jets of dazzling flame were that moment escaping.

"How grand it is!" said he, "and how infinite is the power of God even in its most terrible manifestations!"

This overflow of blazing lava wrapped the sides of the mountain with a veritable drapery of flame; the lower half of the balloon glowed redly in the upper night; a torrid heat ascended to the car, and Dr. Ferguson made all possible haste to escape from this perilous situation.

By ten o'clock the volcano could be seen only as a red point on the horizon, and the balloon tranquilly pursued her course in a less elevated zone of the atmosphere.