

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHTH.

An Evening of Delight.--Joe's Culinary Performance.--A Dissertation on Raw Meat.--The Narrative of James Bruce.--Camping out.--Joe's Dreams.--The Barometer begins to fall.--The Barometer rises again.--Preparations for Departure.--The Tempest.

The evening was lovely, and our three friends enjoyed it in the cool shade of the mimosas, after a substantial repast, at which the tea and the punch were dealt out with no niggardly hand.

Kennedy had traversed the little domain in all directions. He had ransacked every thicket and satisfied himself that the balloon party were the only living creatures in this terrestrial paradise; so they stretched themselves upon their blankets and passed a peaceful night that brought them forgetfulness of their past sufferings.

On the morrow, May 7th, the sun shone with all his splendor, but his rays could not penetrate the dense screen of the palm-tree foliage, and as there was no lack of provisions, the doctor resolved to remain where he was while waiting for a favorable wind.

Joe had conveyed his portable kitchen to the oasis, and proceeded to indulge in any number of culinary combinations, using water

all the time with the most profuse extravagance.

"What a strange succession of annoyances and enjoyments!" moralized Kennedy. "Such abundance as this after such privations; such luxury after such want! Ah! I nearly went mad!"

"My dear Dick," replied the doctor, "had it not been for Joe, you would not be sitting here, to-day, discoursing on the instability of human affairs."

"Whole-hearted friend!" said Kennedy, extending his hand to Joe.

"There's no occasion for all that," responded the latter; "but you can take your revenge some time, Mr. Kennedy, always hoping though that you may never have occasion to do the same for me!"

"It's a poor constitution this of ours to succumb to so little," philosophized Dr. Ferguson.

"So little water, you mean, doctor," interposed Joe; "that element must be very necessary to life."

"Undoubtedly, and persons deprived of food hold out longer than those deprived of water."

"I believe it. Besides, when needs must, one can eat any thing he comes across, even his fellow-creatures, although that must be a kind of food that's pretty hard to digest."

"The savages don't boggle much about it!" said Kennedy.

"Yes; but then they are savages, and accustomed to devouring raw meat; it's something that I'd find very disgusting, for my part."

"It is disgusting enough," said the doctor, "that's a fact; and so much so, indeed, that nobody believed the narratives of the earliest travellers in Africa who brought back word that many tribes on that continent subsisted upon raw meat, and people generally refused to credit the statement. It was under such circumstances that a very singular adventure befell James Bruce."

"Tell it to us, doctor; we've time enough to hear it," said Joe, stretching himself voluptuously on the cool greensward.

"By all means.--James Bruce was a Scotchman, of Stirlingshire, who, between 1768 and 1772, traversed all Abyssinia, as far as Lake Tyana, in search of the sources

of the Nile. He afterward returned to England, but did not publish an account of his journeys until 1790. His statements were received with extreme incredulity, and such may be the reception accorded to our own. The manners and customs of the Abyssinians seemed so different from those of the English, that no one would credit the description of them. Among other details, Bruce had put forward the assertion that the tribes of Eastern Africa fed upon raw flesh, and this set everybody against him. He might say so as much as he pleased; there was no one likely to go and see! One day, in a parlor at Edinburgh, a Scotch gentleman took up the subject in his presence, as it had become the topic of daily pleasantries, and, in reference to the eating of raw flesh, said that the thing was neither possible nor true. Bruce made no reply, but went out and returned a few minutes later with a raw steak, seasoned with pepper and salt, in the African style.

"Sir," said he to the Scotchman, "in doubting my statements, you have grossly affronted me; in believing the thing to be impossible, you have been egregiously mistaken; and, in proof thereof, you will now eat this beef-steak raw, or you will give me instant satisfaction!" The Scotchman had a wholesome dread of the brawny traveller, and DID eat the steak, although not without a good many wry faces. Thereupon, with the utmost coolness, James Bruce added: "Even admitting, sir, that the

thing were untrue, you will, at least, no longer maintain that it is impossible."

"Well put in!" said Joe, "and if the Scotchman found it lie heavy on his stomach, he got no more than he deserved. If, on our return to England, they dare to doubt what we say about our travels--"

"Well, Joe, what would you do?"

"Why, I'll make the doubters swallow the pieces of the balloon, without either salt or pepper!"

All burst out laughing at Joe's queer notions, and thus the day slipped by in pleasant chat. With returning strength, hope had revived, and with hope came the courage to do and to dare. The past was obliterated in the presence of the future with providential rapidity.

Joe would have been willing to remain forever in this enchanting asylum; it was the realm he had pictured in his dreams; he felt himself at home; his master had to give him his exact location, and it was with the gravest air imaginable that he wrote down on his tablets fifteen degrees forty-three minutes east longitude, and eight degrees thirty-two minutes north latitude.

Kennedy had but one regret, to wit, that he could not hunt in that miniature forest, because, according to his ideas, there was a slight deficiency of ferocious wild beasts in it.

"But, my dear Dick," said the doctor, "haven't you rather a short memory? How about the lion and the lioness?"

"Oh, that!" he ejaculated with the contempt of a thorough-bred sportsman for game already killed. "But the fact is, that finding them here would lead one to suppose that we can't be far from a more fertile country."

"It don't prove much, Dick, for those animals, when goaded by hunger or thirst, will travel long distances, and I think that, to-night, we had better keep a more vigilant lookout, and light fires, besides."

"What, in such heat as this?" said Joe. "Well, if it's necessary, we'll have to do it, but I do think it a real pity to burn this pretty grove that has been such a comfort to us!"

"Oh! above all things, we must take the utmost care not to set it on fire," replied the doctor, "so that others in the same strait as ourselves may some day find shelter here in the middle of the desert."

"I'll be very careful, indeed, doctor; but do you think that this oasis is known?"

"Undoubtedly; it is a halting-place for the caravans that frequent the centre of Africa, and a visit from one of them might be any thing but pleasant to you, Joe."

"Why, are there any more of those rascally Nyam-Nyams around here?"

"Certainly; that is the general name of all the neighboring tribes, and, under the same climates, the same races are likely to have similar manners and customs."

"Pah!" said Joe, "but, after all, it's natural enough. If savages had the ways of gentlemen, where would be the difference? By George, these fine fellows wouldn't have to be coaxed long to eat the Scotchman's raw steak, nor the Scotchman either, into the bargain!"

With this very sensible observation, Joe began to get ready his firewood for the night, making just as little of it as possible. Fortunately, these precautions were superfluous; and each of the party, in his turn, dropped off into the soundest slumber.

On the next day the weather still showed no sign of change, but kept provokingly and obstinately fair. The balloon remained motionless, without any oscillation to betray a breath of wind.

The doctor began to get uneasy again. If their stay in the desert were to be prolonged like this, their provisions would give out. After nearly perishing for want of water, they would, at last, have to starve to death!

But he took fresh courage as he saw the mercury fall considerably in the barometer, and noticed evident signs of an early change in the atmosphere. He therefore resolved to make all his preparations for a start, so as to avail himself of the first opportunity. The feeding-tank and the water-tank were both completely filled.

Then he had to reestablish the equilibrium of the balloon, and Joe was obliged to part with another considerable portion of his precious quartz. With restored health, his ambitious notions had come back to him, and he made more than one wry face before obeying his master; but the latter convinced him that he could not carry so considerable a weight with him through the air, and gave him his choice between the water and the gold. Joe hesitated no longer, but flung out the requisite quantity of his much-prized ore upon the sand.

"The next people who come this way," he remarked, "will be rather surprised to find a fortune in such a place."

"And suppose some learned traveller should come across these specimens, eh?" suggested Kennedy.

"You may be certain, Dick, that they would take him by surprise, and that he would publish his astonishment in several folios; so that some day we shall hear of a wonderful deposit of gold-bearing quartz in the midst of the African sands!"

"And Joe there, will be the cause of it all!"

This idea of mystifying some learned sage tickled Joe hugely, and made him laugh.

During the rest of the day the doctor vainly kept on the watch for a change of weather. The temperature rose, and, had it not been for the shade of the oasis, would have been insupportable. The thermometer marked a hundred and forty-nine degrees in the sun, and a veritable rain of fire filled the air. This was the most intense heat that they had yet noted.

Joe arranged their bivouac for that evening, as he had done for the previous night; and during the watches kept by the doctor and Kennedy there was no fresh incident.

But, toward three o'clock in the morning, while Joe was on guard, the temperature suddenly fell; the sky became overcast with clouds, and the darkness increased.

"Turn out!" cried Joe, arousing his companions.

"Turn out! Here's the wind!"

"At last!" exclaimed the doctor, eying the heavens.

"But it is a storm! The balloon! Let us hasten to the balloon!"

It was high time for them to reach it. The Victoria was bending to the force of the hurricane, and dragging along the car, the latter grazing the sand. Had any portion of the ballast been accidentally thrown out, the balloon would have been swept away, and all hope of recovering it have been forever lost.

But fleet-footed Joe put forth his utmost speed, and checked the car, while the balloon beat upon the sand, at the risk of being torn to pieces. The doctor, followed by Kennedy, leaped in, and lit his cylinder, while his companions threw out the superfluous ballast.

The travellers took one last look at the trees of the oasis bowing to the force of the hurricane, and soon, catching the wind at two hundred feet above the ground, disappeared in the gloom.