

CHAPTER THIRTIETH.

Mosfeia.--The Sheik.--Denham, Clapperton, and Oudney.--Vogel.--The Capital of Loggoum.--Toole.--Becalmed above Kernak.--The Governor and his Court.--The Attack.--The Incendiary Pigeons.

On the next day, May 11th, the Victoria resumed her adventurous journey. Her passengers had the same confidence in her that a good seaman has in his ship.

In terrific hurricanes, in tropical heats, when making dangerous departures, and descents still more dangerous, it had, at all times and in all places, come out safely. It might almost have been said that Ferguson managed it with a wave of the hand; and hence, without knowing in advance, where the point of arrival would be, the doctor had no fears concerning the successful issue of his journey. However, in this country of barbarians and fanatics, prudence obliged him to take the strictest precautions. He therefore counselled his companions to have their eyes wide open for every thing and at all hours.

The wind drifted a little more to the northward, and, toward nine o'clock, they sighted the larger city of Mosfeia, built upon an eminence which was itself enclosed between two lofty mountains. Its position was impregnable, a narrow road running between a marsh and a thick wood

being the only channel of approach to it.

At the moment of which we write, a sheik, accompanied by a mounted escort, and clad in a garb of brilliant colors, preceded by couriers and trumpeters, who put aside the boughs of the trees as he rode up, was making his grand entry into the place.

The doctor lowered the balloon in order to get a better look at this cavalcade of natives; but, as the balloon grew larger to their eyes, they began to show symptoms of intense affright, and at length made off in different directions as fast as their legs and those of their horses could carry them.

The sheik alone did not budge an inch. He merely grasped his long musket, cocked it, and proudly waited in silence. The doctor came on to within a hundred and fifty feet of him, and then, with his roundest and fullest voice, saluted him courteously in the Arabic tongue.

But, upon hearing these words falling, as it seemed, from the sky, the sheik dismounted and prostrated himself in the dust of the highway, where the doctor had to leave him, finding it impossible to divert him from his adoration.

"Unquestionably," Ferguson remarked, "those people take us for supernatural beings. When Europeans came among them for the first time, they were mistaken for creatures of a higher race. When this sheik comes to speak of to-day's meeting, he will not fail to embellish the circumstance with all the resources of an Arab imagination. You may, therefore, judge what an account their legends will give of us some day."

"Not such a desirable thing, after all," said the Scot, "in the point of view that affects civilization; it would be better to pass for mere men. That would give these negro races a superior idea of European power."

"Very good, my dear Dick; but what can we do about it? You might sit all day explaining the mechanism of a balloon to the savants of this country, and yet they would not comprehend you, but would persist in ascribing it to supernatural aid."

"Doctor, you spoke of the first time Europeans visited these regions. Who were the visitors?" inquired Joe.

"My dear fellow, we are now upon the very track of Major Denham. It was at this very city of Mosfeia that he was received by the Sultan of Mandara; he had quitted the Bornou country; he accompanied the sheik in an expedition

against the Fellatahs; he assisted in the attack on the city, which, with its arrows alone, bravely resisted the bullets of the Arabs, and put the sheik's troops to flight. All this was but a pretext for murders, raids, and pillage. The major was completely plundered and stripped, and had it not been for his horse, under whose stomach he clung with the skill of an Indian rider, and was borne with a headlong gallop from his barbarous pursuers, he never could have made his way back to Kouka, the capital of Bornou."

"Who was this Major Denham?"

"A fearless Englishman, who, between 1822 and 1824, commanded an expedition into the Bornou country, in company with Captain Clapperton and Dr. Oudney. They set out from Tripoli in the month of March, reached Mourzouk, the capital of Fez, and, following the route which at a later period Dr. Barth was to pursue on his way back to Europe, they arrived, on the 16th of February, 1823, at Kouka, near Lake Tchad. Denham made several explorations in Bornou, in Mandara, and to the eastern shores of the lake. In the mean time, on the 15th of December, 1823, Captain Clapperton and Dr. Oudney had pushed their way through the Soudan country as far as Sackatoo, and Oudney died of fatigue and exhaustion in the town of Murmur."

"This part of Africa has, therefore, paid a heavy tribute of victims to the cause of science," said Kennedy.

"Yes, this country is fatal to travellers. We are moving directly toward the kingdom of Baghirmi, which Vogel traversed in 1856, so as to reach the Wadai country, where he disappeared. This young man, at the age of twenty-three, had been sent to cooperate with Dr. Barth. They met on the 1st of December, 1854, and thereupon commenced his explorations of the country. Toward 1856, he announced, in the last letters received from him, his intention to reconnoitre the kingdom of Wadai, which no European had yet penetrated. It appears that he got as far as Wara, the capital, where, according to some accounts, he was made prisoner, and, according to others, was put to death for having attempted to ascend a sacred mountain in the environs. But, we must not too lightly admit the death of travellers, since that does away with the necessity of going in search of them. For instance, how often was the death of Dr. Barth reported, to his own great annoyance! It is, therefore, very possible that Vogel may still be held as a prisoner by the Sultan of Wadai, in the hope of obtaining a good ransom for him.

"Baron de Neimans was about starting for the Wadai country when he died at Cairo, in 1855; and we now know

that De Heuglin has set out on Vogel's track with the expedition sent from Leipsic, so that we shall soon be accurately informed as to the fate of that young and interesting explorer."*

* Since the doctor's departure, letters written from El'Obeid by Mr. Muntzinger, the newly-appointed head of the expedition, unfortunately place the death of Vogel beyond a doubt.

Mosfeia had disappeared from the horizon long ere this, and the Mandara country was developing to the gaze of our aeronauts its astonishing fertility, with its forests of acacias, its locust-trees covered with red flowers, and the herbaceous plants of its fields of cotton and indigo trees. The river Shari, which eighty miles farther on rolled its impetuous waters into Lake Tchad, was quite distinctly seen.

The doctor got his companions to trace its course upon the maps drawn by Dr. Barth.

"You perceive," said he, "that the labors of this savant have been conducted with great precision; we are moving directly toward the Loggoum region, and perhaps toward Kernak, its capital. It was there that poor Toole died, at the age of scarcely twenty-two. He was a young Englishman, an ensign in the 80th regiment, who, a few weeks

before, had joined Major Denham in Africa, and it was not long ere he there met his death. Ah! this vast country might well be called the graveyard of European travellers."

Some boats, fifty feet long, were descending the current of the Shari. The Victoria, then one thousand feet above the soil, hardly attracted the attention of the natives; but the wind, which until then had been blowing with a certain degree of strength, was falling off.

"Is it possible that we are to be caught in another dead calm?" sighed the doctor.

"Well, we've no lack of water, nor the desert to fear, anyhow, master," said Joe.

"No; but there are races here still more to be dreaded."

"Why!" said Joe, again, "there's something like a town."

"That is Kernak. The last puffs of the breeze are wafting us to it, and, if we choose, we can take an exact plan of the place."

"Shall we not go nearer to it?" asked Kennedy.

"Nothing easier, Dick! We are right over it. Allow me to turn the stopcock of the cylinder, and we'll not be long in descending."

Half an hour later the balloon hung motionless about two hundred feet from the ground.

"Here we are!" said the doctor, "nearer to Kernak than a man would be to London, if he were perched in the cupola of St. Paul's. So we can take a survey at our ease."

"What is that tick-tacking sound that we hear on all sides?"

Joe looked attentively, and at length discovered that the noise they heard was produced by a number of weavers beating cloth stretched in the open air, on large trunks of trees.

The capital of Loggoum could then be seen in its entire extent, like an unrolled chart. It is really a city with straight rows of houses and quite wide streets. In the midst of a large open space there was a slave-market, attended by a great crowd of customers, for the Mandara women, who have extremely small hands and feet, are in excellent request, and can be sold at lucrative rates.

At the sight of the Victoria, the scene so often produced occurred again. At first there were outcries, and then followed general stupefaction; business was abandoned; work was flung aside, and all noise ceased. The aeronauts remained as they were, completely motionless, and lost not a detail of the populous city. They even went down to within sixty feet of the ground.

Hereupon the Governor of Loggoum came out from his residence, displaying his green standard, and accompanied by his musicians, who blew on hoarse buffalo-horns, as though they would split their cheeks or any thing else, excepting their own lungs. The crowd at once gathered around him. In the mean while Dr. Ferguson tried to make himself heard, but in vain.

This population looked like proud and intelligent people, with their high foreheads, their almost aquiline noses, and their curling hair; but the presence of the Victoria troubled them greatly. Horsemen could be seen galloping in all directions, and it soon became evident that the governor's troops were assembling to oppose so extraordinary a foe. Joe wore himself out waving handkerchiefs of every color and shape to them; but his exertions were all to no purpose.

However, the sheik, surrounded by his court, proclaimed

silence, and pronounced a discourse, of which the doctor could not understand a word. It was Arabic, mixed with Baghirmi. He could make out enough, however, by the universal language of gestures, to be aware that he was receiving a very polite invitation to depart. Indeed, he would have asked for nothing better, but for lack of wind, the thing had become impossible. His noncompliance, therefore, exasperated the governor, whose courtiers and attendants set up a furious howl to enforce immediate obedience on the part of the aerial monster.

They were odd-looking fellows those courtiers, with their five or six shirts swathed around their bodies! They had enormous stomachs, some of which actually seemed to be artificial. The doctor surprised his companions by informing them that this was the way to pay court to the sultan. The rotundity of the stomach indicated the ambition of its possessor. These corpulent gentry gesticulated and bawled at the top of their voices--one of them particularly distinguishing himself above the rest--to such an extent, indeed, that he must have been a prime minister--at least, if the disturbance he made was any criterion of his rank. The common rabble of dusky denizens united their howlings with the uproar of the court, repeating their gesticulations like so many monkeys, and thereby producing a single and instantaneous movement of ten thousand arms at one time.

To these means of intimidation, which were presently deemed insufficient, were added others still more formidable. Soldiers, armed with bows and arrows, were drawn up in line of battle; but by this time the balloon was expanding, and rising quietly beyond their reach. Upon this the governor seized a musket and aimed it at the balloon; but, Kennedy, who was watching him, shattered the uplifted weapon in the sheik's grasp.

At this unexpected blow there was a general rout. Every mother's son of them scampered for his dwelling with the utmost celerity, and stayed there, so that the streets of the town were absolutely deserted for the remainder of that day.

Night came, and not a breath of wind was stirring. The aeronauts had to make up their minds to remain motionless at the distance of but three hundred feet above the ground. Not a fire or light shone in the deep gloom, and around reigned the silence of death; but the doctor only redoubled his vigilance, as this apparent quiet might conceal some snare.

And he had reason to be watchful. About midnight, the whole city seemed to be in a blaze. Hundreds of streaks of flame crossed each other, and shot to and fro

in the air like rockets, forming a regular network of fire.

"That's really curious!" said the doctor, somewhat puzzled to make out what it meant.

"By all that's glorious!" shouted Kennedy, "it looks as if the fire were ascending and coming up toward us!"

And, sure enough, with an accompaniment of musket-shots, yelling, and din of every description, the mass of fire was, indeed, mounting toward the Victoria. Joe got ready to throw out ballast, and Ferguson was not long at guessing the truth. Thousands of pigeons, their tails garnished with combustibles, had been set loose and driven toward the Victoria; and now, in their terror, they were flying high up, zigzagging the atmosphere with lines of fire. Kennedy was preparing to discharge all his batteries into the middle of the ascending multitude, but what could he have done against such a numberless army? The pigeons were already whisking around the car; they were even surrounding the balloon, the sides of which, reflecting their illumination, looked as though enveloped with a network of fire.

The doctor dared hesitate no longer; and, throwing out a fragment of quartz, he kept himself beyond the reach of these dangerous assailants; and, for two hours

afterward, he could see them wandering hither and thither through the darkness of the night, until, little by little, their light diminished, and they, one by one, died out.

"Now we may sleep in quiet," said the doctor.

"Not badly got up for barbarians," mused friend Joe, speaking his thoughts aloud.

"Oh, they employ these pigeons frequently, to set fire to the thatch of hostile villages; but this time the village mounted higher than they could go."

"Why, positively, a balloon need fear no enemies!"

"Yes, indeed, it may!" objected Ferguson.

"What are they, then, doctor?"

"They are the careless people in the car! So, my friends, let us have vigilance in all places and at all times."