

## CHAPTER FORTIETH.

Dr. Ferguson's Anxieties.--Persistent Movement southward.--A Cloud of Grasshoppers.--A View of Jenne.--A View of Sego.--Change of the Wind.--Joe's Regrets.

The flow of the river was, at that point, divided by large islands into narrow branches, with a very rapid current. Upon one among them stood some shepherds' huts, but it had become impossible to take an exact observation of them, because the speed of the balloon was constantly increasing. Unfortunately, it turned still more toward the south, and in a few moments crossed Lake Debo.

Dr. Ferguson, forcing the dilation of his aerial craft to the utmost, sought for other currents of air at different heights, but in vain; and he soon gave up the attempt, which was only augmenting the waste of gas by pressing it against the well-worn tissue of the balloon.

He made no remark, but he began to feel very anxious. This persistence of the wind to head him off toward the southern part of Africa was defeating his calculations, and he no longer knew upon whom or upon what to depend. Should he not reach the English or French territories, what was to become of him in the midst of the barbarous tribes that infest the coasts of Guinea? How should he

there get to a ship to take him back to England? And the actual direction of the wind was driving him along to the kingdom of Dahomey, among the most savage races, and into the power of a ruler who was in the habit of sacrificing thousands of human victims at his public orgies. There he would be lost!

On the other hand, the balloon was visibly wearing out, and the doctor felt it failing him. However, as the weather was clearing up a little, he hoped that the cessation of the rain would bring about a change in the atmospheric currents.

It was therefore a disagreeable reminder of the actual situation when Joe said aloud:

"There! the rain's going to pour down harder than ever; and this time it will be the deluge itself, if we're to judge by yon cloud that's coming up!"

"What! another cloud?" asked Ferguson.

"Yes, and a famous one," replied Kennedy.

"I never saw the like of it," added Joe.

"I breathe freely again!" said the doctor, laying down his spy-glass. "That's not a cloud!"

"Not a cloud?" queried Joe, with surprise.

"No; it is a swarm."

"Eh?"

"A swarm of grasshoppers!"

"That? Grasshoppers!"

"Myriads of grasshoppers, that are going to sweep over this country like a water-spout; and woe to it! for, should these insects alight, it will be laid waste."

"That would be a sight worth beholding!"

"Wait a little, Joe. In ten minutes that cloud will have arrived where we are, and you can then judge by the aid of your own eyes."

The doctor was right. The cloud, thick, opaque, and several miles in extent, came on with a deafening noise, casting its immense shadow over the fields. It was composed of numberless legions of that species of grasshopper called crickets. About a hundred paces from the balloon, they settled down upon a tract full of foliage and

verdure. Fifteen minutes later, the mass resumed its flight, and our travellers could, even at a distance, see the trees and the bushes entirely stripped, and the fields as bare as though they had been swept with the scythe. One would have thought that a sudden winter had just descended upon the earth and struck the region with the most complete sterility.

"Well, Joe, what do you think of that?"

"Well, doctor, it's very curious, but quite natural. What one grasshopper does on a small scale, thousands do on a grand scale."

"It's a terrible shower," said the hunter; "more so than hail itself in the devastation it causes."

"It is impossible to prevent it," replied Ferguson.

"Sometimes the inhabitants have had the idea to burn the forests, and even the standing crops, in order to arrest the progress of these insects; but the first ranks plunging into the flames would extinguish them beneath their mass, and the rest of the swarm would then pass irresistibly onward. Fortunately, in these regions, there is some sort of compensation for their ravages, since the natives gather these insects in great numbers and greedily eat them."

"They are the prawns of the air," said Joe, who added that he was sorry that he had never had the chance to taste them--just for information's sake!

The country became more marshy toward evening; the forests dwindled to isolated clumps of trees; and on the borders of the river could be seen plantations of tobacco, and swampy meadow-lands fat with forage. At last the city of Jenne, on a large island, came in sight, with the two towers of its clay-built mosque, and the putrid odor of the millions of swallows' nests accumulated in its walls. The tops of some baobabs, mimosas, and date-trees peeped up between the houses; and, even at night, the activity of the place seemed very great. Jenne is, in fact, quite a commercial city: it supplies all the wants of Timbuctoo. Its boats on the river, and its caravans along the shaded roads, bear thither the various products of its industry.

"Were it not that to do so would prolong our journey," said the doctor, "I should like to alight at this place. There must be more than one Arab there who has travelled in England and France, and to whom our style of locomotion is not altogether new. But it would not be prudent."

"Let us put off the visit until our next trip," said Joe, laughing.

"Besides, my friends, unless I am mistaken, the wind has a slight tendency to veer a little more to the eastward, and we must not lose such an opportunity."

The doctor threw overboard some articles that were no longer of use--some empty bottles, and a case that had contained preserved-meat--and thereby managed to keep the balloon in a belt of the atmosphere more favorable to his plans. At four o'clock in the morning the first rays of the sun lighted up Sego, the capital of Bambarra, which could be recognized at once by the four towns that compose it, by its Saracenic mosques, and by the incessant going and coming of the flat-bottomed boats that convey its inhabitants from one quarter to the other. But the travellers were not more seen than they saw. They sped rapidly and directly to the northwest, and the doctor's anxiety gradually subsided.

"Two more days in this direction, and at this rate of speed, and we'll reach the Senegal River."

"And we'll be in a friendly country?" asked the hunter.

"Not altogether; but, if the worst came to the worst, and the balloon were to fail us, we might make our way to the French settlements. But, let it hold out only for a

few hundred miles, and we shall arrive without fatigue, alarm, or danger, at the western coast."

"And the thing will be over!" added Joe. "Heigh-ho! so much the worse. If it wasn't for the pleasure of telling about it, I would never want to set foot on the ground again! Do you think anybody will believe our story, doctor?"

"Who can tell, Joe? One thing, however, will be undeniable: a thousand witnesses saw us start on one side of the African Continent, and a thousand more will see us arrive on the other."

"And, in that case, it seems to me that it would be hard to say that we had not crossed it," added Kennedy.

"Ah, doctor!" said Joe again, with a deep sigh, "I'll think more than once of my lumps of solid gold-ore! There was something that would have given WEIGHT to our narrative! At a grain of gold per head, I could have got together a nice crowd to listen to me, and even to admire me!"