

## CHAPTER FORTY-SECOND.

A Struggle of Generosity.--The Last Sacrifice.--The Dilating Apparatus.  
--Joe's Adroitness.--Midnight.--The Doctor's Watch.--Kennedy's Watch.  
--The Latter falls asleep at his Post.--The Fire.--The Howlings of the  
Natives.--Out of Range.

Doctor Ferguson's first care was to take his bearings by stellar observation, and he discovered that he was scarcely twenty-five miles from Senegal.

"All that we can manage to do, my friends," said he, after having pointed his map, "is to cross the river; but, as there is neither bridge nor boat, we must, at all hazards, cross it with the balloon, and, in order to do that, we must still lighten up."

"But I don't exactly see how we can do that?" replied Kennedy, anxious about his fire-arms, "unless one of us makes up his mind to sacrifice himself for the rest,--that is, to stay behind, and, in my turn, I claim that honor."

"You, indeed!" remonstrated Joe; "ain't I used to--"

"The question now is, not to throw ourselves out of the car, but simply to reach the coast of Africa on foot. I am a first-rate walker, a good sportsman, and--"

"I'll never consent to it!" insisted Joe.

"Your generous rivalry is useless, my brave friends," said Ferguson; "I trust that we shall not come to any such extremity: besides, if we did, instead of separating, we should keep together, so as to make our way across the country in company."

"That's the talk," said Joe; "a little tramp won't do us any harm."

"But before we try that," resumed the doctor, "we must employ a last means of lightening the balloon."

"What will that be? I should like to see it," said Kennedy, incredulously.

"We must get rid of the cylinder-chests, the spiral, and the Buntzen battery. Nine hundred pounds make a rather heavy load to carry through the air."

"But then, Samuel, how will you dilate your gas?"

"I shall not do so at all. We'll have to get along without it."

"But--"

"Listen, my friends: I have calculated very exactly the amount of ascensional force left to us, and it is sufficient to carry us every one with the few objects that remain. We shall make in all a weight of hardly five hundred pounds, including the two anchors which I desire to keep."

"Dear doctor, you know more about the matter than we do; you are the sole judge of the situation. Tell us what we ought to do, and we will do it."

"I am at your orders, master," added Joe.

"I repeat, my friends, that however serious the decision may appear, we must sacrifice our apparatus."

"Let it go, then!" said Kennedy, promptly.

"To work!" said Joe.

It was no easy job. The apparatus had to be taken down piece by piece. First, they took out the mixing reservoir, then the one belonging to the cylinder, and lastly the tank in which the decomposition of the water was effected. The united strength of all three travellers

was required to detach these reservoirs from the bottom of the car in which they had been so firmly secured; but Kennedy was so strong, Joe so adroit, and the doctor so ingenious, that they finally succeeded. The different pieces were thrown out, one after the other, and they disappeared below, making huge gaps in the foliage of the sycamores.

"The black fellows will be mightily astonished," said Joe, "at finding things like those in the woods; they'll make idols of them!"

The next thing to be looked after was the displacement of the pipes that were fastened in the balloon and connected with the spiral. Joe succeeded in cutting the caoutchouc jointings above the car, but when he came to the pipes he found it more difficult to disengage them, because they were held by their upper extremity and fastened by wires to the very cirlet of the valve.

Then it was that Joe showed wonderful adroitness. In his naked feet, so as not to scratch the covering, he succeeded by the aid of the network, and in spite of the oscillations of the balloon, in climbing to the upper extremity, and after a thousand difficulties, in holding on with one hand to that slippery surface, while he detached the outside screws that secured the pipes in their place.

These were then easily taken out, and drawn away by the lower end, which was hermetically sealed by means of a strong ligature.

The Victoria, relieved of this considerable weight, rose upright in the air and tugged strongly at the anchor-rope.

About midnight this work ended without accident, but at the cost of most severe exertion, and the trio partook of a luncheon of pemmican and cold punch, as the doctor had no more fire to place at Joe's disposal.

Besides, the latter and Kennedy were dropping off their feet with fatigue.

"Lie down, my friends, and get some rest," said the doctor. "I'll take the first watch; at two o'clock I'll waken Kennedy; at four, Kennedy will waken Joe, and at six we'll start; and may Heaven have us in its keeping for this last day of the trip!"

Without waiting to be coaxed, the doctor's two companions stretched themselves at the bottom of the car and dropped into profound slumber on the instant.

The night was calm. A few clouds broke against the last quarter of the moon, whose uncertain rays scarcely

pierced the darkness. Ferguson, resting his elbows on the rim of the car, gazed attentively around him. He watched with close attention the dark screen of foliage that spread beneath him, hiding the ground from his view. The least noise aroused his suspicions, and he questioned even the slightest rustling of the leaves.

He was in that mood which solitude makes more keenly felt, and during which vague terrors mount to the brain. At the close of such a journey, after having surmounted so many obstacles, and at the moment of touching the goal, one's fears are more vivid, one's emotions keener. The point of arrival seems to fly farther from our gaze.

Moreover, the present situation had nothing very consolatory about it. They were in the midst of a barbarous country, and dependent upon a vehicle that might fail them at any moment. The doctor no longer counted implicitly on his balloon; the time had gone by when he manoeuvred it boldly because he felt sure of it.

Under the influence of these impressions, the doctor, from time to time, thought that he heard vague sounds in the vast forests around him; he even fancied that he saw a swift gleam of fire shining between the trees. He looked sharply and turned his night-glass toward the spot; but there was nothing to be seen, and the profoundest silence

appeared to return.

He had, no doubt, been under the dominion of a mere hallucination. He continued to listen, but without hearing the slightest noise. When his watch had expired, he woke Kennedy, and, enjoining upon him to observe the extremest vigilance, took his place beside Joe, and fell sound asleep.

Kennedy, while still rubbing his eyes, which he could scarcely keep open, calmly lit his pipe. He then ensconced himself in a corner, and began to smoke vigorously by way of keeping awake.

The most absolute silence reigned around him; a light wind shook the tree-tops and gently rocked the car, inviting the hunter to taste the sleep that stole over him in spite of himself. He strove hard to resist it, and repeatedly opened his eyes to plunge into the outer darkness one of those looks that see nothing; but at last, yielding to fatigue, he sank back and slumbered.

How long he had been buried in this stupor he knew not, but he was suddenly aroused from it by a strange, unexpected crackling sound.

He rubbed his eyes and sprang to his feet. An intense

glare half-blinded him and heated his cheek--the forest was in flames!

"Fire! fire!" he shouted, scarcely comprehending what had happened.

His two companions started up in alarm.

"What's the matter?" was the doctor's immediate exclamation.

"Fire!" said Joe. "But who could--"

At this moment loud yells were heard under the foliage, which was now illuminated as brightly as the day.

"Ah! the savages!" cried Joe again; "they have set fire to the forest so as to be the more certain of burning us up."

"The Talabas! Al-Hadji's marabouts, no doubt," said the doctor.

A circle of fire hemmed the Victoria in; the crackling of the dry wood mingled with the hissing and sputtering of the green branches; the clambering vines, the foliage, all the living part of this vegetation, writhed in the



destructive element. The eye took in nothing but one vast ocean of flame; the large trees stood forth in black relief in this huge furnace, their branches covered with glowing coals, while the whole blazing mass, the entire conflagration, was reflected on the clouds, and the travellers could fancy themselves enveloped in a hollow globe of fire.

"Let us escape to the ground!" shouted Kennedy,  
"it is our only chance of safety!"

But Ferguson checked him with a firm grasp, and, dashing at the anchor-rope, severed it with one well-directed blow of his hatchet. Meanwhile, the flames, leaping up at the balloon, already quivered on its illuminated sides; but the Victoria, released from her fastenings, spun upward a thousand feet into the air.

Frightful yells resounded through the forest, along with the report of fire-arms, while the balloon, caught in a current of air that rose with the dawn of day, was borne to the westward.

It was now four o'clock in the morning.