

THE BALLOON TREE.

CHAPTER I.

The Colonel said: We rode for several hours straight from the shore toward the heart of the island. The sun was low in the western sky when we left the ship. Neither on the water nor on the land had we felt a breath of air stirring. The glare was upon everything. Over the low range of hills away in the interior hung a few copper-colored clouds. "Wind," said Briery. Kiloos shook his head.

Vegetation of all kinds continued the effects of the long continued drought. The eye wandered without relief from the sickly russet of the undergrowth, so dry in places that leaves and stems cracked under the horses' feet, to the yellowish brown of the thirsty trees that skirted the bridge path. No growing thing was green except the bell-top cactus, fit to flourish in the crater of a living volcano.

Kiloos leaned over the saddle and tore from one of these plants its top, as big as a California pear and bloated with juice. He crushed the bell in his fist, and, turning, flung into our hot faces a few grateful drops of water.

Then the guide began to talk rapidly in his language of vowels and liquids. Briery translated for my benefit. The god Lalala loved a woman of the island. He came in the form of fire, She, accustomed to the ordinary temperature of the climate, only shivered before his approaches. Then he wooed her as a shower of rain and won her heart. Kiloos was a divinity in the eyes of the natives. He also coveted this woman, who was very beautiful. Kiloos's importunities were in vain. In spite, he changed her to a cactus and rooted her to the ground under the burning sun. The good Lalala was powerless to avert this vengeance; but he took up his abode with the cactus woman, still in the form of a rain shower, and never left her, even in the driest season. Thus it happens that the bell-top cactus is an unfailing reservoir of pure, cold water.

Long after dark we reached the channel of a vanished stream, and Kiloos led us for several miles along its dry bed. We were exceedingly tired when the guide bade us dismount. He tethered the panting horses and then dashed into the dense thicket on the bank. A hundred yards of scrambling, and we came to a poor thatched hut. The savage raised both hands above his head and uttered a musical falsetto, not unlike the vocal peculiar to the Valciss. This call brought out the occupant of the hut, upon whom Briery dashed the light of his lantern. It was an old woman, hideous beyond the imagination of a dyspeptic's dream.

"Omanana gelan!" exclaimed Kiloos. "Hail, holy woman!" translated Briery. Between Kiloos and the holy hag there ensued a long colloquy, respectful on his part, sententious and impatient on hers. Briery listened with eager attention. Several times he clutched my arm as if unable to repress his anxiety. The woman seemed to be persuaded by Kiloos's arguments, or won by his entreaties. At last she pointed toward the southeast, slowly pronouncing a few words that apparently satisfied my companion's arrangements. In a quarter of an hour I had lost my head and my bearing in a thicket. For another quarter of an hour I discharged my revolver repeatedly, without getting a single response from east or south. I spent the remainder of daylight in a blundering effort to make my way back to the place where the horses were, and then the sun went down, leaving me in sudden darkness, alone in a wilderness of the extent and character of which I had not the faintest idea.

I will spare you the history of my sufferings during the whole of that night and the next day, and the next night, and another day. When it was dark I wandered about in blind despair, longing for daylight, not daring to sleep or even to stop, and in continual terror of the unknown dangers that surrounded me. In the daytime I longed for night, for the sun scorched its way through the thickest roof that the luxuriant foliage afforded, and drove me nearly mad. The provisions in my haversack were exhausted. My canteen was on my saddle. I should have died of thirst had it not been for the bell-top cactus, which I found twice. But in that horrible experience neither the torture of hunger and thirst, nor the torture of heat equalled the misery of the thought that my life was to be sacrificed to the delusion of a crazy botanist, who had dreamed of the impossible.

On the second afternoon, still staggering aimlessly on through the jungle, I lost my last strength and fell to the ground. Despair and indifference had long since given way to an eager desire for the end. I closed my eyes with indescribable relief; the hot sun seemed pleasant on my face as consciousness departed. Did a beautiful and gentle woman come to me while I lay unconscious, and take my head in her lap and put her arms around me? Did she press her face to mine and in a whisper bid me have courage? That was the belief that glided my mind when it struggled back for a moment into consciousness; I clutched at the warm, soft arms and swooned again.

Do not look at each other and smile, gentlemen; in that cruel wilderness, in my helpless condition, I found pity and benignant tenderness. The next time my senses returned I saw that something was being done for me—something majestic if not beautiful, humane if not human, gracious if not woman. The arms that held me and drew me up were moist and they throbbled with the pulsation of life. There was a faint, sweet odor, like the smell of a woman's perfumed hair. The touch was a caress; the clasp an embrace.

Can I describe its form? No, not with a definiteness that would satisfy the Quakers and the Brierys. I saw that the trunk was massive. The branches that lifted me from the ground and held me carefully and gently were flexible and symmetrically disposed. Above my head there was a wreath of strange foliage, and in the midst of it a dazzling sphere of scarlet. The scarlet globe grew while I watched it, but the effort of the watching was too much for me.

Remember, if you please, that at this time physical exhaustion and mental torture had brought me to the point where

specimen of the Migratory Tree described by Buteaux, you will find that it possesses a well-defined system of real nerves and ganglia, constituting, in fact, the seat of vegetable intelligence. I conjecture you to be very thorough in your dissections.

According to the indications furnished me by the Jesuit, this extraordinary tree should belong to the order of Caetaceae. It should be developed only in conditions of extreme heat and dryness. Its roots should be hardly more than rudimentary, affording a precarious attachment to the earth. This attachment it should be able to sever at will, soiling up into the air and away to another place selected by itself, as a bird shifts its habitation. I infer that these migrations are accomplished by means of the property of secreting hydrogen gas, with which it inflates at pleasure a bladder-like organ of highly elastic tissue, thus lifting itself out of the ground and off to a new abode.

Buteaux added that the Migratory Tree was invariably worshipped by the natives as a supernatural being, and that the mystery thrown by them around its cult was the greatest obstacle in the path of the investigator.

"There!" exclaimed Briery, folding up Professor Quakersuch's letter. "Is not that a most worthy risk or sacrifice of life itself? To add to the recorded facts of vegetable morphology the proved existence of a tree that wanders, a tree that wills, a tree, perhaps, that thinks—this is glory to be won at any cost! The lamented Deandolle of Geneva—"

"Confound the lamented Deandolle of Geneva!" shouted I, for it was excessively hot, and I felt that we had come on a fool's errand.

It was near sunset on the second day of our journey when Kiloos, who was riding several rods in advance of us, uttered a quick cry, leaped from his saddle, and stooped to the ground. Briery was at his side in an instant. "I followed with less agility; my joints were very stiff, and I had no scientific enthusiasm to lubricate them. Briery was on his hands and knees, eagerly examining what seemed to be a recent disturbance of the soil. The savage was prostrate, rubbing his forehead in the dust, as if in a religious ecstasy, and warbling the same falsetto notes that we had heard at the holy woman's hut.

"What beast's trail have you struck?" I demanded. "The trail of no beast," answered Briery, almost angrily. "Do you see this broad round abrasion of the surface, where a heavy weight has rested? Do you see this little trough in the earth, which is fluting from the center like the points of a star? They are the scars left by slender roots torn up from their shallow beds. Do you see Kiloos's hysterical performance? I tell you we are on the track of the Sacred Tree. It has been here, and not long ago.

Acting under Briery's excited instructions, we continued the hunt on foot. Kiloos started toward the east, I toward the west, and Briery took the southward course. To cover the ground thoroughly, we agreed to advance in gradually widening zigzags, communicating with each other at intervals by pistol shots. There could have been no more foolish arrangements. In a quarter of an hour I had lost my head and my bearing in a thicket. For another quarter of an hour I discharged my revolver repeatedly, without getting a single response from east or south. I spent the remainder of daylight in a blundering effort to make my way back to the place where the horses were, and then the sun went down, leaving me in sudden darkness, alone in a wilderness of the extent and character of which I had not the faintest idea.

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I passed to and fro between consciousness and unconsciousness as easily and as frequently as one fluctuates between slumber and wakefulness during a night of fever. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that in my extreme weakness I should be beloved and cared for by a cactus. I did not seek an analysis of this good fortune, or try to analyze it. I simply accepted it as a matter of course, as a child accepts a benefit from an unexpected quarter. The one idea that possessed me was that I had found an unknown friend, instinct with womanly sympathy, and immeasurably kind.

And as night came on it seemed to me that the scarlet bulb overhead became enormously distended, so that it almost filled the sky. Was I gently rocked by the supple arms that still held me? Were we floating off together into the air? I did not know or care. Now I fancied that I was in my berth on ship, cradled by the swell of the sea; now, that I was borne on with prodigious speed through the darkness by my own volition. The sense of incessant motion affected all my dreams. Whenever I awoke I felt a cool breeze steadily beating against my face—the first breath of air since we had landed. I was vaguely happy, gentlemen. I had surrendered all responsibility for my own fate. I had given up the protection of a being of superior powers.

"The brandy flask, Kiloos!" It was daylight. I lay upon the ground and Briery was supporting my shoulders. In his face was a look of bewilderment that I shall never forget. "My God!" he cried, "and how did you get here? We gave up the search two days ago."

The brandy pulled me together. I staggered to my feet and looked around. The cause of Briery's extreme amazement was apparent at a glance. We were not in the wilderness. We were at the shore. There was the bay and the ship at anchor, half a mile off. They were already lowering a boat to send for us.

And there to the south was a bright red spot on the horizon, hardly larger than the morning star—the Balloon Tree returning to the wilderness. I saw it, Briery saw it, the savage Kiloos saw it. We watched it till it vanished. We watched it with very different emotions, we saw it with different eyes. Briery with scientific interest and intense disappointment, I with a heart full of wonder and gratitude.

I clasped my forehead with both hands. It was no dream, then. The Tree, the caress, the embrace, the scarlet bulb, the night journey through the air, were not creations and incidents of delirium. Call it true, or call it plant animal—there it was! Let men of science quarrel over the question of its existence in nature; this I know: It had found me, and had brought me more than a hundred miles straight to the ship where I belonged. Under Providence, gentlemen, that sentient and intelligent vegetable organization saved my life.

[At this point the Colonel got up and left the club. He was very much moved: Pretty soon Briery came in, briskly as usual. He picked up an uncut copy of Lord Bragmoch's "Travels in Kerguelen's Land," and settled himself in an easy chair at the corner of the fireplace.

Young Traddles timidly approached the veteran globe trotter. "Excuse me, Mr. Briery," said he, "but I should like to ask you a question about the Balloon Tree. Were there scientific reasons for believing that its sex was—"

"Ah," interrupted Briery, looking bored. "The Colonel has been favoring me with that extraordinary narrative. Has he honored me again with a share in the adventure? Yes? Well, did he bag the game this time?"

"Why, no," said young Traddles. "You last saw the Tree as a scarlet spot against the horizon."

"By Jove, another miss!" said Briery, solemnly, beginning to cut the leaves of his book.—New York Sun.

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