

# **Five Weeks in a Balloon**

**by**

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## CHAPTER FIRST

The End of a much-applauded Speech.--The Presentation of Dr. Samuel Ferguson.--Excelsior.--Full-length Portrait of the Doctor.--A Fatalist convinced.--A Dinner at the Travellers' Club.--Several Toasts for the Occasion.

There was a large audience assembled on the 14th of January, 1862, at the session of the Royal Geographical Society, No. 3 Waterloo Place, London. The president, Sir Francis M---, made an important communication to his colleagues, in an address that was frequently interrupted by applause.

This rare specimen of eloquence terminated with the following sonorous phrases bubbling over with patriotism:

"England has always marched at the head of nations" (for, the reader will observe, the nations always march at the head of each other), "by the intrepidity of her explorers in the line of geographical discovery." (General assent). "Dr. Samuel Ferguson, one of her most glorious sons, will not reflect discredit on his origin." ("No, indeed!" from all parts of the hall.)

"This attempt, should it succeed" ("It will succeed!"), "will complete and link together the notions, as yet disjointed, which the world entertains of African cartology" (vehement applause); "and, should it fail, it will, at least, remain on record as one of the most daring conceptions of human genius!" (Tremendous cheering.)

"Huzza! huzza!" shouted the immense audience, completely electrified by these inspiring words.

"Huzza for the intrepid Ferguson!" cried one of the most excitable of the enthusiastic crowd.

The wildest cheering resounded on all sides; the name of Ferguson was in every mouth, and we may safely believe that it lost nothing in passing through English throats. Indeed, the hall fairly shook with it.

And there were present, also, those fearless travellers and explorers whose energetic temperaments had borne them through every quarter of the globe, many of them grown old and worn out in the service of science. All had, in some degree, physically or morally, undergone the sorest trials. They had escaped shipwreck; conflagration; Indian tomahawks and war-clubs; the fagot and the stake; nay, even the cannibal maws of the South Sea Islanders. But still their hearts beat high during Sir Francis M---'s address, which certainly was the finest oratorical success that the Royal Geographical Society of London had yet achieved.

But, in England, enthusiasm does not stop short with mere words. It strikes off money faster than the dies of the Royal Mint itself. So a subscription to encourage Dr. Ferguson was voted there and then, and it at once attained the handsome amount of two thousand five hundred pounds. The sum was made commensurate with the importance of the enterprise.

A member of the Society then inquired of the president whether Dr. Ferguson was not to be officially introduced.

"The doctor is at the disposition of the meeting," replied Sir Francis.

"Let him come in, then! Bring him in!" shouted the audience. "We'd like to see a man of such extraordinary daring, face to face!"

"Perhaps this incredible proposition of his is only intended to mystify us," growled an apoplectic old admiral.

"Suppose that there should turn out to be no such person as Dr. Ferguson?" exclaimed another voice, with a malicious twang.

"Why, then, we'd have to invent one!" replied a facetious member of this grave Society.

"Ask Dr. Ferguson to come in," was the quiet remark of Sir Francis M----.

And come in the doctor did, and stood there, quite unmoved by the thunders of applause that greeted his appearance.

He was a man of about forty years of age, of medium height and physique. His sanguine temperament was disclosed in the deep color of his cheeks. His countenance was coldly expressive, with regular features, and a large nose--one of those noses that resemble the prow of a ship, and stamp the faces of men predestined to accomplish great discoveries. His eyes, which were gentle and intelligent, rather than bold, lent a peculiar charm to his physiognomy. His arms were long, and his feet were planted with that solidity which indicates a great pedestrian.

A calm gravity seemed to surround the doctor's entire person, and no one would dream that he could become the agent of any mystification, however harmless.

Hence, the applause that greeted him at the outset continued until he, with a friendly gesture, claimed silence on his own behalf. He stepped toward the seat that had been prepared for him on his presentation, and then, standing erect and motionless, he, with a determined glance, pointed his right forefinger upward, and pronounced aloud the single word--

"Excelsior!"

Never had one of Bright's or Cobden's sudden onslaughts, never had one of Palmerston's abrupt demands for funds to plate the rocks of the English coast with iron, made such a sensation. Sir Francis M---'s address was completely overshadowed. The doctor had shown himself moderate, sublime, and self-contained, in one; he had uttered the word of the situation--

"Excelsior!"

The gouty old admiral who had been finding fault, was completely won over by the singular man before him, and immediately moved the insertion of Dr. Ferguson's speech in "The Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London."

Who, then, was this person, and what was the enterprise that he proposed?

Ferguson's father, a brave and worthy captain in the English Navy, had associated his son with him, from the young man's earliest years, in the perils and adventures of his profession. The fine little fellow, who seemed to have never known the meaning of fear, early revealed a keen and active mind, an investigating intelligence, and a remarkable turn for scientific study; moreover, he disclosed uncommon address in extricating himself from difficulty; he was never perplexed, not even in handling his fork for the first time--an exercise in which children generally have so little success.

His fancy kindled early at the recitals he read of daring enterprise and maritime adventure, and he followed with enthusiasm the discoveries that signalized the first part of the nineteenth century. He mused over the glory of the Mungo Parks, the Bruces, the Caillies, the Levallants, and to some extent, I verily believe, of Selkirk (Robinson Crusoe), whom he considered in no wise inferior to the rest. How many a well-employed hour he passed with that hero on his isle of Juan Fernandez! Often he criticised the ideas of the shipwrecked sailor, and sometimes discussed his plans and projects. He would have done differently, in such and such a case, or quite as well at least--of that he felt assured. But of one thing he was satisfied, that he never should have left that pleasant island, where he was as happy as a king without subjects-- no, not if the inducement held out had been promotion to the first lordship in the admiralty!

It may readily be conjectured whether these tendencies were developed during a youth of adventure, spent in every nook and corner of the Globe. Moreover, his father, who was a man of thorough instruction, omitted no opportunity to consolidate this keen intelligence by serious studies in hydrography, physics, and mechanics, along with a slight tincture of botany, medicine, and astronomy.

Upon the death of the estimable captain, Samuel Ferguson, then twenty-two years of age, had already made his voyage around the world. He had enlisted in the Bengalese Corps of Engineers, and distinguished himself in several affairs; but this soldier's life had not exactly suited him; caring but little for command, he had not been fond of obeying. He, therefore, sent in his resignation, and half botanizing, half playing the hunter, he made his

way toward the north of the Indian Peninsula, and crossed it from Calcutta to Surat--a mere amateur trip for him.

From Surat we see him going over to Australia, and in 1845 participating in Captain Sturt's expedition, which had been sent out to explore the new Caspian Sea, supposed to exist in the centre of New Holland.

Samuel Ferguson returned to England about 1850, and, more than ever possessed by the demon of discovery, he spent the intervening time, until 1853, in accompanying Captain McClure on the expedition that went around the American Continent from Behring's Straits to Cape Farewell.

Notwithstanding fatigues of every description, and in all climates, Ferguson's constitution continued marvellously sound. He felt at ease in the midst of the most complete privations; in fine, he was the very type of the thoroughly accomplished explorer whose stomach expands or contracts at will; whose limbs grow longer or shorter according to the resting-place that each stage of a journey may bring; who can fall asleep at any hour of the day or awake at any hour of the night.

Nothing, then, was less surprising, after that, than to find our traveller, in the period from 1855 to 1857, visiting the whole region west of the Thibet, in company with the brothers Schlagintweit, and bringing back some curious ethnographic observations from that expedition.

During these different journeys, Ferguson had been the most active and interesting correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, the penny newspaper whose circulation amounts to 140,000 copies, and yet scarcely suffices for its many legions of readers. Thus, the doctor had become well known to the public, although he could not claim membership in either of the Royal Geographical Societies of London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, or St. Petersburg, or yet with the Travellers' Club, or even the Royal Polytechnic Institute, where his friend the statistician Cockburn ruled in state.

The latter savant had, one day, gone so far as to propose to him the following problem: Given the number of miles travelled by the doctor in making the circuit of the Globe, how many more had his head described than his feet, by reason of the different lengths of the radii?--or, the number of miles traversed by the doctor's head and feet respectively being given, required the exact height of that gentleman?

This was done with the idea of complimenting him, but the doctor had held himself aloof from all the learned bodies--belonging, as he did, to the church militant and not to the church polemical. He found his time better employed in seeking than in discussing, in discovering rather than discoursing. There is a story told of an Englishman who came one day to Geneva, intending to visit the lake. He was placed in one of those odd vehicles in which the passengers sit side by side, as they do in an omnibus. Well, it so happened that the Englishman got a seat that left him with his back turned toward the lake. The vehicle

completed its circular trip without his thinking to turn around once, and he went back to London delighted with the Lake of Geneva.

Doctor Ferguson, however, had turned around to look about him on his journeyings, and turned to such good purpose that he had seen a great deal. In doing so, he had simply obeyed the laws of his nature, and we have good reason to believe that he was, to some extent, a fatalist, but of an orthodox school of fatalism withal, that led him to rely upon himself and even upon Providence. He claimed that he was impelled, rather than drawn by his own volition, to journey as he did, and that he traversed the world like the locomotive, which does not direct itself, but is guided and directed by the track it runs on.

"I do not follow my route;" he often said, "it is my route that follows me."

The reader will not be surprised, then, at the calmness with which the doctor received the applause that welcomed him in the Royal Society. He was above all such trifles, having no pride, and less vanity. He looked upon the proposition addressed to him by Sir Francis M--- as the simplest thing in the world, and scarcely noticed the immense effect that it produced.

When the session closed, the doctor was escorted to the rooms of the Travellers' Club, in Pall Mall. A superb entertainment had been prepared there in his honor. The dimensions of the dishes served were made to correspond with the importance of the personage entertained, and the boiled sturgeon that figured at this magnificent repast was not an inch shorter than Dr. Ferguson himself.

Numerous toasts were offered and quaffed, in the wines of France, to the celebrated travellers who had made their names illustrious by their explorations of African territory. The guests drank to their health or to their memory, in alphabetical order, a good old English way of doing the thing. Among those remembered thus, were: Abbadie, Adams, Adamson, Anderson, Arnaud, Baikie, Baldwin, Barth, Batouda, Beke, Beltram, Du Berba, Bimbachi, Bolognesi, Bolwik, Belzoni, Bonnemain, Brisson, Browne, Bruce, Brun-Rollet, Burchell, Burckhardt, Burton, Cailland, Caillie, Campbell, Chapman, Clapperton, Clot-Bey, Colomieu, Courval, Cumming, Cuny, Debono, Decken, Denham, Desavanchers, Dickson, Dickson, Dochart, Du Chaillu, Duncan, Durand, Duroule, Duveyrier, D'Escayrac, De Lauture, Erhardt, Ferret, Fresnel, Galinier, Galton, Geoffroy, Golberry, Hahn, Halm, Harnier, Hecquart, Heuglin, Hornemann, Houghton, Imbert, Kauffmann, Knoblecher, Krapf, Kummer, Lafargue, Laing, Lafaille, Lambert, Lamiral, Lampriere, John Lander, Richard Lander, Lefebvre, Lejean, Levailant, Livingstone, MacCarthy, Maggiar, Maizan, Malzac, Moffat, Mollien, Monteiro, Morrison, Mungo Park, Neimans, Overweg, Panet, Partarrieau, Pascal, Pearse, Peddie, Penney, Petherick, Poncet, Prax, Raffanel, Rabh, Rebmman, Richardson, Riley, Ritchey, Rochet d'Hericourt, Rongawi, Roscher, Ruppel, Saugnier, Speke, Steidner, Thibaud, Thompson, Thornton, Toole, Tousny, Trotter, Tuckey, Tyrwhitt, Vaudey, Veyssiere, Vincent, Vinco, Vogel, Wahlberg, Warrington, Washington, Werne, Wild, and last, but not least, Dr. Ferguson, who, by his incredible attempt, was to link together the achievements of all these explorers, and complete the series of African discovery.



## CHAPTER SECOND

The Article in the Daily Telegraph.--War between the Scientific Journals.-- Mr. Petermann backs his Friend Dr. Ferguson.--Reply of the Savant Koner. --Bets made.-- Sundry Propositions offered to the Doctor.

On the next day, in its number of January 15th, the Daily Telegraph published an article couched in the following terms:

"Africa is, at length, about to surrender the secret of her vast solitudes; a modern OEdipus is to give us the key to that enigma which the learned men of sixty centuries have not been able to decipher. In other days, to seek the sources of the Nile--fontes Nili quorerere--was regarded as a mad endeavor, a chimera that could not be realized.

"Dr. Barth, in following out to Soudan the track traced by Denham and Clapperton; Dr. Livingstone, in multiplying his fearless explorations from the Cape of Good Hope to the basin of the Zambesi; Captains Burton and Speke, in the discovery of the great interior lakes, have opened three highways to modern civilization. THEIR POINT OF INTERSECTION, which no traveller has yet been able to reach, is the very heart of Africa, and it is thither that all efforts should now be directed.

"The labors of these hardy pioneers of science are now about to be knit together by the daring project of Dr. Samuel Ferguson, whose fine explorations our readers have frequently had the opportunity of appreciating.

"This intrepid discoverer proposes to traverse all Africa from east to west IN A BALLOON. If we are well informed, the point of departure for this surprising journey is to be the island of Zanzibar, upon the eastern coast. As for the point of arrival, it is reserved for Providence alone to designate.

"The proposal for this scientific undertaking was officially made, yesterday, at the rooms of the Royal Geographical Society, and the sum of twenty-five hundred pounds was voted to defray the expenses of the enterprise.

"We shall keep our readers informed as to the progress of this enterprise, which has no precedent in the annals of exploration."

As may be supposed, the foregoing article had an enormous echo among scientific people. At first, it stirred up a storm of incredulity; Dr. Ferguson passed for a purely chimerical personage of the Barnum stamp, who, after having gone through the United States, proposed to "do" the British Isles.

A humorous reply appeared in the February number of the Bulletins de la Societe Geographique of Geneva, which very wittily showed up the Royal Society of London and their phenomenal sturgeon.

But Herr Petermann, in his *Mittheilungen*, published at Gotha, reduced the Geneva journal to the most absolute silence. Herr Petermann knew Dr. Ferguson personally, and guaranteed the intrepidity of his dauntless friend.

Besides, all manner of doubt was quickly put out of the question: preparations for the trip were set on foot at London; the factories of Lyons received a heavy order for the silk required for the body of the balloon; and, finally, the British Government placed the transport-ship *Resolute*, Captain Bennett, at the disposal of the expedition.

At once, upon word of all this, a thousand encouragements were offered, and felicitations came pouring in from all quarters. The details of the undertaking were published in full in the bulletins of the Geographical Society of Paris; a remarkable article appeared in the *Nouvelles Annales des Voyages, de la Geographie, de l'Histoire, et de l'Archaeologie de M. V. A. Malte-Brun* ("New Annals of Travels, Geography, History, and Archaeology, by M. V. A. Malte-Brun"); and a searching essay in the *Zeitschrift fur Allgemeine Erdkunde*, by Dr. W. Koner, triumphantly demonstrated the feasibility of the journey, its chances of success, the nature of the obstacles existing, the immense advantages of the aerial mode of locomotion, and found fault with nothing but the selected point of departure, which it contended should be Massowah, a small port in Abyssinia, whence James Bruce, in 1768, started upon his explorations in search of the sources of the Nile. Apart from that, it mentioned, in terms of unreserved admiration, the energetic character of Dr. Ferguson, and the heart, thrice panoplied in bronze, that could conceive and undertake such an enterprise.

The North American Review could not, without some displeasure, contemplate so much glory monopolized by England. It therefore rather ridiculed the doctor's scheme, and urged him, by all means, to push his explorations as far as America, while he was about it.

In a word, without going over all the journals in the world, there was not a scientific publication, from the *Journal of Evangelical Missions* to the *Revue Algerienne et Coloniale*, from the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* to the *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, that had not something to say about the affair in all its phases.

Many large bets were made at London and throughout England generally, first, as to the real or supposititious existence of Dr. Ferguson; secondly, as to the trip itself, which, some contended, would not be undertaken at all, and which was really contemplated, according to others; thirdly, upon the success or failure of the enterprise; and fourthly, upon the probabilities of Dr. Ferguson's return. The betting-books were covered with entries of immense sums, as though the Epsom races were at stake.

Thus, believers and unbelievers, the learned and the ignorant, alike had their eyes fixed on the doctor, and he became the lion of the day, without knowing that he carried such a mane. On his part, he willingly gave the most accurate information touching his project. He was very easily approached, being naturally the most affable man in the world. More than one bold adventurer presented himself, offering to share the dangers as well as the

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