

CHAPTER IV

THE DEATH WIND

"The fact is," said Higgs presently, speaking with the air of an oracle, "the fact is that all these accursed sand-hills are as like each other as mummy beads on the same necklace, and therefore it is very difficult to know them apart. Give me that water-bottle, Adams; I am as dry as a lime-kiln."

"No," I said shortly; "you may be drier before the end."

"What do you mean? Oh! I see; but that's nonsense; those Zeus will hunt us up, or, at the worst, we have only to wait till the sun gets out."

As he spoke, suddenly the air became filled with a curious singing sound impossible to describe, caused as I knew, who had often heard it before, by millions and millions of particles of sand being rubbed together. We turned to see whence it came, and perceived, far away, rushing towards us with extraordinary swiftness, a huge and dense cloud preceded by isolated columns and funnels of similar clouds.

"A sand-storm," said Higgs, his florid face paling a little. "Bad luck for us! That's what comes of getting out of bed the wrong side first this morning. No, it's your fault, Adams; you helped me to salt last night, in spite of my remonstrances" (the Professor has sundry little

superstitions of this sort, particularly absurd in so learned a man).

"Well, what shall we do? Get under the lee of the hill until it blows over?"

"Don't suppose it will blow over. Can't see anything to do except say our prayers," remarked Orme with sweet resignation. Oliver is, I think, the coolest hand in an emergency of any one I ever met, except, perhaps, Sergeant Quick, a man, of course, nearly old enough to be his father.

"The game seems to be pretty well up," he added. "Well, you have killed two lions, Higgs, and that is something."

"Oh, hang it! You can die if you like, Oliver. The world won't miss you; but think of its loss if anything happened to me. I don't intend to be wiped out by a beastly sand-storm. I intend to live to write a book on Mur," and Higgs shook his fist at the advancing clouds with an air that was really noble. It reminded me of Ajax defying the lightning.

Meanwhile I had been reflecting.

"Listen," I said. "Our only chance is to stop where we are, for if we move we shall certainly be buried alive. Look; there is something solid to lie on," and I pointed to a ridge of rock, a kind of core of congealed sand, from which the surface had been swept by gales. "Down with you, quick," I went on, "and let's draw that lion-skin over our heads. It may help to keep the dust from choking us. Hurry, men; it's coming!"

Coming, it was indeed, with a mighty, wailing roar. Scarcely had we got ourselves into position, our backs to the blast and our mouths and noses buried after the fashion of camels in a similar predicament, the lion-skin covering our heads and bodies to the middle, with the paws tucked securely beneath us to prevent it from being blown away, when the storm leaped upon us furiously, bringing darkness in its train. There we lay for hour after hour, unable to see, unable to talk because of the roaring noise about us, and only from time to time lifting ourselves a little upon our hands and knees to disturb the weight of sand that accumulated on our bodies, lest it should encase us in a living tomb.

Dreadful were the miseries we suffered--the misery of the heat beneath the stinking pelt of the lion, the misery of the dust-laden air that choked us almost to suffocation, the misery of thirst, for we could not get at our scanty supply of water to drink. But worst of all perhaps, was the pain caused by the continual friction of the sharp sand driven along at hurricane speed, which, incredible as it may seem, finally wore holes in our thin clothing and filed our skins to rawness.

"No wonder the Egyptian monuments get such a beautiful shine on them," I heard poor Higgs muttering in my ear again and again, for he was growing light-headed; "no wonder, no wonder! My shin-bones will be very useful to polish Quick's tall riding-boots. Oh! curse the lions. Why did you help me to salt, you old ass; why did you help me to salt? It's pickling me behind."

Then he became quite incoherent, and only groaned from time to time.

Perhaps, however, this suffering did us a service, since otherwise exhaustion, thirst, and dust might have overwhelmed our senses, and caused us to fall into a sleep from which we never should have awakened. Yet at the time we were not grateful to it, for at last the agony became almost unbearable. Indeed, Orme told me afterwards that the last thing he could remember was a quaint fancy that he had made a colossal fortune by selling the secret of a new torture to the Chinese--that of hot sand driven on to the victim by a continuous blast of hot air.

After a while we lost count of time, nor was it until later that we learned that the storm endured for full twenty hours, during the latter part of which, notwithstanding our manifold sufferings, we must have become more or less insensible. At any rate, at one moment I remembered the awful roar and the stinging of the sand whips, followed by a kind of vision of the face of my son--that beloved, long-lost son whom I had sought for so many years, and for whose sake I endured all these things. Then, without any interval, as it were, I felt my limbs being scorched as though by hot irons or through a burning-glass, and with a fearful effort staggered up to find that the storm had passed, and that the furious sun was blistering my excoriated skin. Rubbing the caked dirt from my eyes, I looked down to see two mounds like those of graves, out of which projected legs that had been white. Just then one pair of legs, the longer pair, stirred, the sand heaved up convulsively, and, uttering

wandering words in a choky voice, there arose the figure of Oliver Orme.

For a moment we stood and stared at each other, and strange spectacles we were.

"Is he dead?" muttered Orme, pointing to the still buried Higgs.

"Fear so," I answered, "but we'll look;" and painfully we began to disinter him.

When we came to it beneath the lion-skin, the Professor's face was black and hideous to see, but, to our relief, we perceived that he was not dead, for he moved his hand and moaned. Orme looked at me.

"Water would save him," I said.

Then came the anxious moment. One of our water-bottles was emptied before the storm began, but the other, a large, patent flask covered with felt, and having a screw vulcanite top, should still contain a good quantity, perhaps three quarts--that is, if the fluid had not evaporated in the dreadful heat. If this had happened, it meant that Higgs would die, and unless help came, that soon we should follow him. Orme unscrewed the flask, for my hands refused that office, and used his teeth to draw the cork, which, providentially enough the thoughtful Quick had set in the neck beneath the screw. Some of the water, which, although it was quite hot, had not evaporated, thank God! flew against

his parched lips, and I saw him bite them till the blood came in the fierceness of the temptation to assuage his raging thirst. But he resisted it like the man he is, and, without drinking a drop, handed me the bottle, saying simply:

"You are the oldest; take care of this, Adams."

Now it was my turn to be tempted, but I, too, overcame, and, sitting down, laid Higgs's head upon my knee; then, drop by drop, let a little of the water trickle between his swollen lips.

The effect was magical, for in less than a minute the Professor sat up, grasped at the flask with both hands, and strove to tear it away.

"You cruel brute! You cruel selfish brute!" he moaned as I wrenched it from him.

"Look here, Higgs," I answered thickly; "Orme and I want water badly enough, and we have had none. But you might take it all if it would save you, only it wouldn't. We are lost in the desert, and must be sparing. If you drank everything now, in a few hours you would be thirsty again and die."

He thought awhile, then looked up and said:

"Beg pardon--I understand. I'm the selfish brute. But there's a good lot

of water there; let's each have a drink; we can't move unless we do."

So we drank, measuring out the water in a little india-rubber cup which we had with us. It held about as much as a port wine glass, and each of us drank, or rather slowly sipped, three cupfuls; we who felt as though we could have swallowed a gallon apiece, and asked for more. Small as was the allowance, it worked wonders in us; we were men again.

We stood up and looked about us, but the great storm had changed everything. Where there had been sand-hills a hundred feet high, now were plains and valleys; where there had been valleys appeared sand-hills. Only the high ridge upon which we had lain was as before, because it stood above the others and had a core of rock. We tried to discover the direction of the oasis by the position of the sun, only to be baffled, since our two watches had run down, and we did not know the time of day or where the sun ought to be in the heavens. Also, in that howling wilderness there was nothing to show us the points of the compass.

Higgs, whose obstinacy remained unimpaired, whatever may have happened to the rest of his vital forces, had one view of the matter, and Orme another diametrically opposed to it. They even argued as to whether the oasis lay to our right or to our left, for their poor heads were so confused that they were scarcely capable of accurate thought or observation. Meanwhile I sat down upon the sand and considered. Through the haze I could see the points of what I thought must be the hills

whence the Zeus declared that the lions came, although of course, for aught I knew, they might be other hills.

"Listen," I said; "if lions live upon those hills, there must be water there. Let us try to reach them; perhaps we shall see the oasis as we go."

Then began our dreadful march. The lion-skin that had saved our lives, and was now baked hard as a board, we left behind, but the rifles we took. All day long we dragged ourselves up and down steep sand-slopes, pausing now again to drink a sip of water, and hoping always that from the top of the next slope we should see a rescue party headed by Quick, or perhaps the oasis itself. Indeed, once we did see it, green and shining, not more than three miles away, but when we got to the head of the hill beyond which it should lie we found that the vision was only a mirage, and our hearts nearly broke with disappointment. Oh! to men dying of thirst, that mirage was indeed a cruel mockery.

At length night approached, and the mountains were yet a long way off. We could march no more, and sank down exhausted, lying on our faces, because our backs were so cut by the driving sand and blistered by the sun that we could not sit. By now almost all our water was gone. Suddenly Higgs nudged us and pointed upwards. Following the line of his hand, we saw, not thirty yards away and showing clear against the sky, a file of antelopes trekking along the sand-ridge, doubtless on a night journey from one pasturage to another.

"You fellows shoot," he muttered; "I might miss and frighten them away," for in his distress poor Higgs was growing modest.

Slowly Orme and I drew ourselves to our knees, cocking our rifles. By this time all the buck save one had passed; there were but six of them, and this one marched along about twenty yards behind the others. Orme pulled the trigger, but his rifle would not go off because, as he discovered afterwards, some sand had worked into the mechanism of the lock.

Meanwhile I had also covered the buck, but the sunset dazzled my weakened eyes, and my arms were feeble; also my terrible anxiety for success, since I knew that on this shot hung our lives, unnerved me. But it must be now or never; in three more paces the beast would be down the dip.

I fired, and knowing that I had missed, turned sick and faint. The antelope bounded forward a few yards right to the edge of the dip; then, never having heard such a sound before, and being overcome by some fatal curiosity, stopped and turned around, staring at the direction whence it had come.

Despairingly I fired again, almost without taking aim, and this time the bullet went in beneath the throat, and, raking the animal, dropped it dead as a stone. We scrambled to it, and presently were engaged in an

awful meal of which we never afterwards liked to think. Happily for us that antelope must have drunk water not long before.

Our hunger and thirst assuaged after this horrible fashion, we slept awhile by the carcase, then arose extraordinarily refreshed, and, having cut off some hunks of meat to carry with us, started on again. By the position of the stars, we now knew that the oasis must lie somewhere to the east of us; but as between us and it there appeared to be nothing but these eternal sand-hills stretching away for many miles, and as in front of us toward the range the character of the desert seemed to be changing, we thought it safer, if the word safety can be used in such a connection, to continue to head for that range. All the remainder of this night we marched, and, as we had no fuel wherewith to cook it, at dawn ate some of the raw meat, which we washed down with the last drops of our water.

Now we were out of the sand-hills, and had entered on a great pebbly plain that lay between us and the foot of the mountains. These looked quiet close, but in fact were still far off. Feebly and ever more feebly we staggered on, meeting no one and finding no water, though here and there we came across little bushes, of which we chewed the stringy and aromatic leaves that contained some moisture, but drew up our mouths and throats like alum.

Higgs, who was the softest of us, gave out the first, though to the last he struggled forward with surprising pluck, even after he had been

obliged to throw away his rifle, because he could no longer carry it, though this we did not notice at the time. When he could not support himself upon his feet, Orme took him by one arm, and I by the other, and helped him on, much as I have seen two elephants do by a wounded companion of the herd.

Half-an-hour or so later my strength failed me also. Although advanced in years, I am tough and accustomed to the desert and hardships; who would not be who had been a slave to the Khalifa? But now I could do no more, and halting, begged the others to go on and leave me. Orme's only answer was to proffer me his left arm. I took it, for life is sweet to us all, especially when one has something to live for--a desire to fulfil as I had, though to tell the truth, even at the time I felt ashamed of myself.

Thus, then, we proceeded awhile, resembling a sober man attempting to lead two drunken friends out of reach of that stern policeman, Death. Orme's strength must be wonderful; or was it his great spirit and his tender pity for our helplessness which enabled him to endure beneath this double burden.

Suddenly he fell down as though he had been shot, and lay there senseless. The Professor, however, retained some portion of his mind, although it wandered. He became light-headed, and rambled on about our madness in having undertaken such a journey, "just to pot a couple of beastly lions," and although I did not answer them, I agreed heartily

with his remarks. Then he seemed to imagine that I was a clergyman, and kneeling on the sand, he made a lengthy confession of his sins which, so far as I gathered, though I did not pay much attention to them, for I was thinking of my own, appeared chiefly to consist of the unlawful acquisition of certain objects of antiquity, or of having overmatched others in the purchase of such objects.

To pacify him, for I feared lest he should go raving mad, I pronounced some religious absolution, whereon poor Higgs rolled over and lay still by Orme. Yes; he, the friend whom I had always loved, for his very failings were endearing, was dead or at the point of death, like the gallant young man at his side, and I myself was dying. Tremors shook my limbs; horrible waves of blackness seemed to well up from my vitals, through my breast to my brain, and thence to evaporate in queer, jagged lines and patches, which I realized, but could not actually see. Gay memories of my far-off childhood arose in me, particularly those of a Christmas party where I had met a little girl dressed like an elf, a little girl with blue eyes whom I had loved dearly for quite a fortnight, to be beaten down, stamped out, swallowed by that vision of the imminent shadow which awaits all mankind, the black womb of a re-birth, if re-birth there be.

What could I do? I thought of lighting a fire; at any rate it would serve to scare the lions and other wild beasts which else might prey upon us before we were quite dead. It would be dreadful to lie helpless but sentient, and feel their rending fangs. But I had no strength to

collect the material. To do so at best must have meant a long walk, for even here it was not plentiful. I had a few cartridges left--three, to be accurate--in my repeating rifle; the rest I had thrown away to be rid of their weight. I determined to fire them, since, in my state I thought they could no longer serve either to win food or for the purposes of defence, although, as it happened, in this I was wrong. It was possible that, even in that endless desert, some one might hear the shots, and if not--well, good-night.

So I sat up and fired the first cartridge, wondering in a childish fashion where the bullet would fall. Then I went to sleep for awhile. The howling of a hyena woke me up, and, on glancing around, I saw the beast's flaming eyes quite close to me. I aimed and shot at it, and heard a yell of pain. That hyena, I reflected, would want no more food at present.

The silence of the desert overwhelmed me; it was so terrible that I almost wished the hyena back for company. Holding the rifle above my head, I fired the third cartridge. Then I took the hand of Higgs in my own, for, after all, it was a link--the last link with humanity and the world--and lay down in the company of death that seemed to fall upon me in black and smothering veils.

I woke up and became aware that some one was pouring water down my

throat. Heaven! I thought to myself, for at that time heaven and water were synonymous in my mind. I drank a good deal of it, not all I wanted by any means, but as much as the pourer would allow, then raised myself upon my hands and looked. The starlight was extraordinarily clear in that pure desert atmosphere, and by it I saw the face of Sergeant Quick bending over me. Also, I saw Orme sitting up, staring about him stupidly, while a great yellow dog, with a head like a mastiff, licked his hand. I knew the dog at once; it was that which Orme had bought from some wandering natives, and named Pharaoh because he ruled over all other dogs. Moreover, I knew the two camels that stood near by. So I was still on earth--unless, indeed we had all moved on a step.

"How did you find us, Sergeant?" I asked feebly.

"Didn't find you, Doctor," answered Quick, "dog Pharaoh found you. In a business like this a dog is more useful than man, for he can smell what one can't see. Now, if you feel better, Doctor, please look at Mr. Higgs, for I fear he's gone."

I looked, and, although I did not say so, was of the same opinion. His jaw had fallen, and he lay limp and senseless; his eyes I could not see, because of the black spectacles.

"Water," I said, and Quick poured some into his mouth, where it vanished.

Still he did not stir, so I opened his garments and felt his heart.

At first I could detect nothing; then there was the slightest possible flutter.

"There's hope," I said in answer to the questioning looks. "You don't happen to have any brandy, do you?" I added.

"Never travelled without it yet, Doctor," replied Quick indignantly, producing a metal flask.

"Give him some," I said, and the Sergeant obeyed with liberality and almost instantaneous effect, for Higgs sat up gasping and coughing.

"Brandy; filthy stuff; teetotaller! Cursed trick! Never forgive you. Water, water," he spluttered in a thick, low voice.

We gave it to him, and he drank copiously, until we would let him have no more indeed. Then, by degrees, his senses came back to him. He thrust up his black spectacles which he had worn all this while, and stared at the Sergeant with his sharp eyes.

"I understand," he said. "So we are not dead, after all, which perhaps is a pity after getting through the beastly preliminaries. What has happened?"

"Don't quite know," answered Orme; "ask Quick."

But the Sergeant was already engaged in lighting a little fire and setting a camp-kettle to boil, into which he poured a tin of beef extract that he had brought with other eatables from our stores on the chance that he might find us. In fifteen minutes we were drinking soup, for I forbade anything more solid as yet, and, oh! what a blessed meal was that. When it was finished, Quick fetched some blankets from the camels, which he threw over us.

"Lie down and sleep, gentlemen," he said; "Pharaoh and I will watch."

The last thing I remember was seeing the Sergeant, in his own fashion an extremely religious man, and not ashamed of it, kneeling upon the sand and apparently saying his prayers. As he explained afterwards, of course, as a fatalist, he knew well that whatever must happen would happen, but still he considered it right and proper to return thanks to the Power which had arranged that on this occasion the happenings should be good, and not ill, a sentiment with which every one of us agreed.

Opposite to him, with one of his faithful eyes fixed on Orme, sat Pharaoh in grave contemplation. Doubtless, being an Eastern dog, he understood the meaning of public prayer; or perhaps he thought that he should receive some share of gratitude and thanks.

When we awoke the sun was already high, and to show us that we had dreamed no dream, there was Quick frying tinned bacon over the fire, while Pharaoh sat still and watched him--or the bacon.

"Look," said Orme to me, pointing to the mountains, "they are still miles away. It was madness to think that we could reach them."

I nodded, then turned to stare at Higgs, who was just waking up, for, indeed, he was a sight to see. His fiery red hair was full of sand, his nether garments were gone, apparently at some stage in our march he had dispensed with the remains of them because they chafed his sore limbs, and his fair skin, not excluding that of his face, was a mass of blisters, raised by the sun. In fact he was so disfigured that his worst enemy would not have known him. He yawned, stretched himself, always a good sign in man or beast, and asked for a bath.

"I am afraid you will have to wash yourself in sand here, sir, like them filthy Arabians," said Quick, saluting. "No water to spare for baths in this dry country. But I've got a tube of hazeline, also a hair-brush and a looking-glass," he added, producing these articles.

"Quite so, Sergeant," said Higgs, as he took them; "it's sacrilege to think of using water to wash. I intend never to waste it in that way again." Then he looked at himself in the glass, and let it fall upon the sand, ejaculating, "Oh! good Lord, is that me?"

"Please be careful, sir," said the Sergeant sternly; "you told me the other day that it's unlucky to break a looking-glass; also I have no other."

"Take it away," said the Professor; "I don't want it any more, and, Doctor, come and oil my face, there's a good fellow; yes, and the rest of me also, if there is enough hazeline."

So we treated each other with the ointment, which at first made us smart fearfully, and then, very gingerly sat down to breakfast.

"Now, Sergeant," said Orme, as he finished his fifth pannikin of tea, "tell us your story."

"There isn't much of a story, Captain. Those Zeu fellows came back without you, and, not knowing the lingo, I could make nothing of their tale. Well, I soon made Shadrach and Co. understand that, death-wind or no death-wind--that's what they call it--they must come with me to look for you, and at last we started, although they said that I was mad, as you were dead already. Indeed, it wasn't until I asked that fellow Shadrach if he wanted to be dead too"--and the Sergeant tapped his revolver grimly--"that he would let any one go.

"As it proved, he was right, for we couldn't find you, and after awhile the camels refused to face the storm any longer; also one of the Abati drivers was lost, and hasn't been heard of since. It was all the rest of us could do to get back to the oasis alive, nor would Shadrach go out again even after the storm had blown itself away. It was no use arguing with the pig, so, as I did not want his blood upon my hands, I took two

camels and started with the dog Pharaoh for company.

"Now this was my thought, although I could not explain it to the Abati crowd, that if you lived at all, you would almost certainly head for the hills as I knew you had no compass, and you would not be able to see anything else. So I rode along the plain which stretches between the desert and the mountains, keeping on the edge of the sand-hills. I rode all day, but when night came I halted, since I could see no more. There I sat in that great place, thinking, and after an hour or two I observed Pharaoh prick his ears and look toward the west. So I also started toward the west, and presently I thought that I saw one faint streak of light which seemed to go upward, and therefore couldn't come from a falling star, but might have come from a rifle fired toward the sky.

"I listened, but no sound reached me, only presently, some seconds afterwards, the dog again pricked his ears as though he heard something. That settled me, and I mounted and rode forward through the night toward the place where I thought I had seen the flash. For two hours I rode, firing my revolver from time to time; then as no answer came, gave it up as a bad job, and stopped. But Pharaoh there wouldn't stop. He began to whine and sniff and run forward, and at last bolted into the darkness, out of which presently I heard him barking some hundreds of yards away, to call me, I suppose. So I followed and found you three gentlemen, dead, as I thought at first. That's all the story, Captain."

"One with a good end, anyway, Sergeant. We owe our lives to you."

"Beg your pardon, Captain," answered Quick modestly; "not to me at all, but to Providence first that arranged everything, before we were born perhaps, and next to Pharaoh. He's a wise dog, Pharaoh, though fierce with some, and you did a good deal when you bought him for a bottle of whisky and a sixpenny pocket-knife."

It was dawn on the following morning before we sighted the oasis, whither we could travel but slowly, since, owing to the lack of camels, two of us must walk. Of these two, as may be guessed, the Sergeant was always one and his master the other, for of all the men I ever knew I think that in such matters Orme is the most unselfish. Nothing would induce him to mount one of the camels, even for half-an-hour, so that when I walked, the brute went riderless. On the other hand, once he was on, notwithstanding the agonies he suffered from his soreness, nothing would induce Higgs to get off.

"Here I am and here I stop," he said several times, in English, French, and sundry Oriental languages. "I've tramped it enough to last me the rest of my life."

Both of us were dozing upon our saddles when suddenly I heard the Sergeant calling to the camels to halt and asked what was the matter.

"Looks like Arabians, Doctor," he said, pointing to a cloud of dust advancing toward us.

"Well, if so," I answered, "our best chance is to show no fear and go on. I don't think they will harm us."

So, having made ready such weapons as we had, we advanced, Orme and the Sergeant walking between the two camels, until presently we encountered the other caravan, and, to our astonishment, saw none other than Shadrach riding at the head of it, mounted on my dromedary, which his own mistress, the Lady of the Abati, had given to me. We came face to face, and halted, staring at each other.

"By the beard of Aaron! is it you, lords?" he asked. "We thought you were dead."

"By the hair of Moses! so I gather," I answered angrily, "seeing that you are going off with all our belongings," and I pointed to the baggage camels laden with goods.

Then followed explanations and voluble apologies, which Higgs for one accepted with a very bad grace. Indeed, as he can talk Arabic and its dialects perfectly, he made use of that tongue to pour upon the heads of Shadrach and his companions a stream of Eastern invective that must have astonished them, ably seconded as it was by Sergeant Quick in English.

Orme listened for some time, then said:

"That'll do, old fellow; if you go on, you will get up a row, and, Sergeant, be good enough to hold your tongue. We have met them, so there is no harm done. Now, friend Shadrach, turn back with us to the oasis. We are going to rest there for some days."

Shadrach looked sulky, and said something about our turning and going on with them, whereon I produced the ancient ring, Sheba's ring, which I had brought as a token from Mur. This I held before his eyes, saying:

"Disobey, and there will be an account to settle when you come into the presence of her who sent you forth, for even if we four should die"--and I looked at him meaningly--"think not that you will be able to hide this matter; there are too many witnesses."

Then, without more words, he saluted the sacred ring, and we all went back to Zeu.