

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOURTH.

The Wind dies away.--The Vicinity of the Desert.--The Mistake in the Water-Supply.--The Nights of the Equator.--Dr. Ferguson's Anxieties.--The Situation flatly stated.--Energetic Replies of Kennedy and Joe.--One Night more.

The balloon, having been made fast to a solitary tree, almost completely dried up by the aridity of the region in which it stood, passed the night in perfect quietness; and the travellers were enabled to enjoy a little of the repose which they so greatly needed. The emotions of the day had left sad impressions on their minds.

Toward morning, the sky had resumed its brilliant purity and its heat. The balloon ascended, and, after several ineffectual attempts, fell into a current that, although not rapid, bore them toward the northwest.

"We are not making progress," said the doctor. "If I am not mistaken, we have accomplished nearly half of our journey in ten days; but, at the rate at which we are going, it would take months to end it; and that is all the more vexatious, that we are threatened with a lack of water."

"But we'll find some," said Joe. "It is not to be

thought of that we shouldn't discover some river, some stream, or pond, in all this vast extent of country."

"I hope so."

"Now don't you think that it's Joe's cargo of stone that is keeping us back?"

Kennedy asked this question only to tease Joe; and he did so the more willingly because he had, for a moment, shared the poor lad's hallucinations; but, not finding any thing in them, he had fallen back into the attitude of a strong-minded looker-on, and turned the affair off with a laugh.

Joe cast a mournful glance at him; but the doctor made no reply. He was thinking, not without secret terror, probably, of the vast solitudes of Sahara--for there whole weeks sometimes pass without the caravans meeting with a single spring of water. Occupied with these thoughts, he scrutinized every depression of the soil with the closest attention.

These anxieties, and the incidents recently occurring, had not been without their effect upon the spirits of our three travellers. They conversed less, and were more wrapt in their own thoughts.

Joe, clever lad as he was, seemed no longer the same person since his gaze had plunged into that ocean of gold. He kept entirely silent, and gazed incessantly upon the stony fragments heaped up in the car--worthless to-day, but of inestimable value to-morrow.

The appearance of this part of Africa was, moreover, quite calculated to inspire alarm: the desert was gradually expanding around them; not another village was to be seen--not even a collection of a few huts; and vegetation also was disappearing. Barely a few dwarf plants could now be noticed, like those on the wild heaths of Scotland; then came the first tract of grayish sand and flint, with here and there a lentisk tree and brambles. In the midst of this sterility, the rudimental carcass of the Globe appeared in ridges of sharply-jutting rock. These symptoms of a totally dry and barren region greatly disquieted Dr. Ferguson.

It seemed as though no caravan had ever braved this desert expanse, or it would have left visible traces of its encampments, or the whitened bones of men and animals. But nothing of the kind was to be seen, and the aeronauts felt that, ere long, an immensity of sand would cover the whole of this desolate region.

However, there was no going back; they must go forward; and, indeed, the doctor asked for nothing better; he would even have welcomed a tempest to carry him beyond this country. But, there was not a cloud in the sky. At the close of the day, the balloon had not made thirty miles.

If there had been no lack of water! But, there remained only three gallons in all! The doctor put aside one gallon, destined to quench the burning thirst that a heat of ninety degrees rendered intolerable. Two gallons only then remained to supply the cylinder. Hence, they could produce no more than four hundred and eighty cubic feet of gas; yet the cylinder consumed about nine cubic feet per hour. Consequently, they could not keep on longer than fifty-four hours--and all this was a mathematical calculation!

"Fifty-four hours!" said the doctor to his companions.

"Therefore, as I am determined not to travel by night, for fear of passing some stream or pool, we have but three days and a half of journeying during which we must find water, at all hazards. I have thought it my duty to make you aware of the real state of the case, as I have retained only one gallon for drinking, and we shall have to put ourselves on the shortest allowance."

"Put us on short allowance, then, doctor," responded Kennedy, "but we must not despair. We have three days left, you say?"

"Yes, my dear Dick!"

"Well, as grieving over the matter won't help us, in three days there will be time enough to decide upon what is to be done; in the meanwhile, let us redouble our vigilance!"

At their evening meal, the water was strictly measured out, and the brandy was increased in quantity in the punch they drank. But they had to be careful with the spirits, the latter being more likely to produce than to quench thirst.

The car rested, during the night, upon an immense plateau, in which there was a deep hollow; its height was scarcely eight hundred feet above the level of the sea. This circumstance gave the doctor some hope, since it recalled to his mind the conjectures of geographers concerning the existence of a vast stretch of water in the centre of Africa. But, if such a lake really existed, the point was to reach it, and not a sign of change was visible in the motionless sky.

To the tranquil night and its starry magnificence succeeded the unchanging daylight and the blazing rays of the sun; and, from the earliest dawn, the temperature became scorching. At five o'clock in the morning, the doctor gave the signal for departure, and, for a considerable time, the balloon remained immovable in the leaden atmosphere.

The doctor might have escaped this intense heat by rising into a higher range, but, in order to do so, he would have had to consume a large quantity of water, a thing that had now become impossible. He contented himself, therefore, with keeping the balloon at one hundred feet from the ground, and, at that elevation, a feeble current drove it toward the western horizon.

The breakfast consisted of a little dried meat and pemmican. By noon, the Victoria had advanced only a few miles.

"We cannot go any faster," said the doctor; "we no longer command--we have to obey."

"Ah! doctor, here is one of those occasions when a propeller would not be a thing to be despised."

"Undoubtedly so, Dick, provided it would not require an expenditure of water to put it in motion, for, in that

case, the situation would be precisely the same; moreover, up to this time, nothing practical of the sort has been invented. Balloons are still at that point where ships were before the invention of steam. It took six thousand years to invent propellers and screws; so we have time enough yet."

"Confounded heat!" said Joe, wiping away the perspiration that was streaming from his forehead.

"If we had water, this heat would be of service to us, for it dilates the hydrogen in the balloon, and diminishes the amount required in the spiral, although it is true that, if we were not short of the useful liquid, we should not have to economize it. Ah! that rascally savage who cost us the tank!"\*

\* The water-tank had been thrown overboard when the native clung to the car.

"You don't regret, though, what you did, doctor?"

"No, Dick, since it was in our power to save that unfortunate missionary from a horrible death. But, the hundred pounds of water that we threw overboard would be very useful to us now; it would be thirteen or fourteen days more of progress secured, or quite enough to carry us over this desert."

"We've made at least half the journey, haven't we?"  
asked Joe.

"In distance, yes; but in duration, no, should the wind  
leave us; and it, even now, has a tendency to die away  
altogether."

"Come, sir," said Joe, again, "we must not complain;  
we've got along pretty well, thus far, and whatever  
happens to me, I can't get desperate. We'll find water;  
mind, I tell you so."

The soil, however, ran lower from mile to mile; the  
undulations of the gold-bearing mountains they had left  
died away into the plain, like the last throes of exhausted  
Nature. Scanty grass took the place of the fine trees of  
the east; only a few belts of half-scorched herbage still  
contended against the invasion of the sand, and the huge  
rocks, that had rolled down from the distant summits,  
crushed in their fall, had scattered in sharp-edged pebbles  
which soon again became coarse sand, and finally impalpable dust.

"Here, at last, is Africa, such as you pictured it to  
yourself, Joe! Was I not right in saying, 'Wait a  
little?' eh?"

"Well, master, it's all natural, at least--heat and dust.



It would be foolish to look for any thing else in such a country. Do you see," he added, laughing, "I had no confidence, for my part, in your forests and your prairies; they were out of reason. What was the use of coming so far to find scenery just like England? Here's the first time that I believe in Africa, and I'm not sorry to get a taste of it."

Toward evening, the doctor calculated that the balloon had not made twenty miles during that whole burning day, and a heated gloom closed in upon it, as soon as the sun had disappeared behind the horizon, which was traced against the sky with all the precision of a straight line.

The next day was Thursday, the 1st of May, but the days followed each other with desperate monotony. Each morning was like the one that had preceded it; noon poured down the same exhaustless rays, and night condensed in its shadow the scattered heat which the ensuing day would again bequeath to the succeeding night. The wind, now scarcely observable, was rather a gasp than a breath, and the morning could almost be foreseen when even that gasp would cease.

The doctor reacted against the gloominess of the situation and retained all the coolness and self-possession of a disciplined heart. With his glass he scrutinized every

quarter of the horizon; he saw the last rising ground gradually melting to the dead level, and the last vegetation disappearing, while, before him, stretched the immensity of the desert.

The responsibility resting upon him pressed sorely, but he did not allow his disquiet to appear. Those two men, Dick and Joe, friends of his, both of them, he had induced to come with him almost by the force alone of friendship and of duty. Had he done well in that? Was it not like attempting to tread forbidden paths? Was he not, in this trip, trying to pass the borders of the impossible? Had not the Almighty reserved for later ages the knowledge of this inhospitable continent?

All these thoughts, of the kind that arise in hours of discouragement, succeeded each other and multiplied in his mind, and, by an irresistible association of ideas, the doctor allowed himself to be carried beyond the bounds of logic and of reason. After having established in his own mind what he should NOT have done, the next question was, what he should do, then. Would it be impossible to retrace his steps? Were there not currents higher up that would waft him to less arid regions? Well informed with regard to the countries over which he had passed, he was utterly ignorant of those to come, and thus his conscience speaking aloud to him, he resolved, in his turn, to

speaking frankly to his two companions. He thereupon laid the whole state of the case plainly before them; he showed them what had been done, and what there was yet to do; at the worst, they could return, or attempt it, at least.--What did they think about it?

"I have no other opinion than that of my excellent master," said Joe; "what he may have to suffer, I can suffer, and that better than he can, perhaps. Where he goes, there I'll go!"

"And you, Kennedy?"

"I, doctor, I'm not the man to despair; no one was less ignorant than I of the perils of the enterprise, but I did not want to see them, from the moment that you determined to brave them. Under present circumstances, my opinion is, that we should persevere--go clear to the end. Besides, to return looks to me quite as perilous as the other course. So onward, then! you may count upon us!"

"Thanks, my gallant friends!" replied the doctor, with much real feeling, "I expected such devotion as this; but I needed these encouraging words. Yet, once again, thank you, from the bottom of my heart!"

And, with this, the three friends warmly grasped each

other by the hand.

"Now, hear me!" said the doctor. "According to my solar observations, we are not more than three hundred miles from the Gulf of Guinea; the desert, therefore, cannot extend indefinitely, since the coast is inhabited, and the country has been explored for some distance back into the interior. If needs be, we can direct our course to that quarter, and it seems out of the question that we should not come across some oasis, or some well, where we could replenish our stock of water. But, what we want now, is the wind, for without it we are held here suspended in the air at a dead calm.

"Let us wait with resignation," said the hunter.

But, each of the party, in his turn, vainly scanned the space around him during that long wearisome day. Nothing could be seen to form the basis of a hope. The very last inequalities of the soil disappeared with the setting sun, whose horizontal rays stretched in long lines of fire over the flat immensity. It was the Desert!

Our aeronauts had scarcely gone a distance of fifteen miles, having expended, as on the preceding day, one hundred and thirty-five cubic feet of gas to feed the cylinder, and two pints of water out of the remaining

eight had been sacrificed to the demands of intense thirst.

The night passed quietly--too quietly, indeed, but the doctor did not sleep!