

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIFTH.

A Little Philosophy.--A Cloud on the Horizon.--In the Midst of a Fog.--The Strange Balloon.--An Exact View of the Victoria.--The Palm-Trees.--Traces of a Caravan.--The Well in the Midst of the Desert.

On the morrow, there was the same purity of sky, the same stillness of the atmosphere. The balloon rose to an elevation of five hundred feet, but it had scarcely changed its position to the westward in any perceptible degree.

"We are right in the open desert," said the doctor.

"Look at that vast reach of sand! What a strange spectacle! What a singular arrangement of nature! Why should there be, in one place, such extreme luxuriance of vegetation yonder, and here, this extreme aridity, and that in the same latitude, and under the same rays of the sun?"

"The why concerns me but little," answered Kennedy, "the reason interests me less than the fact. The thing is so; that's the important part of it!"

"Oh, it is well to philosophize a little, Dick; it does no harm."

"Let us philosophize, then, if you will; we have time enough before us; we are hardly moving; the wind is

afraid to blow; it sleeps."

"That will not last forever," put in Joe; "I think I see some banks of clouds in the east."

"Joe's right!" said the doctor, after he had taken a look.

"Good!" said Kennedy; "now for our clouds, with a fine rain, and a fresh wind to dash it into our faces!"

"Well, we'll see, Dick, we'll see!"

"But this is Friday, master, and I'm afraid of Fridays!"

"Well, I hope that this very day you'll get over those notions."

"I hope so, master, too. Whew!" he added, mopping his face, "heat's a good thing, especially in winter, but in summer it don't do to take too much of it."

"Don't you fear the effect of the sun's heat on our balloon?" asked Kennedy, addressing the doctor.

"No! the gutta-percha coating resists much higher temperatures than even this. With my spiral I have subjected it inside to as much as one hundred and

fifty-eight degrees sometimes, and the covering does not appear to have suffered."

"A cloud! a real cloud!" shouted Joe at this moment, for that piercing eyesight of his beat all the glasses.

And, in fact, a thick bank of vapor, now quite distinct, could be seen slowly emerging above the horizon.

It appeared to be very deep, and, as it were, puffed out.

It was, in reality, a conglomeration of smaller clouds.

The latter invariably retained their original formation, and from this circumstance the doctor concluded that there was no current of air in their collected mass.

This compact body of vapor had appeared about eight o'clock in the morning, and, by eleven, it had already reached the height of the sun's disk. The latter then disappeared entirely behind the murky veil, and the lower belt of cloud, at the same moment, lifted above the line of the horizon, which was again disclosed in a full blaze of daylight.

"It's only an isolated cloud," remarked the doctor.

"It won't do to count much upon that."

"Look, Dick, its shape is just the same as when we saw it this morning!"

"Then, doctor, there's to be neither rain nor wind, at least for us!"

"I fear so; the cloud keeps at a great height."

"Well, doctor, suppose we were to go in pursuit of this cloud, since it refuses to burst upon us?"

"I fancy that to do so wouldn't help us much; it would be a consumption of gas, and, consequently, of water, to little purpose; but, in our situation, we must not leave anything untried; therefore, let us ascend!"

And with this, the doctor put on a full head of flame from the cylinder, and the dilation of the hydrogen, occasioned by such sudden and intense heat, sent the balloon rapidly aloft.

About fifteen hundred feet from the ground, it encountered an opaque mass of cloud, and entered a dense fog, suspended at that elevation; but it did not meet with the least breath of wind. This fog seemed even destitute of humidity, and the articles brought in contact with it were scarcely dampened in the slightest degree. The balloon, completely enveloped in the vapor, gained a little increase of speed, perhaps, and that was all.

The doctor gloomily recognized what trifling success he had obtained from his manoeuvre, and was relapsing into deep meditation, when he heard Joe exclaim, in tones of most intense astonishment:

"Ah! by all that's beautiful!"

"What's the matter, Joe?"

"Doctor! Mr. Kennedy! Here's something curious!"

"What is it, then?"

"We are not alone, up here! There are rogues about! They've stolen our invention!"

"Has he gone crazy?" asked Kennedy.

Joe stood there, perfectly motionless, the very picture of amazement.

"Can the hot sun have really affected the poor fellow's brain?" said the doctor, turning toward him.

"Will you tell me?--"

"Look!" said Joe, pointing to a certain quarter of the sky.

"By St. James!" exclaimed Kennedy, in turn, "why, who would have believed it? Look, look! doctor!"

"I see it!" said the doctor, very quietly.

"Another balloon! and other passengers, like ourselves!"

And, sure enough, there was another balloon about two hundred paces from them, floating in the air with its car and its aeronauts. It was following exactly the same route as the Victoria.

"Well," said the doctor, "nothing remains for us but to make signals; take the flag, Kennedy, and show them our colors."

It seemed that the travellers by the other balloon had just the same idea, at the same moment, for the same kind of flag repeated precisely the same salute with a hand that moved in just the same manner.

"What does that mean?" asked Kennedy.

"They are apes," said Joe, "imitating us."

"It means," said the doctor, laughing, "that it is you, Dick, yourself, making that signal to yourself; or, in other words, that we see ourselves in the second balloon, which is no other than the Victoria."

"As to that, master, with all respect to you," said Joe, "you'll never make me believe it."

"Climb up on the edge of the car, Joe; wave your arms, and then you'll see."

Joe obeyed, and all his gestures were instantaneously and exactly repeated.

"It is merely the effect of the MIRAGE," said the doctor, "and nothing else--a simple optical phenomenon due to the unequal refraction of light by different layers of the atmosphere, and that is all.

"It's wonderful," said Joe, who could not make up his mind to surrender, but went on repeating his gesticulations.

"What a curious sight! Do you know," said Kennedy, "that it's a real pleasure to have a view of our noble balloon in that style? She's a beauty, isn't she?--

and how stately her movements as she sweeps along!"

"You may explain the matter as you like," continued Joe, "it's a strange thing, anyhow!"

But ere long this picture began to fade away; the clouds rose higher, leaving the balloon, which made no further attempt to follow them, and in about an hour they disappeared in the open sky.

The wind, which had been scarcely perceptible, seemed still to diminish, and the doctor in perfect desperation descended toward the ground, and all three of the travellers, whom the incident just recorded had, for a few moments, diverted from their anxieties, relapsed into gloomy meditation, sweltering the while beneath the scorching heat.

About four o'clock, Joe descried some object standing out against the vast background of sand, and soon was able to declare positively that there were two palm-trees at no great distance.

"Palm-trees!" exclaimed Ferguson; "why, then there's a spring--a well!"

He took up his glass and satisfied himself that Joe's

eyes had not been mistaken.

"At length!" he said, over and over again, "water!
water! and we are saved; for if we do move slowly, still
we move, and we shall arrive at last!"

"Good, master! but suppose we were to drink a mouthful
in the mean time, for this air is stifling?"

"Let us drink then, my boy!"

No one waited to be coaxed. A whole pint was swallowed
then and there, reducing the total remaining supply
to three pints and a half.

"Ah! that does one good!" said Joe; "wasn't it
fine? Barclay and Perkins never turned out ale equal to
that!"

"See the advantage of being put on short allowance!"
moralized the doctor.

"It is not great, after all," retorted Kennedy; "and if
I were never again to have the pleasure of drinking water,
I should agree on condition that I should never be deprived
of it."

At six o'clock the balloon was floating over the palm-trees.

They were two shrivelled, stunted, dried-up specimens of trees--two ghosts of palms--without foliage, and more dead than alive. Ferguson examined them with terror.

At their feet could be seen the half-worn stones of a spring, but these stones, pulverized by the baking heat of the sun, seemed to be nothing now but impalpable dust. There was not the slightest sign of moisture. The doctor's heart shrank within him, and he was about to communicate his thoughts to his companions, when their exclamations attracted his attention. As far as the eye could reach to the eastward, extended a long line of whitened bones; pieces of skeletons surrounded the fountain; a caravan had evidently made its way to that point, marking its progress by its bleaching remains; the weaker had fallen one by one upon the sand; the stronger, having at length reached this spring for which they panted, had there found a horrible death.

Our travellers looked at each other and turned pale.

"Let us not alight!" said Kennedy, "let us fly from this hideous spectacle! There's not a drop of water here!"

"No, Dick, as well pass the night here as elsewhere; let us have a clear conscience in the matter. We'll dig down to the very bottom of the well. There has been a spring here, and perhaps there's something left in it!"

The Victoria touched the ground; Joe and Kennedy put into the car a quantity of sand equal to their weight, and leaped out. They then hastened to the well, and penetrated to the interior by a flight of steps that was now nothing but dust. The spring appeared to have been dry for years. They dug down into a parched and powdery sand--the very dryest of all sand, indeed--there was not one trace of moisture!

The doctor saw them come up to the surface of the desert, saturated with perspiration, worn out, covered with fine dust, exhausted, discouraged and despairing.

He then comprehended that their search had been fruitless. He had expected as much, and he kept silent, for he felt that, from this moment forth, he must have courage and energy enough for three.

Joe brought up with him some pieces of a leathern bottle that had grown hard and horn-like with age, and angrily flung them away among the bleaching bones of the caravan.

At supper, not a word was spoken by our travellers,
and they even ate without appetite. Yet they had not,
up to this moment, endured the real agonies of thirst, and
were in no desponding mood, excepting for the future.