

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIXTH.

One Hundred and Thirteen Degrees.--The Doctor's Reflections.--A Desperate Search.--The Cylinder goes out.--One Hundred and Twenty-two Degrees.--Contemplation of the Desert.--A Night Walk.--Solitude.--Debility.--Joe's Prospects.--He gives himself One Day more.

The distance made by the balloon during the preceding day did not exceed ten miles, and, to keep it afloat, one hundred and sixty-two cubic feet of gas had been consumed.

On Saturday morning the doctor again gave the signal for departure.

"The cylinder can work only six hours longer; and, if in that time we shall not have found either a well or a spring of water, God alone knows what will become of us!"

"Not much wind this morning, master," said Joe; "but it will come up, perhaps," he added, suddenly remarking the doctor's ill-concealed depression.

Vain hope! The atmosphere was in a dead calm--one of those calms which hold vessels captive in tropical seas. The heat had become intolerable; and the thermometer, in the shade under the awning, indicated one hundred

and thirteen degrees.

Joe and Kennedy, reclining at full length near each other, tried, if not in slumber, at least in torpor, to forget their situation, for their forced inactivity gave them periods of leisure far from pleasant. That man is to be pitied the most who cannot wean himself from gloomy reflections by actual work, or some practical pursuit. But here there was nothing to look after, nothing to undertake, and they had to submit to the situation, without having it in their power to ameliorate it.

The pangs of thirst began to be severely felt; brandy, far from appeasing this imperious necessity, augmented it, and richly merited the name of "tiger's milk" applied to it by the African natives. Scarcely two pints of water remained, and that was heated. Each of the party devoured the few precious drops with his gaze, yet neither of them dared to moisten his lips with them. Two pints of water in the midst of the desert!

Then it was that Dr. Ferguson, buried in meditation, asked himself whether he had acted with prudence. Would he not have done better to have kept the water that he had decomposed in pure loss, in order to sustain him in the air? He had gained a little distance, to be sure; but was he any nearer to his journey's end? What

difference did sixty miles to the rear make in this region, when there was no water to be had where they were? The wind, should it rise, would blow there as it did here, only less strongly at this point, if it came from the east. But hope urged him onward. And yet those two gallons of water, expended in vain, would have sufficed for nine days' halt in the desert. And what changes might not have occurred in nine days! Perhaps, too, while retaining the water, he might have ascended by throwing out ballast, at the cost merely of discharging some gas, when he had again to descend. But the gas in his balloon was his blood, his very life!

A thousand one such reflections whirled in succession through his brain; and, resting his head between his hands, he sat there for hours without raising it.

"We must make one final effort," he said, at last, about ten o'clock in the morning. "We must endeavor, just once more, to find an atmospheric current to bear us away from here, and, to that end, must risk our last resources."

Therefore, while his companions slept, the doctor raised the hydrogen in the balloon to an elevated temperature, and the huge globe, filling out by the dilation of the gas, rose straight up in the perpendicular rays of the sun.

The doctor searched vainly for a breath of wind, from the height of one hundred feet to that of five miles; his starting-point remained fatally right below him, and absolute calm seemed to reign, up to the extreme limits of the breathing atmosphere.

At length the feeding-supply of water gave out; the cylinder was extinguished for lack of gas; the Buntzen battery ceased to work, and the balloon, shrinking together, gently descended to the sand, in the very place that the car had hollowed out there.

It was noon; and solar observations gave nineteen degrees thirty-five minutes east longitude, and six degrees fifty-one minutes north latitude, or nearly five hundred miles from Lake Tchad, and more than four hundred miles from the western coast of Africa.

On the balloon taking ground, Kennedy and Joe awoke from their stupor.

"We have halted," said the Scot.

"We had to do so," replied the doctor, gravely.

His companions understood him. The level of the soil at that point corresponded with the level of the sea, and,

consequently, the balloon remained in perfect equilibrium, and absolutely motionless.

The weight of the three travellers was replaced with an equivalent quantity of sand, and they got out of the car. Each was absorbed in his own thoughts; and for many hours neither of them spoke. Joe prepared their evening meal, which consisted of biscuit and pemmican, and was hardly tasted by either of the party. A mouthful of scalding water from their little store completed this gloomy repast.

During the night none of them kept awake; yet none could be precisely said to have slept. On the morrow there remained only half a pint of water, and this the doctor put away, all three having resolved not to touch it until the last extremity.

It was not long, however, before Joe exclaimed:

"I'm choking, and the heat is getting worse! I'm not surprised at that, though," he added, consulting the thermometer; "one hundred and forty degrees!"

"The sand scorches me," said the hunter, "as though it had just come out of a furnace; and not a cloud in this sky of fire. It's enough to drive one mad!"

"Let us not despair," responded the doctor. "In this latitude these intense heats are invariably followed by storms, and the latter come with the suddenness of lightning. Notwithstanding this disheartening clearness of the sky, great atmospheric changes may take place in less than an hour."

"But," asked Kennedy, "is there any sign whatever of that?"

"Well," replied the doctor, "I think that there is some slight symptom of a fall in the barometer."

"May Heaven hearken to you, Samuel! for here we are pinned to the ground, like a bird with broken wings."

"With this difference, however, my dear Dick, that our wings are unhurt, and I hope that we shall be able to use them again."

"Ah! wind! wind!" exclaimed Joe; "enough to carry us to a stream or a well, and we'll be all right. We have provisions enough, and, with water, we could wait a month without suffering; but thirst is a cruel thing!"

It was not thirst alone, but the unchanging sight of the desert, that fatigued the mind. There was not a variation in the surface of the soil, not a hillock of sand, not a pebble, to relieve the gaze. This unbroken level discouraged the beholder, and gave him that kind of malady called the "desert-sickness." The impassible monotony of the arid blue sky, and the vast yellow expanse of the desert-sand, at length produced a sensation of terror. In this inflamed atmosphere the heat appeared to vibrate as it does above a blazing hearth, while the mind grew desperate in contemplating the limitless calm, and could see no reason why the thing should ever end, since immensity is a species of eternity.

Thus, at last, our hapless travellers, deprived of water in this torrid heat, began to feel symptoms of mental disorder. Their eyes swelled in their sockets, and their gaze became confused.

When night came on, the doctor determined to combat this alarming tendency by rapid walking. His idea was to pace the sandy plain for a few hours, not in search of any thing, but simply for exercise.

"Come along!" he said to his companions; "believe me, it will do you good."

"Out of the question!" said Kennedy; "I could not walk a step."

"And I," said Joe, "would rather sleep!"

"But sleep, or even rest, would be dangerous to you, my friends; you must react against this tendency to stupor. Come with me!"

But the doctor could do nothing with them, and, therefore, set off alone, amid the starry clearness of the night.

The first few steps he took were painful, for they were the steps of an enfeebled man quite out of practice in walking. However, he quickly saw that the exercise would be beneficial to him, and pushed on several miles to the westward. Once in rapid motion, he felt his spirits greatly cheered, when, suddenly, a vertigo came over him; he seemed to be poised on the edge of an abyss; his knees bent under him; the vast solitude struck terror to his heart; he found himself the minute mathematical point, the centre of an infinite circumference, that is to say--a nothing! The balloon had disappeared entirely in the deepening gloom. The doctor, cool, impassible, reckless explorer that he was, felt himself at last seized with a nameless dread. He strove to retrace his steps, but in vain. He called aloud. Not even an echo replied, and his voice died out in the empty vastness of surrounding

space, like a pebble cast into a bottomless gulf; then, down he sank, fainting, on the sand, alone, amid the eternal silence of the desert.

At midnight he came to, in the arms of his faithful follower, Joe. The latter, uneasy at his master's prolonged absence, had set out after him, easily tracing him by the clear imprint of his feet in the sand, and had found him lying in a swoon.

"What has been the matter, sir?" was the first inquiry.

"Nothing, Joe, nothing! Only a touch of weakness, that's all. It's over now."

"Oh! it won't amount to any thing, sir, I'm sure of that; but get up on your feet, if you can. There! lean upon me, and let us get back to the balloon."

And the doctor, leaning on Joe's arm, returned along the track by which he had come.

"You were too bold, sir; it won't do to run such risks. You might have been robbed," he added, laughing.

"But, sir, come now, let us talk seriously."

"Speak! I am listening to you."

"We must positively make up our minds to do something. Our present situation cannot last more than a few days longer, and if we get no wind, we are lost."

The doctor made no reply.

"Well, then, one of us must sacrifice himself for the good of all, and it is most natural that it should fall to me to do so."

"What have you to propose? What is your plan?"

"A very simple one! It is to take provisions enough, and to walk right on until I come to some place, as I must do, sooner or later. In the mean time, if Heaven sends you a good wind, you need not wait, but can start again. For my part, if I come to a village, I'll work my way through with a few Arabic words that you can write for me on a slip of paper, and I'll bring you help or lose my hide. What do you think of my plan?"

"It is absolute folly, Joe, but worthy of your noble heart. The thing is impossible. You will not leave us."

"But, sir, we must do something, and this plan can't do you any harm, for, I say again, you need not wait;

and then, after all, I may succeed."

"No, Joe, no! We will not separate. That would only be adding sorrow to trouble. It was written that matters should be as they are; and it is very probably written that it shall be quite otherwise by-and-by. Let us wait, then, with resignation."

"So be it, master; but take notice of one thing: I give you a day longer, and I'll not wait after that. To-day is Sunday; we might say Monday, as it is one o'clock in the morning, and if we don't get off by Tuesday, I'll run the risk. I've made up my mind to that!"

The doctor made no answer, and in a few minutes they got back to the car, where he took his place beside Kennedy, who lay there plunged in silence so complete that it could not be considered sleep.