

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVENTH.

Terrific Heat.--Hallucinations.--The Last Drops of Water.--Nights of Despair.--An Attempt at Suicide.--The Simoom.--The Oasis.--The Lion and Lioness.

The doctor's first care, on the morrow, was to consult the barometer. He found that the mercury had scarcely undergone any perceptible depression.

"Nothing!" he murmured, "nothing!"

He got out of the car and scrutinized the weather; there was only the same heat, the same cloudless sky, the same merciless drought.

"Must we, then, give up to despair?" he exclaimed, in agony.

Joe did not open his lips. He was buried in his own thoughts, and planning the expedition he had proposed.

Kennedy got up, feeling very ill, and a prey to nervous agitation. He was suffering horribly with thirst, and his swollen tongue and lips could hardly articulate a syllable.

There still remained a few drops of water. Each of

them knew this, and each was thinking of it, and felt himself drawn toward them; but neither of the three dared to take a step.

Those three men, friends and companions as they were, fixed their haggard eyes upon each other with an instinct of ferocious longing, which was most plainly revealed in the hardy Scot, whose vigorous constitution yielded the soonest to these unnatural privations.

Throughout the day he was delirious, pacing up and down, uttering hoarse cries, gnawing his clinched fists, and ready to open his veins and drink his own hot blood.

"Ah!" he cried, "land of thirst! Well might you be called the land of despair!"

At length he sank down in utter prostration, and his friends heard no other sound from him than the hissing of his breath between his parched and swollen lips.

Toward evening, Joe had his turn of delirium. The vast expanse of sand appeared to him an immense pond, full of clear and limpid water; and, more than once, he dashed himself upon the scorching waste to drink long draughts, and rose again with his mouth clogged with hot dust.

"Curses on it!" he yelled, in his madness, "it's nothing but salt water!"

Then, while Ferguson and Kennedy lay there motionless, the resistless longing came over him to drain the last few drops of water that had been kept in reserve. The natural instinct proved too strong. He dragged himself toward the car, on his knees; he glared at the bottle containing the precious fluid; he gave one wild, eager glance, seized the treasured store, and bore it to his lips.

At that instant he heard a heart-rending cry close beside him--"Water! water!"

It was Kennedy, who had crawled up close to him, and was begging there, upon his knees, and weeping piteously.

Joe, himself in tears, gave the poor wretch the bottle, and Kennedy drained the last drop with savage haste.

"Thanks!" he murmured hoarsely, but Joe did not hear him, for both alike had dropped fainting on the sand.

What took place during that fearful night neither of them knew, but, on Tuesday morning, under those showers of heat which the sun poured down upon them, the

unfortunate men felt their limbs gradually drying up, and when Joe attempted to rise he found it impossible.

He looked around him. In the car, the doctor, completely overwhelmed, sat with his arms folded on his breast, gazing with idiotic fixedness upon some imaginary point in space. Kennedy was frightful to behold. He was rolling his head from right to left like a wild beast in a cage.

All at once, his eyes rested on the butt of his rifle, which jutted above the rim of the car.

"Ah!" he screamed, raising himself with a superhuman effort.

Desperate, mad, he snatched at the weapon, and turned the barrel toward his mouth.

"Kennedy!" shouted Joe, throwing himself upon his friend.

"Let go! hands off!" moaned the Scot, in a hoarse, grating voice--and then the two struggled desperately for the rifle.

"Let go, or I'll kill you!" repeated Kennedy. But Joe clung to him only the more fiercely, and they had been contending thus without the doctor seeing them for

many seconds, when, suddenly the rifle went off. At the sound of its discharge, the doctor rose up erect, like a spectre, and glared around him.

But all at once his glance grew more animated; he extended his hand toward the horizon, and in a voice no longer human shrieked:

"There! there--off there!"

There was such fearful force in the cry that Kennedy and Joe released each other, and both looked where the doctor pointed.

The plain was agitated like the sea shaken by the fury of a tempest; billows of sand went tossing over each other amid blinding clouds of dust; an immense pillar was seen whirling toward them through the air from the southeast, with terrific velocity; the sun was disappearing behind an opaque veil of cloud whose enormous barrier extended clear to the horizon, while the grains of fine sand went gliding together with all the supple ease of liquid particles, and the rising dust-tide gained more and more with every second.

Ferguson's eyes gleamed with a ray of energetic hope.

"The simoom!" he exclaimed.

"The simoom!" repeated Joe, without exactly knowing what it meant.

"So much the better!" said Kennedy, with the bitterness of despair. "So much the better--we shall die!"

"So much the better!" echoed the doctor, "for we shall live!" and, so saying, he began rapidly to throw out the sand that encumbered the car.

At length his companions understood him, and took their places at his side.

"And now, Joe," said the doctor, "throw out some fifty pounds of your ore, there!"

Joe no longer hesitated, although he still felt a fleeting pang of regret. The balloon at once began to ascend.

"It was high time!" said the doctor.

The simoom, in fact, came rushing on like a thunderbolt, and a moment later the balloon would have been crushed, torn to atoms, annihilated. The awful whirlwind was almost upon it, and it was already pelted with showers of sand driven like hail by the storm.

"Out with more ballast!" shouted the doctor.

"There!" responded Joe, tossing over a huge fragment of quartz.

With this, the Victoria rose swiftly above the range of the whirling column, but, caught in the vast displacement of the atmosphere thereby occasioned, it was borne along with incalculable rapidity away above this foaming sea.

The three travellers did not speak. They gazed, and hoped, and even felt refreshed by the breath of the tempest.

About three o'clock, the whirlwind ceased; the sand, falling again upon the desert, formed numberless little hillocks, and the sky resumed its former tranquillity.

The balloon, which had again lost its momentum, was floating in sight of an oasis, a sort of islet studded with green trees, thrown up upon the surface of this sandy ocean.

"Water! we'll find water there!" said the doctor.

And, instantly, opening the upper valve, he let some

hydrogen escape, and slowly descended, taking the ground at about two hundred feet from the edge of the oasis.

In four hours the travellers had swept over a distance of two hundred and forty miles!

The car was at once ballasted, and Kennedy, closely followed by Joe, leaped out.

"Take your guns with you!" said the doctor; "take your guns, and be careful!"

Dick grasped his rifle, and Joe took one of the fowling-pieces. They then rapidly made for the trees, and disappeared under the fresh verdure, which announced the presence of abundant springs. As they hurried on, they had not taken notice of certain large footprints and fresh tracks of some living creature marked here and there in the damp soil.

Suddenly, a dull roar was heard not twenty paces from them.

"The roar of a lion!" said Joe.

"Good for that!" said the excited hunter; "we'll fight him. A man feels strong when only a fight's in question."



"But be careful, Mr. Kennedy; be careful! The lives of all depend upon the life of one."

But Kennedy no longer heard him; he was pushing on, his eye blazing; his rifle cocked; fearful to behold in his daring rashness. There, under a palm-tree, stood an enormous black-maned lion, crouching for a spring on his antagonist. Scarcely had he caught a glimpse of the hunter, when he bounded through the air; but he had not touched the ground ere a bullet pierced his heart, and he fell to the earth dead.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted Joe, with wild exultation.

Kennedy rushed toward the well, slid down the dampened steps, and flung himself at full length by the side of a fresh spring, in which he plunged his parched lips. Joe followed suit, and for some minutes nothing was heard but the sound they made with their mouths, drinking more like maddened beasts than men.

"Take care, Mr. Kennedy," said Joe at last; "let us not overdo the thing!" and he panted for breath.

But Kennedy, without a word, drank on. He even plunged his hands, and then his head, into the delicious tide--he fairly revelled in its coolness.

"But the doctor?" said Joe; "our friend, Dr. Ferguson?"

That one word recalled Kennedy to himself, and, hastily filling a flask that he had brought with him, he started on a run up the steps of the well.

But what was his amazement when he saw an opaque body of enormous dimensions blocking up the passage! Joe, who was close upon Kennedy's heels, recoiled with him.

"We are blocked in--entrapped!"

"Impossible! What does that mean?--"

Dick had no time to finish; a terrific roar made him only too quickly aware what foe confronted him.

"Another lion!" exclaimed Joe.

"A lioness, rather," said Kennedy. "Ah! ferocious brute!" he added, "I'll settle you in a moment more!" and swiftly reloaded his rifle.

In another instant he fired, but the animal had disappeared.

"Onward!" shouted Kennedy.

"No!" interposed the other, "that shot did not kill her; her body would have rolled down the steps; she's up there, ready to spring upon the first of us who appears, and he would be a lost man!"

"But what are we to do? We must get out of this, and the doctor is expecting us."

"Let us decoy the animal. Take my piece, and give me your rifle."

"What is your plan?"

"You'll see."

And Joe, taking off his linen jacket, hung it on the end of the rifle, and thrust it above the top of the steps. The lioness flung herself furiously upon it. Kennedy was on the alert for her, and his bullet broke her shoulder. The lioness, with a frightful howl of agony, rolled down the steps, overturning Joe in her fall. The poor fellow imagined that he could already feel the enormous paws of the savage beast in his flesh, when a second detonation resounded in the narrow passage, and Dr. Ferguson appeared at the opening above with his gun in hand, and still smoking

from the discharge.

Joe leaped to his feet, clambered over the body of the dead lioness, and handed up the flask full of sparkling water to his master.

To carry it to his lips, and to half empty it at a draught, was the work of an instant, and the three travellers offered up thanks from the depths of their hearts to that Providence who had so miraculously saved them.