

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOURTH.

The Hurricane.--A Forced Departure.--Loss of an Anchor.--Melancholy Reflections.--The Resolution adopted.--The Sand-Storm.--The Buried Caravan.--A Contrary yet Favorable Wind.--The Return southward.--Kennedy at his Post.

At three o'clock in the morning the wind was raging. It beat down with such violence that the Victoria could not stay near the ground without danger. It was thrown almost flat over upon its side, and the reeds chafed the silk so roughly that it seemed as though they would tear it.

"We must be off, Dick," said the doctor; "we cannot remain in this situation."

"But, doctor, what of Joe?"

"I am not likely to abandon him. No, indeed! and should the hurricane carry me a thousand miles to the northward, I will return! But here we are endangering the safety of all."

"Must we go without him?" asked the Scot, with an accent of profound grief.

"And do you think, then," rejoined Ferguson, "that

my heart does not bleed like your own? Am I not merely obeying an imperious necessity?"

"I am entirely at your orders," replied the hunter;
"let us start!"

But their departure was surrounded with unusual difficulty. The anchor, which had caught very deeply, resisted all their efforts to disengage it; while the balloon, drawing in the opposite direction, increased its tension. Kennedy could not get it free. Besides, in his present position, the manoeuvre had become a very perilous one, for the Victoria threatened to break away before he should be able to get into the car again.

The doctor, unwilling to run such a risk, made his friend get into his place, and resigned himself to the alternative of cutting the anchor-rope. The Victoria made one bound of three hundred feet into the air, and took her route directly northward.

Ferguson had no other choice than to scud before the storm. He folded his arms, and soon became absorbed in his own melancholy reflections.

After a few moments of profound silence, he turned to Kennedy, who sat there no less taciturn.

"We have, perhaps, been tempting Providence," said he; "it does not belong to man to undertake such a journey!" --and a sigh of grief escaped him as he spoke.

"It is but a few days," replied the sportsman, "since we were congratulating ourselves upon having escaped so many dangers! All three of us were shaking hands!"

"Poor Joe! kindly and excellent disposition! brave and candid heart! Dazzled for a moment by his sudden discovery of wealth, he willingly sacrificed his treasures! And now, he is far from us; and the wind is carrying us still farther away with resistless speed!"

"Come, doctor, admitting that he may have found refuge among the lake tribes, can he not do as the travellers who visited them before us, did;--like Denham, like Barth? Both of those men got back to their own country."

"Ah! my dear Dick! Joe doesn't know one word of the language; he is alone, and without resources. The travellers of whom you speak did not attempt to go forward without sending many presents in advance of them to the chiefs, and surrounded by an escort armed and trained for these expeditions. Yet, they could not avoid sufferings of the worst description! What, then, can you

expect the fate of our companion to be? It is horrible to think of, and this is one of the worst calamities that it has ever been my lot to endure!"

"But, we'll come back again, doctor!"

"Come back, Dick? Yes, if we have to abandon the balloon! if we should be forced to return to Lake Tchad on foot, and put ourselves in communication with the Sultan of Bornou! The Arabs cannot have retained a disagreeable remembrance of the first Europeans."

"I will follow you, doctor," replied the hunter, with emphasis. "You may count upon me! We would rather give up the idea of prosecuting this journey than not return. Joe forgot himself for our sake; we will sacrifice ourselves for his!"

This resolve revived some hope in the hearts of these two men; they felt strong in the same inspiration. Ferguson forthwith set every thing at work to get into a contrary current, that might bring him back again to Lake Tchad; but this was impracticable at that moment, and even to alight was out of the question on ground completely bare of trees, and with such a hurricane blowing.

The Victoria thus passed over the country of the Tibbous,

crossed the Belad el Djerid, a desert of briers that forms the border of the Soudan, and advanced into the desert of sand streaked with the long tracks of the many caravans that pass and repass there. The last line of vegetation was speedily lost in the dim southern horizon, not far from the principal oasis in this part of Africa, whose fifty wells are shaded by magnificent trees; but it was impossible to stop. An Arab encampment, tents of striped stuff, some camels, stretching out their viper-like heads and necks along the sand, gave life to this solitude, but the Victoria sped by like a shooting-star, and in this way traversed a distance of sixty miles in three hours, without Ferguson being able to check or guide her course.

"We cannot halt, we cannot alight!" said the doctor; "not a tree, not an inequality of the ground! Are we then to be driven clear across Sahara? Surely, Heaven is indeed against us!"

He was uttering these words with a sort of despairing rage, when suddenly he saw the desert sands rising aloft in the midst of a dense cloud of dust, and go whirling through the air, impelled by opposing currents.

Amid this tornado, an entire caravan, disorganized, broken, and overthrown, was disappearing beneath an avalanche of sand. The camels, flung pell-mell together,

were uttering dull and pitiful groans; cries and howls of despair were heard issuing from that dusty and stifling cloud, and, from time to time, a parti-colored garment cut the chaos of the scene with its vivid hues, and the moaning and shrieking sounded over all, a terrible accompaniment to this spectacle of destruction.

Ere long the sand had accumulated in compact masses; and there, where so recently stretched a level plain as far as the eye could see, rose now a ridgy line of hillocks, still moving from beneath--the vast tomb of an entire caravan!

The doctor and Kennedy, pallid with emotion, sat transfixed by this fearful spectacle. They could no longer manage their balloon, which went whirling round and round in contending currents, and refused to obey the different dilations of the gas. Caught in these eddies of the atmosphere, it spun about with a rapidity that made their heads reel, while the car oscillated and swung to and fro violently at the same time. The instruments suspended under the awning clattered together as though they would be dashed to pieces; the pipes of the spiral bent to and fro, threatening to break at every instant; and the water-tanks jostled and jarred with tremendous din. Although but two feet apart, our aeronauts could not hear each other speak, but with firmly-clinched hands they clung convulsively

to the cordage, and endeavored to steady themselves against the fury of the tempest.

Kennedy, with his hair blown wildly about his face, looked on without speaking; but the doctor had regained all his daring in the midst of this deadly peril, and not a sign of his emotion was betrayed in his countenance, even when, after a last violent twirl, the Victoria stopped suddenly in the midst of a most unlooked-for calm; the north wind had abruptly got the upper hand, and now drove her back with equal rapidity over the route she had traversed in the morning.

"Whither are we going now?" cried Kennedy.

"Let us leave that to Providence, my dear Dick; I was wrong in doubting it. It knows better than we, and here we are, returning to places that we had expected never to see again!"

The surface of the country, which had looked so flat and level when they were coming, now seemed tossed and uneven, like the ocean-billows after a storm; a long succession of hillocks, that had scarcely settled to their places yet, indented the desert; the wind blew furiously, and the balloon fairly flew through the atmosphere.

The direction taken by our aeronauts differed somewhat from that of the morning, and thus about nine o'clock, instead of finding themselves again near the borders of Lake Tchad, they saw the desert still stretching away before them.

Kennedy remarked the circumstance.

"It matters little," replied the doctor, "the important point is to return southward; we shall come across the towns of Bornou, Wouddie, or Kouka, and I should not hesitate to halt there."

"If you are satisfied, I am content," replied the Scot, "but Heaven grant that we may not be reduced to cross the desert, as those unfortunate Arabs had to do! What we saw was frightful!"

"It often happens, Dick; these trips across the desert are far more perilous than those across the ocean. The desert has all the dangers of the sea, including the risk of being swallowed up, and added thereto are unendurable fatigues and privations."

"I think the wind shows some symptoms of moderating; the sand-dust is less dense; the undulations of the surface are diminishing, and the sky is growing clearer."

"So much the better! We must now reconnoitre attentively with our glasses, and take care not to omit a single point."

"I will look out for that, doctor, and not a tree shall be seen without my informing you of it."

And, suiting the action to the word, Kennedy took his station, spy-glass in hand, at the forward part of the car.