

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIFTH.

What happened to Joe.--The Island of the Biddiomahs.--The Adoration shown him.--The Island that sank.--The Shores of the Lake.--The Tree of the Serpents.--The Foot-Tramp.--Terrible Suffering.--Mosquitoes and Ants.--Hunger.--The Victoria seen.--She disappears.--The Swamp.--One Last Despairing Cry.

What had become of Joe, while his master was thus vainly seeking for him?

When he had dashed headlong into the lake, his first movement on coming to the surface was to raise his eyes and look upward. He saw the Victoria already risen far above the water, still rapidly ascending and growing smaller and smaller. It was soon caught in a rapid current and disappeared to the northward. His master--both his friends were saved!

"How lucky it was," thought he, "that I had that idea to throw myself out into the lake! Mr. Kennedy would soon have jumped at it, and he would not have hesitated to do as I did, for nothing's more natural than for one man to give himself up to save two others. That's mathematics!"

Satisfied on this point, Joe began to think of himself.

He was in the middle of a vast lake, surrounded by tribes unknown to him, and probably ferocious. All the greater reason why he should get out of the scrape by depending only on himself. And so he gave himself no farther concern about it.

Before the attack by the birds of prey, which, according to him, had behaved like real condors, he had noticed an island on the horizon, and determining to reach it, if possible, he put forth all his knowledge and skill in the art of swimming, after having relieved himself of the most troublesome part of his clothing. The idea of a stretch of five or six miles by no means disconcerted him; and therefore, so long as he was in the open lake, he thought only of striking out straight ahead and manfully.

In about an hour and a half the distance between him and the island had greatly diminished.

But as he approached the land, a thought, at first fleeting and then tenacious, arose in his mind. He knew that the shores of the lake were frequented by huge alligators, and was well aware of the voracity of those monsters.

Now, no matter how much he was inclined to find every thing in this world quite natural, the worthy fellow was no little disturbed by this reflection. He feared greatly

lest white flesh like his might be particularly acceptable to the dreaded brutes, and advanced only with extreme precaution, his eyes on the alert on both sides and all around him. At length, he was not more than one hundred yards from a bank, covered with green trees, when a puff of air strongly impregnated with a musky odor reached him.

"There!" said he to himself, "just what I expected. The crocodile isn't far off!"

With this he dived swiftly, but not sufficiently so to avoid coming into contact with an enormous body, the scaly surface of which scratched him as he passed. He thought himself lost and swam with desperate energy. Then he rose again to the top of the water, took breath and dived once more. Thus passed a few minutes of unspeakable anguish, which all his philosophy could not overcome, for he thought, all the while, that he heard behind him the sound of those huge jaws ready to snap him up forever. In this state of mind he was striking out under the water as noiselessly as possible when he felt himself seized by the arm and then by the waist.

Poor Joe! he gave one last thought to his master; and began to struggle with all the energy of despair, feeling himself the while drawn along, but not toward the bottom

of the lake, as is the habit of the crocodile when about to devour its prey, but toward the surface.

So soon as he could get breath and look around him, he saw that he was between two natives as black as ebony, who held him, with a firm gripe, and uttered strange cries.

"Ha!" said Joe, "blacks instead of crocodiles! Well, I prefer it as it is; but how in the mischief dare these fellows go in bathing in such places?"

Joe was not aware that the inhabitants of the islands of Lake Tchad, like many other negro tribes, plunge with impunity into sheets of water infested with crocodiles and caymans, and without troubling their heads about them. The amphibious denizens of this lake enjoy the well-deserved reputation of being quite inoffensive.

But had not Joe escaped one peril only to fall into another? That was a question which he left events to decide; and, since he could not do otherwise, he allowed himself to be conducted to the shore without manifesting any alarm.

"Evidently," thought he, "these chaps saw the Victoria skimming the waters of the lake, like a monster of the air. They were the distant witnesses of my tumble, and

they can't fail to have some respect for a man that fell from the sky! Let them have their own way, then."

Joe was at this stage of his meditations, when he was landed amid a yelling crowd of both sexes, and all ages and sizes, but not of all colors. In fine, he was surrounded by a tribe of Biddiomahs as black as jet. Nor had he to blush for the scantiness of his costume, for he saw that he was in "undress" in the highest style of that country.

But before he had time to form an exact idea of the situation, there was no mistaking the agitation of which he instantly became the object, and this soon enabled him to pluck up courage, although the adventure of Kazah did come back rather vividly to his memory.

"I foresee that they are going to make a god of me again," thought he, "some son of the moon most likely. Well, one trade's as good as another when a man has no choice. The main thing is to gain time. Should the Victoria pass this way again, I'll take advantage of my new position to treat my worshippers here to a miracle when I go sailing up into the sky!"

While Joe's thoughts were running thus, the throng pressed around him. They prostrated themselves before him; they howled; they felt him; they became even annoyingly

familiar; but at the same time they had the consideration to offer him a superb banquet consisting of sour milk and rice pounded in honey. The worthy fellow, making the best of every thing, took one of the heartiest luncheons he ever ate in his life, and gave his new adorers an exalted idea of how the gods tuck away their food upon grand occasions.

When evening came, the sorcerers of the island took him respectfully by the hand, and conducted him to a sort of house surrounded with talismans; but, as he was entering it, Joe cast an uneasy look at the heaps of human bones that lay scattered around this sanctuary. But he had still more time to think about them when he found himself at last shut up in the cabin.

During the evening and through a part of the night, he heard festive chantings, the reverberations of a kind of drum, and a clatter of old iron, which were very sweet, no doubt, to African ears. Then there were howling choruses, accompanied by endless dances by gangs of natives who circled round and round the sacred hut with contortions and grimaces.

Joe could catch the sound of this deafening orchestra, through the mud and reeds of which his cabin was built; and perhaps under other circumstances he might have been

amused by these strange ceremonies; but his mind was soon disturbed by quite different and less agreeable reflections. Even looking at the bright side of things, he found it both stupid and sad to be left alone in the midst of this savage country and among these wild tribes. Few travellers who had penetrated to these regions had ever again seen their native land. Moreover, could he trust to the worship of which he saw himself the object? He had good reason to believe in the vanity of human greatness; and he asked himself whether, in this country, adoration did not sometimes go to the length of eating the object adored!

But, notwithstanding this rather perplexing prospect, after some hours of meditation, fatigue got the better of his gloomy thoughts, and Joe fell into a profound slumber, which would have lasted no doubt until sunrise, had not a very unexpected sensation of dampness awakened the sleeper. Ere long this dampness became water, and that water gained so rapidly that it had soon mounted to Joe's waist.

"What can this be?" said he; "a flood! a water-spout! or a new torture invented by these blacks? Faith, though, I'm not going to wait here till it's up to my neck!"

And, so saying, he burst through the frail wall with

a jog of his powerful shoulder, and found himself--where?  
--in the open lake! Island there was none. It had sunk  
during the night. In its place, the watery immensity of  
Lake Tchad!

"A poor country for the land-owners!" said Joe, once more  
vigorously resorting to his skill in the art of natation.

One of those phenomena, which are by no means unusual  
on Lake Tchad, had liberated our brave Joe. More than  
one island, that previously seemed to have the solidity  
of rock, has been submerged in this way; and the people  
living along the shores of the mainland have had to  
pick up the unfortunate survivors of these terrible catastrophes.

Joe knew nothing about this peculiarity of the region,  
but he was none the less ready to profit by it. He caught  
sight of a boat drifting about, without occupants, and was  
soon aboard of it. He found it to be but the trunk of a  
tree rudely hollowed out; but there were a couple of  
paddles in it, and Joe, availing himself of a rapid current,  
allowed his craft to float along.

"But let us see where we are," he said. "The polar-star  
there, that does its work honorably in pointing out  
the direction due north to everybody else, will, most likely,  
do me that service."



He discovered, with satisfaction, that the current was taking him toward the northern shore of the lake, and he allowed himself to glide with it. About two o'clock in the morning he disembarked upon a promontory covered with prickly reeds, that proved very provoking and inconvenient even to a philosopher like him; but a tree grew there expressly to offer him a bed among its branches, and Joe climbed up into it for greater security, and there, without sleeping much, however, awaited the dawn of day.

When morning had come with that suddenness which is peculiar to the equatorial regions, Joe cast a glance at the tree which had sheltered him during the last few hours, and beheld a sight that chilled the marrow in his bones. The branches of the tree were literally covered with snakes and chameleons! The foliage actually was hidden beneath their coils, so that the beholder might have fancied that he saw before him a new kind of tree that bore reptiles for its leaves and fruit. And all this horrible living mass writhed and twisted in the first rays of the morning sun! Joe experienced a keen sensation of terror mingled with disgust, as he looked at it, and he leaped precipitately from the tree amid the hissings of these new and unwelcome bedfellows.

"Now, there's something that I would never have believed!"

said he.

He was not aware that Dr. Vogel's last letters had made known this singular feature of the shores of Lake Tchad, where reptiles are more numerous than in any other part of the world. But after what he had just seen, Joe determined to be more circumspect for the future; and, taking his bearings by the sun, he set off afoot toward the northeast, avoiding with the utmost care cabins, huts, hovels, and dens of every description, that might serve in any manner as a shelter for human beings.

How often his gaze was turned upward to the sky! He hoped to catch a glimpse, each time, of the Victoria; and, although he looked vainly during all that long, fatiguing day of sore foot-travel, his confident reliance on his master remained undiminished. Great energy of character was needed to enable him thus to sustain the situation with philosophy. Hunger conspired with fatigue to crush him, for a man's system is not greatly restored and fortified by a diet of roots, the pith of plants, such as the Mele, or the fruit of the doum palm-tree; and yet, according to his own calculations, Joe was enabled to push on about twenty miles to the westward.

His body bore in scores of places the marks of the thorns with which the lake-reeds, the acacias, the mimosas,

and other wild shrubbery through which he had to force his way, are thickly studded; and his torn and bleeding feet rendered walking both painful and difficult. But at length he managed to react against all these sufferings; and when evening came again, he resolved to pass the night on the shores of Lake Tchad.

There he had to endure the bites of myriads of insects --gnats, mosquitoes, ants half an inch long, literally covered the ground; and, in less than two hours, Joe had not a rag remaining of the garments that had covered him, the insects having devoured them! It was a terrible night, that did not yield our exhausted traveller an hour of sleep. During all this time the wild-boars and native buffaloes, reenforced by the ajoub--a very dangerous species of lamantine --carried on their ferocious revels in the bushes and under the waters of the lake, filling the night with a hideous concert. Joe dared scarcely breathe. Even his courage and coolness had hard work to bear up against so terrible a situation.

At length, day came again, and Joe sprang to his feet precipitately; but judge of the loathing he felt when he saw what species of creature had shared his couch--a toad!--but a toad five inches in length, a monstrous, repulsive specimen of vermin that sat there staring at him with huge round eyes. Joe felt his stomach revolt at the

sight, and, regaining a little strength from the intensity of his repugnance, he rushed at the top of his speed and plunged into the lake. This sudden bath somewhat allayed the pangs of the itching that tortured his whole body; and, chewing a few leaves, he set forth resolutely, again feeling an obstinate resolution in the act, for which he could hardly account even to his own mind. He no longer seemed to have entire control of his own acts, and, nevertheless, he felt within him a strength superior to despair.

However, he began now to suffer terribly from hunger. His stomach, less resigned than he was, rebelled, and he was obliged to fasten a tendril of wild-vine tightly about his waist. Fortunately, he could quench his thirst at any moment, and, in recalling the sufferings he had undergone in the desert, he experienced comparative relief in his exemption from that other distressing want.

"What can have become of the Victoria?" he wondered. "The wind blows from the north, and she should be carried back by it toward the lake. No doubt the doctor has gone to work to right her balance, but yesterday would have given him time enough for that, so that may be to-day--but I must act just as if I was never to see him again. After all, if I only get to one of the large towns on the lake, I'll find myself no worse off than the travellers my master used to talk about. Why shouldn't

I work my way out of the scrape as well as they did?  
Some of them got back home again. Come, then! the  
deuce! Cheer up, my boy!"

Thus talking to himself and walking on rapidly, Joe  
came right upon a horde of natives in the very depths of  
the forest, but he halted in time and was not seen by them.  
The negroes were busy poisoning arrows with the juice of  
the euphorbium--a piece of work deemed a great affair  
among these savage tribes, and carried on with a sort of  
ceremonial solemnity.

Joe, entirely motionless and even holding his breath,  
was keeping himself concealed in a thicket, when, happening  
to raise his eyes, he saw through an opening in the  
foliage the welcome apparition of the balloon--the Victoria  
herself--moving toward the lake, at a height of only  
about one hundred feet above him. But he could not  
make himself heard; he dared not, could not make his  
friends even see him!

Tears came to his eyes, not of grief but of thankfulness;  
his master was then seeking him; his master had  
not left him to perish! He would have to wait for the  
departure of the blacks; then he could quit his hiding-place  
and run toward the borders of Lake Tchad!

But by this time the Victoria was disappearing in the distant sky. Joe still determined to wait for her; she would come back again, undoubtedly. She did, indeed, return, but farther to the eastward. Joe ran, gesticulated, shouted--but all in vain! A strong breeze was sweeping the balloon away with a speed that deprived him of all hope.

For the first time, energy and confidence abandoned the heart of the unfortunate man. He saw that he was lost. He thought his master gone beyond all prospect of return. He dared no longer think; he would no longer reflect!

Like a crazy man, his feet bleeding, his body cut and torn, he walked on during all that day and a part of the next night. He even dragged himself along, sometimes on his knees, sometimes with his hands. He saw the moment nigh when all his strength would fail, and nothing would be left to him but to sink upon the ground and die.

Thus working his way along, he at length found himself close to a marsh, or what he knew would soon become a marsh, for night had set in some hours before, and he fell by a sudden misstep into a thick, clinging mire. In spite of all his efforts, in spite of his desperate struggles, he felt himself sinking gradually in the swampy ooze, and in a

few minutes he was buried to his waist.

"Here, then, at last, is death!" he thought, in agony,  
"and what a death!"

He now began to struggle again, like a madman; but his efforts only served to bury him deeper in the tomb that the poor doomed lad was hollowing for himself; not a log of wood or a branch to buoy him up; not a reed to which he might cling! He felt that all was over! His eyes convulsively closed!

"Master! master!--Help!" were his last words; but his voice, despairing, unaided, half stifled already by the rising mire, died away feebly on the night.