

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIXTH.

A Throng of People on the Horizon.--A Troop of Arabs.--The Pursuit.
--It is He.--Fall from Horseback.--The Strangled Arab.--A Ball from
Kennedy.--Adroit Manoeuvres.--Caught up flying.--Joe saved at last.

From the moment when Kennedy resumed his post of observation in the front of the car, he had not ceased to watch the horizon with his utmost attention.

After the lapse of some time he turned toward the doctor and said:

"If I am not greatly mistaken I can see, off yonder in the distance, a throng of men or animals moving. It is impossible to make them out yet, but I observe that they are in violent motion, for they are raising a great cloud of dust."

"May it not be another contrary breeze?" said the doctor, "another whirlwind coming to drive us back northward again?" and while speaking he stood up to examine the horizon.

"I think not, Samuel; it is a troop of gazelles or of wild oxen."

"Perhaps so, Dick; but yon throng is some nine or

ten miles from us at least, and on my part, even with the glass, I can make nothing of it!"

"At all events I shall not lose sight of it. There is something remarkable about it that excites my curiosity. Sometimes it looks like a body of cavalry manoeuvring. Ah! I was not mistaken. It is, indeed, a squadron of horsemen. Look--look there!"

The doctor eyed the group with great attention, and, after a moment's pause, remarked:

"I believe that you are right. It is a detachment of Arabs or Tibbous, and they are galloping in the same direction with us, as though in flight, but we are going faster than they, and we are rapidly gaining on them. In half an hour we shall be near enough to see them and know what they are."

Kennedy had again lifted his glass and was attentively scrutinizing them. Meanwhile the crowd of horsemen was becoming more distinctly visible, and a few were seen to detach themselves from the main body.

"It is some hunting manoeuvre, evidently," said Kennedy.

"Those fellows seem to be in pursuit of something.

I would like to know what they are about."

"Patience, Dick! In a little while we shall overtake them, if they continue on the same route. We are going at the rate of twenty miles per hour, and no horse can keep up with that."

Kennedy again raised his glass, and a few minutes later he exclaimed:

"They are Arabs, galloping at the top of their speed; I can make them out distinctly. They are about fifty in number. I can see their bournouses puffed out by the wind. It is some cavalry exercise that they are going through. Their chief is a hundred paces ahead of them and they are rushing after him at headlong speed."

"Whoever they may be, Dick, they are not to be feared, and then, if necessary, we can go higher."

"Wait, doctor--wait a little!"

"It's curious," said Kennedy again, after a brief pause, "but there's something going on that I can't exactly explain. By the efforts they make, and the irregularity of their line, I should fancy that those Arabs are pursuing some one, instead of following."

"Are you certain of that, Dick?"

"Oh! yes, it's clear enough now. I am right! It is a pursuit--a hunt--but a man-hunt! That is not their chief riding ahead of them, but a fugitive."

"A fugitive!" exclaimed the doctor, growing more and more interested.

"Yes!"

"Don't lose sight of him, and let us wait!"

Three or four miles more were quickly gained upon these horsemen, who nevertheless were dashing onward with incredible speed.

"Doctor! doctor!" shouted Kennedy in an agitated voice.

"What is the matter, Dick?"

"Is it an illusion? Can it be possible?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wait!" and so saying, the Scot wiped the sights of

his spy-glass carefully, and looked through it again intently.

"Well?" questioned the doctor.

"It is he, doctor!"

"He!" exclaimed Ferguson with emotion.

"It is he! no other!" and it was needless to pronounce the name.

"Yes! it is he! on horseback, and only a hundred paces in advance of his enemies! He is pursued!"

"It is Joe--Joe himself!" cried the doctor, turning pale.

"He cannot see us in his flight!"

"He will see us, though!" said the doctor, lowering the flame of his blow-pipe.

"But how?"

"In five minutes we shall be within fifty feet of the ground, and in fifteen we shall be right over him!"

"We must let him know it by firing a gun!"

"No! he can't turn back to come this way. He's headed off!"

"What shall we do, then?"

"We must wait."

"Wait?--and these Arabs!"

"We shall overtake them. We'll pass them. We are not more than two miles from them, and provided that Joe's horse holds out!"

"Great God!" exclaimed Kennedy, suddenly.

"What is the matter?"

Kennedy had uttered a cry of despair as he saw Joe fling himself to the ground. His horse, evidently exhausted, had just fallen headlong.

"He sees us!" cried the doctor, "and he motions to us, as he gets upon his feet!"

"But the Arabs will overtake him! What is he waiting for? Ah! the brave lad! Huzza!" shouted the

sportsman, who could no longer restrain his feelings.

Joe, who had immediately sprung up after his fall, just as one of the swiftest horsemen rushed upon him, bounded like a panther, avoided his assailant by leaping to one side, jumped up behind him on the crupper, seized the Arab by the throat, and, strangling him with his sinewy hands and fingers of steel, flung him on the sand, and continued his headlong flight.

A tremendous howl was heard from the Arabs, but, completely engrossed by the pursuit, they had not taken notice of the balloon, which was now but five hundred paces behind them, and only about thirty feet from the ground. On their part, they were not twenty lengths of their horses from the fugitive.

One of them was very perceptibly gaining on Joe, and was about to pierce him with his lance, when Kennedy, with fixed eye and steady hand, stopped him short with a ball, that hurled him to the earth.

Joe did not even turn his head at the report. Some of the horsemen reined in their barbs, and fell on their faces in the dust as they caught sight of the Victoria; the rest continued their pursuit.

"But what is Joe about?" said Kennedy; "he don't stop!"

"He's doing better than that, Dick! I understand him! He's keeping on in the same direction as the balloon. He relies upon our intelligence. Ah! the noble fellow! We'll carry him off in the very teeth of those Arab rascals! We are not more than two hundred paces from him!"

"What are we to do?" asked Kennedy.

"Lay aside your rifle, Dick."

And the Scot obeyed the request at once.

"Do you think that you can hold one hundred and fifty pounds of ballast in your arms?"

"Ay, more than that!"

"No! That will be enough!"

And the doctor proceeded to pile up bags of sand in Kennedy's arms.

"Hold yourself in readiness in the back part of the car, and be prepared to throw out that ballast at a single effort. But, for your life, don't do so until I give the word!"

"Be easy on that point."

"Otherwise, we should miss Joe, and he would be lost."

"Count upon me!"

The Victoria at that moment almost commanded the troop of horsemen who were still desperately urging their steeds at Joe's heels. The doctor, standing in the front of the car, held the ladder clear, ready to throw it at any moment. Meanwhile, Joe had still maintained the distance between himself and his pursuers--say about fifty feet. The Victoria was now ahead of the party.

"Attention!" exclaimed the doctor to Kennedy.

"I'm ready!"

"Joe, look out for yourself!" shouted the doctor in his sonorous, ringing voice, as he flung out the ladder, the lowest ratlines of which tossed up the dust of the road.

As the doctor shouted, Joe had turned his head, but without checking his horse. The ladder dropped close to him, and at the instant he grasped it the doctor again shouted to Kennedy:

"Throw ballast!"

"It's done!"

And the Victoria, lightened by a weight greater than Joe's, shot up one hundred and fifty feet into the air.

Joe clung with all his strength to the ladder during the wide oscillations that it had to describe, and then making an indescribable gesture to the Arabs, and climbing with the agility of a monkey, he sprang up to his companions, who received him with open arms.

The Arabs uttered a scream of astonishment and rage. The fugitive had been snatched from them on the wing, and the Victoria was rapidly speeding far beyond their reach.

"Master! Kennedy!" ejaculated Joe, and overwhelmed, at last, with fatigue and emotion, the poor fellow fainted away, while Kennedy, almost beside himself, kept exclaiming:

"Saved--saved!"

"Saved indeed!" murmured the doctor, who had recovered

all his phlegmatic coolness.

Joe was almost naked. His bleeding arms, his body covered with cuts and bruises, told what his sufferings had been. The doctor quietly dressed his wounds, and laid him comfortably under the awning.

Joe soon returned to consciousness, and asked for a glass of brandy, which the doctor did not see fit to refuse, as the faithful fellow had to be indulged.

After he had swallowed the stimulant, Joe grasped the hands of his two friends and announced that he was ready to relate what had happened to him.

But they would not allow him to talk at that time, and he sank back into a profound sleep, of which he seemed to have the greatest possible need.

The Victoria was then taking an oblique line to the westward. Driven by a tempestuous wind, it again approached the borders of the thorny desert, which the travellers descried over the tops of palm-trees, bent and broken by the storm; and, after having made a run of two hundred miles since rescuing Joe, it passed the tenth degree of east longitude about nightfall.