

The Great Desert.

A Graphic Picture of Fearful Scenes in Sahara.

A traveller who has journeyed across the great Sahara desert in Africa, thus describes in the New Orleans Times the terrible scenes that he witnessed: Riding five hundred metres in advance of our little troop, the horseman who acts as guide directs our way over the dead level of the dismal solitude. For the last ten minutes he kept his horse at a walk, sitting motionless in his saddle, and singing in his own tongue a melancholy, long-drawn chant; with singularly descriptive Oriental rhyme. We imitate his pace. Then all of a sudden he starts off at a trot, standing in his stirrups erect, with his great burnous floating behind him. And we all trot after him, until he draws rein again to re-commence a gentle pace.

I ask my comrade: "How can he guide us through these naked wastes without a single mark to show the way?"

But he answered: "There are only the bones of camels."

And in fact, every quarter of an hour, we came across some enormous bone gnawed by beasts, cooked by the sun—all white, in strong relief against the sand. Sometimes it was part of a leg, sometimes part of a jaw, sometimes a part of the vertebral column. The caravans leave behind them every animal they cannot keep up; and the jackals do not carry all the remains away.

And for several days we continued this monotonous voyage, always in the saddle, always behind the same Arab, almost without speaking.

Now, one afternoon, as we were approaching Bou-Saada, I saw, far off, before us, a great dark mass, made larger by the mirage,—the form of which astonished me. At our approach two vultures flew away. It was a carcass, still stiff in spite of the heat,—glossy as though varnished, with putrid blood. The chest alone remained; the limbs had doubtless been torn off and carried away by the voracious devourers of the dead.

"Ah! There are travellers ahead of us!" said the lieutenant.

Some hours later we entered a ravine, a sort of a defile, a frightful furnace, bordered by huge rocks toothed like a saw—sharp, pointed, ragged, rabid, in revolt, as it were against the implacably ferocious sky. Another corpse was lying there. And a jackal that had been devouring it flew away.

Then, as we passed out of the ravine, a gray heap of something before us moved; and slowly, at the end of a disproportionately long neck, I saw the head of an agonizing camel rise up. He was lying there—and had been lying for three or four days, perhaps—on his side, dying of fatigue and thirst. His long members, that seemed inert, broken, all mixed up together, were stretched upon the fiery soil. And, hearing us coming, he had lifted up his head, like a light-house. His forehead, already gnawed by the sun, was but one wound—one running sore; and his resigned gaze followed us. He did not utter a moan, did not make the least effort to rise. One would have thought, that he had seen so many of his brothers die in their long voyages through desolation he knew to well the merciless of man. Now it was his turn—that was all! And we passed on.

But when I looked back a long, long time afterward, I saw still rising up from the sand the lofty neck of the abandoned beast, watching to the end the last living creatures he could ever behold, passing beyond the horizon.

An hour later it was a dog, crouching close to a rock, with jaws wide open and fangs glittering, incapable of moving a paw, with eyes fixed upon two vultures who sat not far off, pluming themselves while waiting for his death. He was so possessed with terror of those terribly patient birds, waiting for his flesh, that he never turned his head, and did not even feel the stones that a saphi flung at him.

And, suddenly at the outlet of another defile, I saw the oasis before me.

It was an apparition never to be forgotten. One has traversed endless plains, climbed mountains all craggy, bald, calcined, without ever seeing a tree, a plant; a single green leaf, and lo!—right before you, at your very feet, is an opaque mass of sombre verdure—as it were, a lake of foliage extending upon the sand. Then, further on, the desert recommences, lengthening infinitely to the indefinable horizon where it mixes with the sky.

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