

The Caravan in the Deserts

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by

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THE CARAVAN IN THE DESERTS.

CALL it not Loneliness, to dwell
In woodland shade, or hermit dell ;
To pierce the forest's twilight maze,
Or from the Alpine summit gaze ;
For Nature there all joyous reigns,
And fills with life her wild domains :
A bird's light wing may break the air,
A fairy stream may murmur there ;
A bee the mountain-rose may seek,
A chamois bound from peak to peak ;
An eagle, rushing to the sky,
Wake the deep echoes with his cry ;
And still some sound, thy heart to cheer,
Some voice, though not of man, is near.

But he, whose weary step has trac'd
Mysterious Afric's awful waste,
Whose eye Arabia's wilds hath view'd,
Can tell thee what is Solitude !
It is, to traverse lifeless plains
Where everlasting stillness reigns,
And billowy sands, and dazzling sky,
Seem boundless, as Infinity !
It is, to sink with speechless dread
In scenes unmeet for mortal tread,
Sever'd from earthly being's trace,
Alone amidst unmeasur'd space.

'Tis noon—and fearfully profound
Silence is on the desert round.
Supreme she reigns, above, beneath,
With all the attributes of Death !
No bird the blazing heav'n may dare,
No insect 'bide the scorching air ;
The ostrich, though of sun-born race,
Seeks a more shelter'd dwelling-place ;
The lion slumbers in his lair,
The serpent shuns the noontide glare ;
But slowly winds the patient train
Of camels, o'er the blasted plain,
Where they and man may brave alone
The terrors of the burning zone.

Faint not, oh Pilgrims ! though on high
As a volcano flame the sky ;
Shrink not, though, as a furnace glow,
The dark red seas of sand below ;
Though not a shadow, save your own,
Across the dread expanse is thrown :
Mark, where your feverish lips to lave,
Wide spreads the fresh transparent wave !
Urge your tir'd camels on, and take
Your rest beside yon glist'ning lake ;
Thence, haply, cooler gales may spring,
And fan your brows with lighter wing.
Lo ! nearer now, its glassy tide
Reflects the date-tree on its side :
Speed on ! pure draughts and genial air,
And verdant shade await you there ;

Oh ! glimpse of heav'n ! to him unknown
That hath not track'd the burning zone !
—Forward they press—they gaze dis-
may'd—

The waters of the desert fade !
Melting to vapours, that elude
The eye, the lip, their brightness woo'd*.

What meteor comes ?—a purple haze
Hath half obscur'd the noontide rays :
Onward it moves in swift career,
A blush upon the atmosphere ;
Haste, haste ! avert th' impending doom,
Fall prostrate !—'tis the dread Simoom !
Bow down your faces—till the blast
On its red wing of flame hath past,
Far bearing o'er the sandy wave,
The viewless angel of the grave.

It came—'tis vanish'd—but hath left
The wanderers e'en of hope bereft † ;
The ardent heart, the vigorous frame,
Pride, courage, strength, its power could
tame ;

Faint with despondence, worn with toil,
They sink upon the burning soil ;
Resign'd, amidst those realms of gloom,
To find their death-bed and their tomb.

But onward still !—yon distant spot
Of verdure can deceive you not.
Yon palms, which tremulously seem'd
Reflected as the waters gleam'd,
Along th' horizon's verge display'd,
Still rear their slender colonnade,
A landmark, guiding o'er the plain,
The Caravan's exhausted train.

* The *mirage*, or nitrous sand assuming the appearance of water.

† The extreme languor and despondence produced by the Simoom, even when its effects are not fatal, have been described by many travellers.

Fair is that little Isle of Bliss,
The desert's emerald Oasis.
A rainbow on the torrent's wave,
A gem, embosom'd in the grave,
The sunbeam of a stormy day,
Its beauty's image might convey ;
Beauty, in horror's lap that sleeps,
While silence round her vigil keeps.

Rest, weary Pilgrims ! calmly laid
To slumber in th' Acacia-shade.
Rest, where the shrubs your camels
bruise
Their aromatic breath diffuse ;
Where softer light the sunbeams pour,
Through the tall palm and sycamore,
And the rich date luxuriant spreads
Its pendent clusters o'er your heads.
Nature once more, to seal your eyes,
Murmurs her sweetest lullabies ;
Again each heart the music hails,
Of rustling leaves and sighing gales ;

And oh ! to Afric's child how dear !
The voice of fountains gushing near !

Sweet be your slumbers ! and your dreams,
Of waving groves and rippling streams !
Far be the serpent's venom'd coil
From the brief respite won by toil !
Far be the awful shades of those
Who deep beneath the sands repose,
The hosts, to whom the desert's breath
Bore swift and stern the call of death !
Sleep ! nor may scorching blast invade
The freshness of th' Acacia-shade ;
But gales of heav'n your spirits bless
With life's best balm—forgetfulness ;
Till night from many an urn diffuse
The treasures of her world of dews.

The day hath clos'd—the moon on high
Walks in her cloudless majesty.
A thousand stars to Afric's heav'n
Serene magnificence have given ;
Pure beacons of the sky, whose flame
Shines forth eternally the same.
Blest be their beams ! whose holy light
Shall guide the camel's footsteps right,
And lead, as with a torch divine,
The Pilgrim to his Prophet's shrine.

—Rise ! bid your Isle of Palms adieu,
Again your lonely march pursue,
While winds of night are freshly blowing,
And heav'ns with softer beauty glowing.

—Tis silence all—the solemn scene
Wears, at each step, a ruder mien ;
For giant-rocks, at distance pil'd,
Cast their deep shadows o'er the wild.
Darkly they rise—what eye hath view'd
The caverns of their solitude ?
Away !—within those awful cells,
The savage lord of Afric dwells !
Heard ye his voice ?—the Lion's roar
Swells as when billows break on shore ;
Well may the camel shake with fear,
And the steed pant—his foe is near.
Haste, light the torch—bid watch-fires
 throw

Far o'er the waste a ruddy glow ;
Keep vigil—guard the bright array
Of flames that scare him from his prey !
Within their magic circle press,
Oh wanderers of the wilderness !
Heap high the pile, and, by its blaze,
Tell the wild tales of elder days :
Arabia's wondrous lore—that dwells
On warrior deeds and wizard spells,
Enchanted domes, 'mid scenes like these,
Rising to vanish with the breeze ;
Gardens, whose fruits are gems, that shed
Their light where mortal may not tread,
And genii, o'er whose pearly halls,
Th' eternal billow heaves and falls.
With charms like these, of mystic power,
Watchers ! beguile the midnight hour.
Slowly that hour hath roll'd away,
And star by star withdraws its ray.

Dark children of the sun ! again
Your own rich Orient hails his reign.
He comes, but veil'd ; with sanguine
glare

Tinging the mists that load the air ;
Sounds of dismay, and signs of flame,
Th' approaching hurricane proclaim.
'Tis death's red banner streams on high—
Fly to the rocks for shelter—fly !
Lo ! darkening o'er the fiery skies,
The pillars of the desert rise !
On, in terrific grandeur wheeling,
A giant-host, the heav'ns concealing,
They move like mighty genii-forms,
Towering immense midst clouds and
storms.

Who shall escape ? with awful force
The whirlwind bears them on their course ;
They join—they rush resistless on—
—The landmarks of the plain are gone !
The steps, the forms, from earth effac'd
Of those who trod the boundless waste !
All whelm'd, all hush'd !—None left to
bear

Sad record how they perish'd there !
No stone their tale of death shall tell,
—The desert guards its mysteries well !
And o'er th' unfathom'd sandy deep
Where low their nameless relics sleep,
Oft shall the future Pilgrim tread,
Nor know his steps are on the dead !
