THE DESERT HOME

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OR THE

ADVENTURES OF A LOST FAMILY IN THE WILDERNESS

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE GREAT AMERICAN DESERT

THERE is a great desert in the interior of North America. It is almost as large as the famous Saära of Africa. It is fifteen hundred miles long, and a thousand wide. Now, if it were of a regular shape —that is to say, a parallelogram—you could at once compute its area, by multiplying the length upon the breadth and you would obtain one million and a half for the result—one million and a half of square miles. But its outlines are as yet very imperfectly known; and although it is fully fifteen hundred miles long, and in some places a thousand in breadth, its surface-extent is probably not over one million of square miles, or twenty-five times the size of England. Fancy a desert twenty-five times as big as all England! Do you not think that it has received a most appropriate name when it is called the Great American Desert?

Now, my young friend, what do you understand by a desert? I think I can guess. When you read or hear of a desert, you think of a vast level

plain, covered with sand, and without trees, or grass, or any kind of vegetation. You think, also, of this sand being blown about in thick yellow clouds, and no water to be met with in any direction. This is your idea of a desert, is it not? Well, it is not altogether the correct one. It is true that in almost every desert there are these sandy plains, yet are there other parts of its surface of a far different character, equally deserving the name of desert. Although the interior of the great Saära has not been fully explored, enough is known of it to prove that it contains large tracks of mountainous and hilly country, with rocks and valleys, lakes, rivers, and springs. There are, also, fertile spots, at wide distances from each other, covered with trees, and shrubs, and beautiful vegetation. Some of these spots are small, while others are of large extent, and inhabited by independent tribes, and even whole kingdoms of people. A fertile tract of this kind is called an oasis; and, by looking at your map, you will perceive that there are many oases in the Saära of Africa.

Of a similar character is the Great American Desert; but its surface is still more varied with what may be termed 'geographical features.' There are plains—some of them more than a hundred miles wide—where you can see nothing but white sand, often drifting about on the wind, and here and there thrown into long ridges such as those made by a snowstorm. There are other plains, equally large, where no sand appears, but brown barren earth utterly destitute of vegetation. There are others, again, on which grows a stunted shrub with leaves of a pale silvery colour. In some places it grows so thickly,

interlocking its twisted and knotty branches, that a horseman can hardly ride through among them. This shrub is the artemisia—a species of wild sage or wormwood,—and the plains upon which it grows are called by the hunters, who cross them, the sage prairies. Other plains are met with that present a black aspect to the traveller. These are covered with lava, that at some distant period of time has been vomited forth from volcanic mountains, and now lies frozen up, and broken into small fragments like the stones upon a new-made road. Still other plains present themselves in the American Desert. Some are white, as if snow had fallen freshly upon them, and yet it is not snow, but salt! Yes; pure white salt—covering the ground six inches deep, and for fifty miles in every direction! Others, again, have a similar appearance; but instead of salt, you find the substance which covers them to be soda—a beautiful efflorescence of soda!

There are mountains, too—indeed, one-half of this Desert is very mountainous; and the great chain of the Rocky Mountains—of which you have no doubt heard—runs sheer through it from north to south, and divides it into two nearly equal parts. But there are other mountains besides these; mountains of every height, and sometimes in their shape and colour presenting very striking and singular appearances. Some of them run for miles in horizontal ridges like the roofs of houses, and seemingly so narrow at their tops that one might sit astride of them. Others, again, of a conical form, stand out in the plain apart from the rest, and look like teacups turned upside down in the middle of a table. Then there are

sharp peaks that shoot upward like needles, and others shaped like the dome of some great cathedral—like the dome of St. Paul's. These mountains are of many colours. Some are dark, or dark green, or blue when seen from a distance. They are of this colour when covered by forests of pine or cedar, both of which trees are found in great plenty among the mountains of the Desert.

There are many mountains, where no trees are seen, nor any signs of vegetation along their sides. Huge naked rocks of granite appear piled upon each other, or jutting out over dark and frowning chasms. There are peaks perfectly white, because they are covered with a thick mantle of snow. These can always be seen from the greatest distance, as the snow lying upon them all the year without melting proves them to be of vast elevation above the level of the sea. There are other peaks almost as white, and yet it is not with snow. They are of a milky hue, and stunted cedar-trees may be seen clinging in seams and crevices along their sides. These are mountains of pure limestone, or the white quartz rock. There are mountains, again, upon which neither tree nor leaf is to be seen; but, in their stead, the most vivid colours of red and green and yellow and white, appearing in stripes along their sides, as though they had been freshly painted. These stripes mark the strata of different coloured rocks, of which the mountains are composed. And there are still other mountains in the Great American Desert, to startle the traveller with their strange appearance. They are those that glitter with the mica and selenite. These, when seen from a distance

flashing under the sun, look as though they were mountains of silver and gold!

The rivers, too. Strange rivers are they. Some run over broad shallow beds of bright sand. Large rivers—hundreds of yards in width, with sparkling waters. Follow them down their course. What do you find? Instead of growing larger, like the rivers of your own land, they become less and less, until at length their waters sink into the sands, and you see nothing but the dry channel for miles after miles! Go still farther down, and again the water appears, and increases in volume, until—thousands of miles from the sea—large ships can float upon their bosom. Such are the Arkansas and the Platte.

There are other rivers that run between bleak, rocky banks—banks a thousand feet high, whose bald, naked 'bluffs' frown at each other across the deep chasm, in the bottom of which roars the troubled water. Often these banks extend for hundreds of miles, so steep at all points that one cannot go down to the bed of their stream; and often—often—the traveller has perished with thirst, while the roar of their water was sounding in his ears! Such are the Colorado and the Snake.

Still others go sweeping through the broad plains, tearing up the clay with their mighty floods, and year after year changing their channels, until they are sometimes an hundred miles from their ancient beds. Here they are found gurgling for many leagues under ground—under vast rafts formed by the trees which they have borne downwards in their current. There you find them winding by a thousand loops like the sinuosities of a great serpent, rolling

sluggishly along, with waters red and turbid as though they were rivers of blood! Such are the Brazos and the Red River.

Strange rivers are they that struggle through the mountains, and valleys, and plateau-lands of the Great American Desert.

Not less strange are its lakes. Some lie in the deep recesses of hills that dip down so steeply you cannot reach their shore; while the mountains around them are so bleak and naked, that not even a bird ever wings its flight across their silent waters. Other lakes are seen in broad, barren plains; and yet, a few years after, the traveller finds them not—they have dried up and disappeared. Some are fresh with waters like crystal—others brackish and muddy—while many of them are more salt than the ocean itself.

In this Desert there are springs—springs of soda and sulphur and salt waters; and others so hot that they boil up as in a great caldron, and you could not dip your finger into them without scalding it.

There are vast caves piercing the sides of the mountains, and deep chasms opening into the plains—some of them so deep, that you might fancy mountains had been scooped out to form them. They are called 'barrancas.' There are precipices rising straight up from the plains—thousands of feet in height—and steep as a wall; and through the mountains themselves you may see great clefts cut by the rivers, as though they had been tunnelled and their tops had fallen in. They are called 'canons.' All these singular formations mark the wild region of the Great American Desert.

It has its denizens. There are oases in it; some of them large, and settled by civilized men. One of these is the country of New Mexico, containing many towns, and 100,000 inhabitants. These are of the Spanish and mixed Indian races. Another oasis is the country around the Great Salt and Utah Lakes. Here is also a settlement, established in 1846. Its people are Americans and Englishmen. They are the Mormons; and, although they dwell hundreds of miles from any sea, they seem likely to become a large and powerful nation of themselves.

Besides these two great oasis, there are thousands of others, of all sizes—from fifty miles in breadth, to the little spot of a few acres, formed by the fertilizing waters of some gurgling spring. Many of these are without inhabitants. In others, again, dwell tribes of Indians—some of them numerous and powerful, possessing horses and cattle; while others are found in small groups of three or four families each, subsisting miserably upon roots, seeds, grass, reptiles, and insects. In addition to the two great settlements we have mentioned, and the Indians, there is another class of men scattered over this region. These are white men—hunters and trappers. They subsist by trapping the beaver, and hunting the buffalo and other animals. Their life is one continued scene of peril, both from the wild animals which they encounter in their lonely excursions, and the hostile Indians with whom they come in contact. These men procure the furs of the beaver, the otter, the musk-rat, the marten, the ermine, the lynx, the fox, and the skins of many other animals. This is their business, and by this they live. There are

forts, or trading posts—established by adventurous merchants—at long distances from each other; and at these forts the trappers exchange their furs for food, clothing and for the necessary implements of their perilous calling.

There is another class of men who traverse the Great Desert. For many years there has been a commerce carried on between the oasis of New Mexico and the United States. This commerce employs a considerable amount of capital, and a great number of men—principally Americans. The goods are transported in large wagons drawn by mules or oxen; and a train of these wagons is called a 'caravan.' Other caravans—Spanish ones—cross the western wing of the Desert, from Sonora to California, and thence to New Mexico. Thus, you see, the American Desert has its caravans as well as the Saära of Africa.

These caravans travel for hundreds of miles through countries in which there are no inhabitants except the scattered and roving band of Indians; and there are many parts on their routes so sterile, that not even Indians can exist there.

The caravans, however, usually follow a track which is known, and where grass and water may be found at certain seasons of the year. There are several of these tracks, or, as they are called, 'trails,' that cross from the frontier settlements of the United States to those of New Mexico. Between one and another of these trails, however, stretch vast regions of desert country—entirely unexplored and unknown—and many fertile spots exist, that have never been trodden by the foot of man.

Such, then, my young friend, is a rough sketch of

some of the more prominent features of the Great American Desert.

Let me conduct you into it, and show you—from a nearer view—some of its wild but interesting aspects. I shall not show you the wildest of them, lest they might terrify you. Fear not—I shall not lead you into danger. Follow me.

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE PEAK

SOME years ago, I was one of a party of 'prairie merchants,' who crossed with a caravan from St. Louis on the Mississippi, to Santa Fé in New Mexico. We followed the usual 'Santa Fé trail.' Not disposing of all our goods in New Mexico, we kept on to the great town of Chihuahua, which lies farther to the south. There we settled our business, and were about to return to the United States the way we had come, when it was proposed (as we had now nothing to encumber us but our bags of money), that we should explore a new 'trail' across the prairies. We all wished to find a better route than the Santa Fé road; and we expected that such an one lay between the town of El Paso—on the Del Norté River—and some point on the frontiers of Arkansas.

On arriving at El Paso, we sold our wagons, and purchased Mexican pack-mules—engaging, at the same time, a number of 'arrieros,' or muleteers to manage them. We also purchased saddle-horses—the small tight horses of New Mexico, which are excellent for journeying in the Desert. We provided ourselves, moreover, with such articles of clothing

and provisions as we might require upon our unknown route. Having got everything ready for the journey, we bade adieu to El Paso, and turned our faces eastward. There were in all twelve of us—traders, and a number of hunters, who had agreed to accompany us across the plains. There was a miner, too, who belonged to a copper mine near El Paso. There were also four Mexicans—the 'arrieros' who had charge of our little train of pack-mules. Of course, we were all well armed, and mounted upon the best horses we could procure for money.

We had first to cross over the Rocky Mountains, which run north and south through all the country. That chain of them which lies eastward of El Paso is called the Sierra de Organos, or 'Organ mountains.' They are so called from the fancied resemblance which is seen in one of their cliffs to the tubes of an organ. These cliffs are of trap rock, which, as you are aware, often presents very fantastic and singular formations, by means of its peculiar stratification. But there is a still more curious feature about these Organ mountains. On the top of one of them is a lake, which has its tides that ebb and flow like the tides of the ocean! No one has yet accounted for this remarkable phenomenon, and it remains a puzzle to the geological inquirer. This lake is a favourite resort for the wild animals of the country, and deer and elk are found in great numbers around its shores. They are not even molested by the Mexican hunters of these parts, who seem to have a superstitious fear of the spirits of the Organ mountains, and rarely climb up their steep sides.

Our party found an easy pass through the range, which brought us out into an open country on the other side. After travelling several days through the eastern spurs of the Rocky Mountains, known as the Sierras Sacramento and Guadalupe, we struck upon a small stream, which we followed downward. It brought us at length to a large river running north and sonth, which we knew to be the celebrated Pecos, or, as it is sometimes called, the Puerco. These, you will perceive, are all Spanish names, for the country through which we were travelling, although uninhabited and almost unexplored by the Mexican Spaniards, was yet part of their territory; and such objects as were known to them, through hunters or others, had received names in their language.

We crossed the Pecos, and travelled for some days up its left bank, in hopes of reaching some other stream that might run into it from the east, which we could follow. No such stream appeared; and we were forced at times to leave the Pecos itself, and make out into the open country for a distance of miles, before we could get back to its waters. This was on account of the deep channel which the river—working for long ages—had cut through hills that opposed its course, leaving on both sides vast precipices for its banks.

Having got farther to the north than we wished, our party at length determined to attempt the passage of the arid plain which stretched away eastward as far as the eye could reach. It was a perilous enterprise to leave the river, without some knowledge that there was water ahead of us. Travellers, under

such circumstances, usually keep close to a stream—whenever it runs in the direction in which they wish to go; but we had grown impatient on not finding one flowing into the Pecos from the east; and, having filled our gourd canteens, and given our animals as much water as they could drink, we turned their heads towards the open plain.

After riding for several hours, we found ourselves in the midst of a wide desert, with neither hill, mountain, nor any other landmark in view. Scarcely a trace of vegetation appeared around us. Here and there were patches of stunted sage-bushes and clumps of thorny cactus; but not a blade of grass to gladden the eyes of our animals. Not a drop of water was met with, nor any indication that rain had ever fallen upon that parched plain. The soil was as dry as powder, and the dust, kicked up by the hoofs of our mules and horses, hung around us in clouds as we marched. In addition to this, the heat was excessive; and this, with the dust and fatigue of travel, brought on an unquenchable thirst that soon caused us to drink up the contents of our water-gourds. Long before night they were all empty, and every one of our party was crying out from thrist. Our animals suffered worse—for we, at least, had food, while they, poor brutes, were without a bite to sustain them.

We could not well turn back. We thought we should surely come to water, sooner than we could get back to the river we had left; and with this hope we struggled on. Late in the afternoon, our eyes were greeted by a glad sight, that caused us to start up in our saddles with a feeling of joy. You may

think that it was water—but it was not. It was a white object that appeared against the sky at a great distance. It was of a triangular shape, and seemed to be suspended in the air like the upper half of a huge kite. All of us knew at a glance what it was. We knew that it was the white cap of a snowy mountain.

You will wonder why this sight should have given us such feelings of pleasure, as, in your opinion, there is nothing very hospitable in the appearance of a snow-capped mountain. That is because you do not understand the peculiarities of the Desert. I will explain. We knew, from the appearance of the mountain, that it was one of those where the snow lies for ever, and which throughout Mexico are termed 'Nevada', or snowy. We knew, moreover, that wherever these are met with, streams of water will be found ruuning down their sides, almost at all seasons, but certainly in hot or summer weather, in consequence of the melting of the snow. It was this knowledge, then, that cheered us; and although the mountain seemed at a great distance, we pushed forward with renewed energy and hope. Our animals, too, as if they also understood the matter, neighed and brayed loudly, and stepped out with a more springy and elastic tread.

The white triangle grew bigger as we advanced. At sunset we could distinguish the brown seams in the lower part of the monntain; and the yellow rays glancing upon the snowy crystals of the cone caused it to glitter like a coronet of gold. The sight cheered us on.

The sun set, and the moon took his place in

the heavens. Under her pale light we travelled on—the peak of the mountain still glistening coldly before us. We travelled all night—and why not? There was nothing to halt for. We could not have halted, except to die.

The morning broke upon us as we dragged wearily along. We could not have ridden less than an hundred miles since leaving the Pecos river? and yet to our dismay, the mountain was still at a good distance before us. As the day brightened, we could trace the configuration of its base; and we observed that upon its southern face a deep ravine indented the mountain nearly to its top. On its western side—the one nearest us—there was no such feature; and we conjectured that the most likely place for water would be in the ravine on the south, where a stream would be formed by the aggregation of the melted snows.

We directed our course toward the point, where the ravine appeared to have its debouchment on the plain. We had calculated rightly. As we approached it, winding round the foot of the mountain, we saw a line of bright green colour, running out into the brown desert. It looked like a low hedge, with here and there tall trees growing up above the rest. We knew well what it was—a grove of willows, with trees of cotton-wood interspersed. We knew them to be sure signs of water, and we hailed their appearance with delight. The men huzza'd hoarsely—the horses neighed—the mules hinnied—and in a few moments more, men, mules, and horses, were kneeling by a crystal streamlet, and drinking deeply of its sweet and refreshing waters.