

existence of cavities, or depressions of the soil, which permit the rays of light to describe a very bold arc before they reach the spectator's eye.

Towards the equinoxes, the storms of the Desert assume a terrible character. Everybody has heard tell of that awful word, the Simoun,\* and can recall to mind the statements recorded by travellers of its deleterious effects.

This formidable wind blows also in Egypt, where it is called *Khamsin* ("fifty"), because it prevails during a period of fifty days; that is, from the end of April to the middle of June. On the western border of the Sahara, in Senegambia, it is called *harmattan*. It is also identified, though not altogether satisfactorily, with the *Sirocco* of Italy, the *Solano* of Spain, and the *Foehn* of Switzerland.

The approach of the simoun is announced, in the Desert, by a black point—the "small black cloud"—which rises on the horizon, and which rapidly enlarges. A gloomy veil overspreads the sky; the sun, shorn of its beams, assumes a violet tint. Thick whirlwinds of dust rise in the air, which loses all its transparency, just as the pulverulent matters ejected by Vesuvius obscured the atmosphere when they buried beneath their accumulations the cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii.

If a caravan be surprised by the simoun, they make haste to arrange the camels in a ring, their heads turned towards the centre, and the travellers take shelter in the midst of their beasts, covering their faces, that they may not breathe the burning air. Sometimes they find an asylum in a well, if one lies within easy reach. But, despite these precautions, many of the sufferers perish, suffocated by the burning dust with which the atmosphere is loaded.

It was the terrible simoun which destroyed, according to the historians, the entire army of the Persian king Cambyses, when he rashly directed its advance into the open desert. In 1855 the simoun, it is said, destroyed, and buried in the sands, an entire caravan, composed of two thousand persons and of eighteen camels. More than once the Algerian generals, and, among others, General Desvaux,

\* From an Arabic word signifying "poison."