CHAPTER XII ELEVEN THOUSAND FEET ALOFT

NOTHING of importance had occurred hitherto in the passage through Chili; but all the obstacles and difficulties incident to a mountain journey were about to crowd on the travelers now.

One important question had first to be settled. Which pass would take them over the Andes, and yet not be out of their fixed route?

On questioning the CATAPEZ on the subject, he replied:

"There are only two practicable passes that I know of in this part of the Cordilleras."

"The pass of Arica is one undoubtedly discovered by Valdivia Mendoze," said Paganel.

"Just so."

"And that of Villarica is the other."

"Precisely."

"Well, my good fellow, both these passes have only one fault; they take us too far out of our route, either north or south."

"Have you no other to propose?" asked the Major.

"Certainly," replied Paganel. "There is the pass of Antuco, on the slope of the volcano, in latitude, 37 degrees 30' , or, in other words, only half a degree out of our way."

"That would do, but are you acquainted with this pass of Antuco, CATAPEZ?" said Glenarvan.

"Yes, your Lordship, I have been through it, but I did not mention it, as no one goes that way but the Indian shepherds with the herds of cattle."

"Oh, very well; if mares and sheep and oxen can go that way, we can, so let's start at once."

The signal for departure was given immediately, and they struck into the heart of the valley of Las Lejas, between great masses of chalk crystal. From this point the pass began to be difficult, and even dangerous. The angles of the declivities widened and the ledges narrowed, and frightful precipices met their gaze. The mules went cautiously along, keeping their heads near the ground, as if scenting the track. They marched in file. Sometimes at a sudden bend of the road, the MADRINA would disappear, and the little caravan had to guide themselves by the distant tinkle of her bell. Often some capricious

winding would bring the column in two parallel lines, and the CATAPEZ could speak to his PEONS across a crevasse not two fathoms wide, though two hundred deep, which made between them an inseparable gulf.

Glenarvan followed his guide step by step. He saw that his perplexity was increasing as the way became more difficult, but did not dare to interrogate him, rightly enough, perhaps, thinking that both mules and muleteers were very much governed by instinct, and it was best to trust to them.

For about an hour longer the CATAPEZ kept wandering about almost at haphazard, though always getting higher up the mountains. At last he was obliged to stop short. They were in a narrow valley, one of those gorges called by the Indians "quebrads," and on reaching the end, a wall of porphyry rose perpendicularly before them, and barred further passage. The CATAPEZ, after vain attempts at finding an opening, dismounted, crossed his arms, and waited. Glenarvan went up to him and asked if he had lost his way.

"No, your Lordship," was the reply.

"But you are not in the pass of Antuco."

"We are."

"You are sure you are not mistaken?"

"I am not mistaken. See! there are the remains of a fire left
by the Indians, and there are the marks of the mares and the sheep."

"They must have gone on then."

"Yes, but no more will go; the last earthquake has made
the route impassable."

"To mules," said the Major, "but not to men."

"Ah, that's your concern; I have done all I could.
My mules and myself are at your service to try the other passes
of the Cordilleras."

"And that would delay us?"

"Three days at least."

Glenarvan listened silently. He saw the CATAPEZ was right.
His mules could not go farther. When he talked of returning,
however, Glenarvan appealed to his companions and said:

"Will you go on in spite of all the difficulty?"

"We will follow your Lordship," replied Tom Austin.

"And even precede you," added Paganel. "What is it after all? We have only to cross the top of the mountain chain, and once over, nothing can be easier of descent than the slopes we shall find there. When we get below, we shall find BAQUEANOS, Argentine shepherds, who will guide us through the Pampas, and swift horses accustomed to gallop over the plains. Let's go forward then, I say, and without a moment's hesitation."

"Forward!" they all exclaimed. "You will not go with us, then?" said Glenarvan to the CATAPEZ.

"I am the muleteer," was the reply.

"As you please," said Glenarvan.

"We can do without him," said Paganel. "On the other side we shall get back into the road to Antuco, and I'm quite sure I'll lead you to the foot of the mountain as straight as the best guide in the Cordilleras."

Accordingly, Glenarvan settled accounts with the CATAPEZ, and bade farewell to him and his PEONS and mules. The arms and instruments, and a small stock of provisions were divided among the seven travelers, and it was unanimously agreed that the ascent should recommence at once, and, if necessary,

should continue part of the night. There was a very steep winding path on the left, which the mules never would have attempted. It was toilsome work, but after two hours' exertion, and a great deal of roundabout climbing, the little party found themselves once more in the pass of Antuco.

They were not far now from the highest peak of the Cordilleras, but there was not the slightest trace of any beaten path. The entire region had been overturned by recent shocks of earthquake, and all they could do was to keep on climbing higher and higher. Paganel was rather disconcerted at finding no way out to the other side of the chain, and laid his account with having to undergo great fatigue before the topmost peaks of the Andes could be reached, for their mean height is between eleven and twelve thousand six hundred feet. Fortunately the weather was calm and the sky clear, in addition to the season being favorable, but in Winter, from May to October, such an ascent would have been impracticable. The intense cold quickly kills travelers, and those who even manage to hold out against it fall victims to the violence of the TEMPORALES, a sort of hurricane peculiar to those regions, which yearly fills the abysses of the Cordilleras with dead bodies.

They went on toiling steadily upward all night, hoisting themselves up to almost inaccessible plateaux, and leaping over broad, deep crevasses. They had no ropes, but arms linked in arms supplied the lack, and shoulders served for ladders. The strength

of Mulrady and the dexterity of Wilson were taxed heavily now.
These two brave Scots multiplied themselves, so to speak.
Many a time, but for their devotion and courage the small band could not have gone on. Glenarvan never lost sight of young Robert, for his age and vivacity made him imprudent. Paganel was a true Frenchman in his impetuous ardor, and hurried furiously along.
The Major, on the contrary, only went as quick as was necessary, neither more nor less, climbing without the least apparent exertion.
Perhaps he hardly knew, indeed, that he was climbing at all, or perhaps he fancied he was descending.

The whole aspect of the region had now completely changed. Huge blocks of glittering ice, of a bluish tint on some of the declivities, stood up on all sides, reflecting the early light of morn.
The ascent became very perilous. They were obliged to reconnoiter carefully before making a single step, on account of the crevasses.
Wilson took the lead, and tried the ground with his feet.
His companions followed exactly in his footprints, lowering their voices to a whisper, as the least sound would disturb the currents of air, and might cause the fall of the masses of snow suspended in the air seven or eight hundred feet above their heads.

They had come now to the region of shrubs and bushes, which, higher still, gave place to grasses and cacti.
At 11,000 feet all trace of vegetation had disappeared.
They had only stopped once, to rest and snatch a hurried meal to

recruit their strength. With superhuman courage,
the ascent was then resumed amid increasing dangers and difficulties.
They were forced to bestride sharp peaks and leap over chasms
so deep that they did not dare to look down them. In many places
wooden crosses marked the scene of some great catastrophes.

About two o'clock they came to an immense barren plain, without a
sign of vegetation. The air was dry and the sky unclouded blue.
At this elevation rain is unknown, and vapors only condense into
snow or hail. Here and there peaks of porphyry or basalt pierced
through the white winding-sheet like the bones of a skeleton;
and at intervals fragments of quartz or gneiss, loosened by the action
of the air, fell down with a faint, dull sound, which in a denser
atmosphere would have been almost imperceptible.

However, in spite of their courage, the strength of the little band was
giving way. Glenarvan regretted they had gone so far into the interior
of the mountain when he saw how exhausted his men had become.
Young Robert held out manfully, but he could not go much farther.

At three o'clock Glenarvan stopped and said:

"We must rest."

He knew if he did not himself propose it, no one else would.

"Rest?" rejoined Paganel; "we have no place of shelter."

"It is absolutely necessary, however, if it were only for Robert."

"No, no," said the courageous lad; "I can still walk; don't stop."

"You shall be carried, my boy; but we must get to the other side
of the Cordilleras, cost what it may. There we may perhaps find
some hut to cover us. All I ask is a two hours' longer march."

"Are you all of the same opinion?" said Glenarvan.

"Yes," was the unanimous reply: and Mulrady added, "I'll carry the boy."

The march eastward was forthwith resumed. They had a
frightful height to climb yet to gain the topmost peaks.
The rarefaction of the atmosphere produced that painful oppression
known by the name of PUNA. Drops of blood stood on the gums
and lips, and respiration became hurried and difficult.
However strong the will of these brave men might be,
the time came at last when their physical powers failed,
and vertigo, that terrible malady in the mountains,
destroyed not only their bodily strength but their moral energy.
Falls became frequent, and those who fell could not rise again,
but dragged themselves along on their knees.

But just as exhaustion was about to make short work of any further ascent, and Glenarvan's heart began to sink as he thought of the snow lying far as the eye could reach, and of the intense cold, and saw the shadow of night fast overspreading the desolate peaks, and knew they had not a roof to shelter them, suddenly the Major stopped and said, in a calm voice, "A hut!"