CHAPTER XIII A SUDDEN DESCENT

ANYONE else but McNabbs might have passed the hut a hundred times, and gone all round it, and even over it without suspecting its existence. It was covered with snow, and scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding rocks; but Wilson and Mulrady succeeded in digging it out and clearing the opening after half an hour's hard work, to the great joy of the whole party, who eagerly took possession of it.

They found it was a CASUCHA, constructed by the Indians, made of ADOBES, a species of bricks baked in the sun. Its form was that of a cube, 12 feet on each side, and it stood on a block of basalt. A stone stair led up to the door, the only opening; and narrow as this door was, the hurricane, and snow, and hail found their way in when the TEMPORALES were unchained in the mountains.

Ten people could easily find room in it, and though the walls might be none too water-tight in the rainy season, at this time of the year, at any rate, it was sufficient protection against the intense cold, which, according to the thermometer, was ten degrees below zero. Besides, there was a sort of fireplace in it, with a chimney of bricks, badly enough put together, certainly, but still it allowed of a fire being lighted.

"This will shelter us, at any rate," said Glenarvan, "even if it is not very comfortable. Providence has led us to it, and we can only be thankful."

"Why, it is a perfect palace, I call it," said Paganel; "we only want flunkeys and courtiers. We shall do capital here."

"Especially when there is a good fire blazing on the hearth, for we are quite as cold as we are hungry. For my part, I would rather see a good faggot just now than a slice of venison."

"Well, Tom, we'll try and get some combustible or other," said Paganel.

"Combustibles on the top of the Cordilleras!" exclaimed Mulrady, in a dubious tone.

"Since there is a chimney in the CASUCHA," said the Major, "the probability is that we shall find something to burn in it."

"Our friend McNabbs is right," said Glenarvan. "Get everything in readiness for supper, and I'll go out and turn woodcutter."

"Wilson and I will go with you," said Paganel.

"Do you want me?" asked Robert, getting up.

"No, my brave boy, rest yourself. You'll be a man, when others are only children at your age," replied Glenarvan.

On reaching the little mound of porphyry, Glenarvan and his two companions left the CASUCHA. In spite of the perfect calmness of the atmosphere, the cold was stinging.
Paganel consulted his barometer, and found that the depression of the mercury corresponded to an elevation of 11,000 feet, only 910 meters lower than Mont Blanc. But if these mountains had presented the difficulties of the giant of the Swiss Alps, not one of the travelers could have crossed the great chain of the New World.

On reaching a little mound of porphyry, Glenarvan and Paganel stopped to gaze about them and scan the horizon on all sides. They were now on the summit of the Nevadas of the Cordilleras, and could see over an area of forty miles. The valley of the Colorado was already sunk in shadow, and night was fast drawing her mantle over the eastern slopes of the Andes. The western side was illumined by the rays of the setting sun, and peaks and glaciers flashed back his golden beams with dazzling radiance. On the south the view was magnificent. Across the wild valley of the Torbido, about two miles distant, rose the volcano of Antuco. The mountain roared like some enormous monster, and vomited red smoke, mingled with torrents of sooty flame. The surrounding peaks appeared on fire. Showers of red-hot stones,

clouds of reddish vapor and rockets of lava, all combined,
presented the appearance of glowing sparkling streams.
The splendor of the spectacle increased every instant
as night deepened, and the whole sky became lighted up with
a dazzling reflection of the blazing crater, while the sun,
gradually becoming shorn of his sunset glories, disappeared like
a star lost in the distant darkness of the horizon.

Paganel and Glenarvan would have remained long enough gazing
at the sublime struggle between the fires of earth and heaven,
if the more practical Wilson had not reminded them of the business
on hand. There was no wood to be found, however, but fortunately
the rocks were covered with a poor, dry species of lichen.
Of this they made an ample provision, as well as of a plant
called LLARETTA, the root of which burns tolerably well.
This precious combustible was carried back to the CASUCHA
and heaped up on the hearth. It was a difficult matter
to kindle it, though, and still more to keep it alight.
The air was so rarefied that there was scarcely oxygen enough
in it to support combustion. At least, this was the reason
assigned by the Major.

"By way of compensation, however," he added, "water will boil
at less than 100 degrees heat. It will come to the point
of ebullition before 99 degrees."

McNabbs was right, as the thermometer proved, for it was plunged into the kettle when the water boiled, and the mercury only rose to 99 degrees. Coffee was soon ready, and eagerly gulped down by everybody.
The dry meat certainly seemed poor fare, and Paganel couldn't help saying:

"I tell you what, some grilled llama wouldn't be bad with this, would it? They say that the llama is substitute for the ox and the sheep, and I should like to know if it is, in an alimentary respect."

"What!" replied the Major. "You're not content with your supper, most learned Paganel."

"Enchanted with it, my brave Major; still I must confess I should not say no to a dish of llama."

"You are a Sybarite."

"I plead guilty to the charge. But come, now, though you call me that, you wouldn't sulk at a beefsteak yourself, would you?"

"Probably not."

"And if you were asked to lie in wait for a llama, notwithstanding the cold and the darkness, you would do it without the least hesitation?"

"Of course; and if it will give you the slightest pleasure--"

His companions had hardly time to thank him for his obliging good nature, when distant and prolonged howls broke on their ear, plainly not proceeding from one or two solitary animals, but from a whole troop, and one, moreover, that was rapidly approaching.

Providence had sent them a supper, as well as led them to a hut. This was the geographer's conclusion; but Glenarvan damped his joy somewhat by remarking that the quadrupeds of the Cordilleras are never met with in such a high latitude.

"Then where can these animals come from?" asked Tom Austin. "Don't you hear them getting nearer!"

"An avalanche," suggested Mulrady.

"Impossible," returned Paganel. "That is regular howling."

"Let us go out and see," said Glenarvan.

"Yes, and be ready for hunting," replied McNabbs, arming himself with his carbine.

They all rushed forthwith out of the CASUCHA. Night had completely set in, dark and starry. The moon, now in her last quarter, had not yet risen. The peaks on the north and

east had disappeared from view, and nothing was visible save
the fantastic SILHOUETTE of some towering rocks here and there.
The howls, and clearly the howls of terrified animals,
were redoubled. They proceeded from that part of the Cordilleras
which lay in darkness. What could be going on there?
Suddenly a furious avalanche came down, an avalanche of living
animals mad with fear. The whole plateau seemed to tremble.
There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these animals,
and in spite of the rarefied atmosphere, their noise was deafening.
Were they wild beasts from the Pampas, or herds of llamas and vicunas?
Glenarvan, McNabbs, Robert, Austin, and the two sailors,
had just time to throw themselves flat on the ground before
they swept past like a whirlwind, only a few paces distant.
Paganel, who had remained standing, to take advantage of his
peculiar powers of sight, was knocked down in a twinkling.
At the same moment the report of firearms was heard.
The Major had fired, and it seemed to him that an animal had fallen
close by, and that the whole herd, yelling louder than ever,
had rushed down and disappeared among the declivities lighted
up by the reflection of the volcano.

"Ah, I've got them," said a voice, the voice of Paganel.

"Got what?" asked Glenarvan.

"My spectacles," was the reply. "One might expect to lose that much

in such a tumult as this."

"You are not wounded, I hope?"

"No, only knocked down; but by what?"

"By this," replied the Major, holding up the animal he had killed.

They all hastened eagerly into the hut, to examine McNabbs'
prize by the light of the fire.

It was a pretty creature, like a small camel without a hump.
The head was small and the body flattened, the legs were long and slender,
the skin fine, and the hair the color of cafe au lait.

Paganel had scarcely looked at it before he exclaimed, "A guanaco!"

"What sort of an animal is that?" asked Glenarvan.

"One you can eat."

"And it is good savory meat, I assure you; a dish of Olympus! I knew
we should have fresh meat for supper, and such meat!
But who is going to cut up the beast?"

"I will," said Wilson.

"Well, I'll undertake to cook it," said Paganel.

"Can you cook, then, Monsieur Paganel?" asked Robert.

"I should think so, my boy. I'm a Frenchman, and in every Frenchman there is a cook."

Five minutes afterward Paganel began to grill large slices of venison on the embers made by the use of the LLARETTAS, and in about ten minutes a dish was ready, which he served up to his companions by the tempting name of guanaco cutlets. No one stood on ceremony, but fell to with a hearty good will.

To the absolute stupefaction of the geographer, however, the first mouthful was greeted with a general grimace, and such exclamations as--"Tough!" "It is horrible." "It is not eatable."

The poor SAVANT was obliged to own that his cutlets could not be relished, even by hungry men. They began to banter him about his "Olympian dish," and indulge in jokes at his expense; but all he cared about was to find out how it happened that the flesh of the guanaco, which was certainly good and eatable food, had turned out so badly in his hands. At last light broke in on him, and he called out:

"I see through it now! Yes, I see through it. I have found out the secret now."

"The meat was too long kept, was it?" asked McNabbs, quietly.

"No, but the meat had walked too much. How could I have forgotten that?"

"What do you mean?" asked Tom Austin.

"I mean this: the guanaco is only good for eating when it is killed in a state of rest. If it has been long hunted, and gone over much ground before it is captured, it is no longer eatable. I can affirm the fact by the mere taste, that this animal has come a great distance, and consequently the whole herd has."

"You are certain of this?" asked Glenarvan.

"Absolutely certain."

"But what could have frightened the creatures so, and driven them from their haunts, when they ought to have been quietly sleeping?"

"That's a question, my dear Glenarvan, I could not possibly answer. Take my advice, and let us go to sleep without troubling our heads about it. I say, Major, shall we go to sleep?"

"Yes, we'll go to sleep, Paganel."

Each one, thereupon, wrapped himself up in his poncho, and the fire was made up for the night.

Loud snores in every tune and key soon resounded from all sides of the hut, the deep bass contribution of Paganel completing the harmony.

But Glenarvan could not sleep. Secret uneasiness kept him in a continual state of wakefulness. His thoughts reverted involuntarily to those frightened animals flying in one common direction, impelled by one common terror. They could not be pursued by wild beasts, for at such an elevation there were almost none to be met with, and of hunters still fewer. What terror then could have driven them among the precipices of the Andes? Glenarvan felt a presentiment of approaching danger.

But gradually he fell into a half-drowsy state, and his apprehensions were lulled. Hope took the place of fear. He saw himself on the morrow on the plains of the Andes, where the search would actually commence, and perhaps success was close at hand. He thought of Captain Grant and his two sailors, and their deliverance from cruel bondage. As these visions passed rapidly through his mind, every now and then he was roused by the crackling of the fire, or sparks flying out, or some little jet of flame would suddenly flare up and illumine the faces of his slumbering companions.

Then his presentiments returned in greater strength than before,
and he listened anxiously to the sounds outside the hut.

At certain intervals he fancied he could hear rumbling noises
in the distance, dull and threatening like the mutter-ings
of thunder before a storm. There surely must be a storm raging
down below at the foot of the mountains. He got up and went
out to see.

The moon was rising. The atmosphere was pure and calm.
Not a cloud visible either above or below. Here and there was
a passing reflection from the flames of Antuco, but neither storm
nor lightning, and myriads of bright stars studded the zenith.
Still the rumbling noises continued. They seemed to meet together
and cross the chain of the Andes. Glenarvan returned to the CASUCHA
more uneasy than ever, questioning within himself as to the
connection between these sounds and the flight of the guanacos.
He looked at his watch and found the time was about two in the morning.
As he had no certainty, however, of any immediate danger,
he did not wake his companions, who were sleeping soundly
after their fatigue, and after a little dozed off himself,
and slumbered heavily for some hours.

All of a sudden a violent crash made him start to his feet.
A deafening noise fell on his ear like the roar of artillery.

He felt the ground giving way beneath him, and the CASUCHA rocked to and fro, and opened.

He shouted to his companions, but they were already awake, and tumbling pell-mell over each other. They were being rapidly dragged down a steep declivity. Day dawned and revealed a terrible scene. The form of the mountains changed in an instant. Cones were cut off. Tottering peaks disappeared as if some trap had opened at their base. Owing to a peculiar phenomenon of the Cordilleras, an enormous mass, many miles in extent, had been displaced entirely, and was speeding down toward the plain.

"An earthquake!" exclaimed Paganel. He was not mistaken. It was one of those cataclysms frequent in Chili, and in this very region where Copiapo had been twice destroyed, and Santiago four times laid in ruins in fourteen years. This region of the globe is so underlaid with volcanic fires and the volcanoes of recent origin are such insufficient safety valves for the subterranean vapors, that shocks are of frequent occurrence, and are called by the people TREMBLORES.

The plateau to which the seven men were clinging, holding on by tufts of lichen, and giddy and terrified in the extreme, was rushing down the declivity with the swiftness of an express, at the rate of fifty miles an hour. Not a cry was possible, nor an attempt to get off or stop. They could not even have heard themselves speak. The internal rumblings,

the crash of the avalanches, the fall of masses of granite and basalt,
and the whirlwind of pulverized snow, made all communication impossible.
Sometimes they went perfectly smoothly along without jolts or jerks,
and sometimes on the contrary, the plateau would reel and roll like a ship
in a storm, coasting past abysses in which fragments of the mountain
were falling, tearing up trees by the roots, and leveling, as if with
the keen edge of an immense scythe, every projection of the declivity.

How long this indescribable descent would last, no one
could calculate, nor what it would end in ultimately.
None of the party knew whether the rest were still alive, whether one
or another were not already lying in the depths of some abyss.
Almost breathless with the swift motion, frozen with the cold air,
which pierced them through, and blinded with the whirling snow,
they gasped for breath, and became exhausted and nearly inanimate,
only retaining their hold of the rocks by a powerful instinct
of self-preservation. Suddenly a tremendous shock pitched them
right off, and sent them rolling to the very foot of the mountain.
The plateau had stopped.

For some minutes no one stirred. At last one of the party
picked himself up, and stood on his feet, stunned by the shock,
but still firm on his legs. This was the Major. He shook
off the blinding snow and looked around him. His companions
lay in a close circle like the shots from a gun that has just
been discharged, piled one on top of another.

The Major counted them. All were there except one--that one was Robert Grant.