

CHAPTER XV THALCAVE

ROBERT had no sooner escaped one terrible danger than he ran the risk of another scarcely less formidable. He was almost torn to pieces by his friends, for the brave fellows were so overjoyed at the sight of him, that in spite of his weak state, none of them would be satisfied without giving him a hug. However, it seemed as if good rough hugging did not hurt sick people; at any rate it did not hurt Robert, but quite the contrary.

But the first joy of deliverance over, the next thought was who was the deliverer? Of course it was the Major who suggested looking for him, and he was not far off, for about fifty paces from the RIO a man of very tall stature was seen standing motionless on the lowest crags at the foot of the mountain. A long gun was lying at his feet.

He had broad shoulders, and long hair bound together with leather thongs. He was over six feet in height. His bronzed face was red between the eyes and mouth, black by the lower eyelids, and white on the forehead. He wore the costume of the Patagonians on the frontiers, consisting of a splendid cloak, ornamented with scarlet arabesques, made of the skins of the guanaco, sewed together with ostrich tendons, and with the silky wool turned up on the edge. Under this mantle was a garment of fox-skin,

fastened round the waist, and coming down to a point in front.
A little bag hung from his belt, containing colors for painting his face.
His boots were pieces of ox hide, fastened round the ankles
by straps, across.

This Patagonian had a splendid face, indicating real intelligence,
notwithstanding the medley of colors by which it was disfigured.
His waiting attitude was full of dignity; indeed, to see him standing
grave and motionless on his pedestal of rocks, one might have taken
him for a statue of sang-froid.

As soon as the Major perceived him, he pointed him out to Glenarvan,
who ran toward him immediately. The Patagonian came two steps
forward to meet him, and Glenarvan caught hold of his hand
and pressed it in his own. It was impossible to mistake
the meaning of the action, for the noble face of the Scotch
lord so beamed with gratitude that no words were needed.
The stranger bowed slightly in return, and said a few words
that neither Glenarvan nor the Major could understand.

The Patagonian surveyed them attentively for a few minutes,
and spoke again in another language. But this second idiom
was no more intelligible than the first. Certain words,
however, caught Glenarvan's ear as sounding like Spanish,
a few sentences of which he could speak.

ESPANOL?" he asked.

The Patagonian nodded in reply, a movement of the head which has an affirmative significance among all nations.

"That's good!" said the Major. "Our friend Paganel will be the very man for him. It is lucky for us that he took it into his head to learn Spanish."

Paganel was called forthwith. He came at once, and saluted the stranger with all the grace of a Frenchman. But his compliments were lost on the Patagonian, for he did not understand a single syllable.

However, on being told how things stood, he began in Spanish, and opening his mouth as wide as he could, the better to articulate, said:

"Vos sois um homen de bem." (You are a brave man.)

The native listened, but made no reply.

"He doesn't understand," said the geographer.

"Perhaps you haven't the right accent," suggested the Major.

"That's just it! Confound the accent!"

Once more Paganel repeated his compliment, but with no better success.

"I'll change the phrase," he said; and in slow, deliberate tones he went on, "Sam duvida um Patagao" (A Patagonian, undoubtedly).

No response still.

"DIZEIME!" said Paganel (Answer me).

But no answer came.

"Vos compriendeis?" (Do you understand?) shouted Paganel, at the very top of his voice, as if he would burst his throat.

Evidently the Indian did not understand, for he replied in Spanish,

"No comprendo" (I do not understand).

It was Paganel's turn now to be amazed. He pushed his spectacles right down over his nose, as if greatly irritated, and said,

"I'll be hanged if I can make out one word of his infernal patois.

It is Araucanian, that's certain!"

"Not a bit of it!" said Glenarvan. "It was Spanish he spoke."

And addressing the Patagonian, he repeated the word, "ESPANOL?"
(Spanish?).

"Si, si" (yes, yes) replied the Indian.

Paganel's surprise became absolute stupefaction.

The Major and his cousin exchanged sly glances, and McNabbs said, mischievously, with a look of fun on his face, "Ah, ah, my worthy friend; is this another of your misadventures? You seem to have quite a monopoly of them."

"What!" said Paganel, pricking up his ear.

"Yes, it's clear enough the man speaks Spanish."

"He!"

"Yes, he certainly speaks Spanish. Perhaps it is some other language you have been studying all this time instead of--"

But Paganel would not allow him to proceed. He shrugged his shoulders, and said stiffly,

"You go a little too far, Major."

"Well, how is it that you don't understand him then?"

"Why, of course, because the man speaks badly," replied the learned geographer, getting impatient.

"He speaks badly; that is to say, because you can't understand him," returned the Major coolly.

"Come, come, McNabbs," put in Glenarvan, "your supposition is quite inadmissible. However DISTRAIT our friend Paganel is, it is hardly likely he would study one language for another."

"Well, Edward--or rather you, my good Paganel--explain it then."

"I explain nothing. I give proof. Here is the book I use daily, to practice myself in the difficulties of the Spanish language. Examine it for yourself, Major," he said, handing him a volume in a very ragged condition, which he had brought up, after a long rummage, from the depths of one of his numerous pockets. "Now you can see whether I am imposing on you," he continued, indignantly.

"And what's the name of this book?" asked the Major, as he took it from his hand.

"The LUSIADES, an admirable epic, which--"

"The LUSIADES!" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes, my friend, the LUSIADES of the great Camoens,
neither more nor less."

"Camoens!" repeated Glenarvan; "but Paganel, my unfortunate fellow,
Camoens was a Portuguese! It is Portuguese you have been learning
for the last six weeks!"

"Camoens! LUISADES! Portuguese!" Paganel could not say more.
He looked vexed, while his companions, who had all gathered round,
broke out in a furious burst of laughter.

The Indian never moved a muscle of his face. He quietly awaited
the explanation of this incomprehensible mirth.

"Fool, idiot, that I am!" at last uttered Paganel. "Is it really a fact?
You are not joking with me? It is what I have actually been doing?
Why, it is a second confusion of tongues, like Babel. Ah me!
alack-a-day! my friends, what is to become of me? To start for India
and arrive at Chili! To learn Spanish and talk Portuguese! Why, if I
go on like this, some day I shall be throwing myself out of the window
instead of my cigar!"

To hear Paganel bemoan his misadventures and see his
comical discomfiture, would have upset anyone's gravity.

Besides, he set the example himself, and said:

"Laugh away, my friends, laugh as loud as you like; you can't laugh at me half as much as I laugh at myself!"

"But, I say," said the Major, after a minute, "this doesn't alter the fact that we have no interpreter."

"Oh, don't distress yourself about that," replied Paganel, "Portuguese and Spanish are so much alike that I made a mistake; but this very resemblance will be a great help toward rectifying it. In a very short time I shall be able to thank the Patagonian in the language he speaks so well."

Paganel was right. He soon managed to exchange a few words with the stranger, and found out even that his name was Thalcave, a word that signified in Araucanian, "The Thunderer." This surname had, no doubt, come from his skill in handling fire-arms.

But what rejoiced Glenarvan most was to learn that he was a guide by occupation, and, moreover, a guide across the Pampas. To his mind, the meeting with him was so providential, that he could not doubt now of the success of their enterprise. The deliverance of Captain Grant seemed an accomplished fact.

When the party went back to Robert, the boy held out his arms to the Patagonian, who silently laid his hand on his head,

and proceeded to examine him with the greatest care, gently feeling each of his aching limbs. Then he went down to the RIO, and gathered a few handfuls of wild celery, which grew on the banks, with which he rubbed the child's body all over. He handled him with the most exquisite delicacy, and his treatment so revived the lad's strength, that it was soon evident that a few hours' rest would set him all right.

It was accordingly decided that they should encamp for the rest of the day and the ensuing night. Two grave questions, moreover, had to be settled: where to get food, and means of transport. Provisions and mules were both lacking. Happily, they had Thalcave, however, a practised guide, and one of the most intelligent of his class. He undertook to find all that was needed, and offered to take him to a TOLDERIA of Indians, not further than four miles off at most, where he could get supplies of all he wanted. This proposition was partly made by gestures, and partly by a few Spanish words which Paganel managed to make out. His offer was accepted, and Glenarvan and his learned friend started off with him at once.

They walked at a good pace for an hour and a half, and had to make great strides to keep up with the giant Thalcave. The road lay through a beautiful fertile region, abounding in rich pasturages; where a hundred thousand cattle might have fed comfortably. Large ponds, connected by an inextricable labyrinth of RIOS, amply watered these plains and produced their greenness.

Swans with black heads were disputing in the water, disputing possession with the numerous intruders which gamboled over the LLANOS. The feathered tribes were of most brilliant plumage, and of marvelous variety and deafening noise. The isacus, a graceful sort of dove with gray feathers streaked with white, and the yellow cardinals, were flitting about in the trees like moving flowers; while overhead pigeons, sparrows, chingolos, bulgueros, and mongitas, were flying swiftly along, rending the air with their piercing cries.

Paganel's admiration increased with every step, and he had nearly exhausted his vocabulary of adjectives by his loud exclamations, to the astonishment of the Patagonian, to whom the birds, and the swans, and the prairies were every day things.

The learned geographer was so lost in delight, that he seemed hardly to have started before they came in sight of the Indian camp, or TOLDERIA, situated in the heart of a valley.

About thirty nomadic Indians were living there in rude cabins made of branches, pasturing immense herds of milch cows, sheep, oxen, and horses. They went from one prairie to another, always finding a well-spread table for their four-footed guests.

These nomads were a hybrid type of Araucans, Pehu-enches, and Aucas. They were Ando-Peruvians, of an olive tint, of medium stature and massive form, with a low forehead, almost circular face,

thin lips, high cheekbones, effeminate features, and cold expression. As a whole, they are about the least interesting of the Indians. However, it was their herds Glenarvan wanted, not themselves. As long as he could get beef and horses, he cared for nothing else.

Thalcave did the bargaining. It did not take long. In exchange for seven ready saddled horses of the Argentine breed, 100 pounds of CHARQUI, or dried meat, several measures of rice, and leather bottles for water, the Indians agreed to take twenty ounces of gold as they could not get wine or rum, which they would have preferred, though they were perfectly acquainted with the value of gold. Glenarvan wished to purchase an eighth horse for the Patagonian, but he gave him to understand that it would be useless.

They got back to the camp in less than half an hour, and were hailed with acclamations by the whole party or rather the provisions and horses were. They were all hungry, and ate heartily of the welcome viands. Robert took a little food with the rest. He was fast recovering strength. The close of the day was spent in complete repose and pleasant talk about the dear absent ones.

Paganel never quitted the Indian's side. It was not that he was so glad to see a real Patagonian, by whom he looked a perfect pigmy-- a Patagonian who might have almost rivaled the Emperor Maximii, and that Congo negro seen by the learned Van der Brock, both eight feet high; but he caught up Spanish phrases from

the Indian and studied the language without a book this time, gesticulating at a great rate all the grand sonorous words that fell on his ear.

"If I don't catch the accent," he said to the Major, "it won't be my fault; but who would have said to me that it was a Patagonian who would teach me Spanish one day?"