CHAPTER XVI THE NEWS OF THE LOST CAPTAIN

NEXT day, the 22d of October, at eight o'clock in the morning, Thalcave gave the signal for departure. Between the 22d and 42d degrees the Argentine soil slopes eastward, and all the travelers had to do was to follow the slope right down to the sea.

Glenarvan had supposed Thalcave's refusal of a horse was that he preferred walking, as some guides do, but he was mistaken, for just as they were ready, the Patagonian gave a peculiar whistle, and immediately a magnificent steed of the pure Argentine breed came bounding out of a grove close by, at his master's call.
Both in form and color the animal was of perfect beauty. The Major, who was a thorough judge of all the good points of a horse, was loud in admiration of this sample of the Pampas breed, and considered that, in many respects, he greatly resembled an English hunter.
This splendid creature was called "Thaouka," a word in Patagonia which means bird, and he well deserved the name.

Thalcave was a consummate horseman, and to see him on his prancing steed was a sight worth looking at. The saddle was adapted to the two hunting weapons in common use on the Argentine plains--the BOLAS and the LAZO. The BOLAS consists of three balls fastened together by a strap of leather, attached to the front of the RECADO. The Indians fling them often at the distance of a hundred feet from the animal

or enemy of which they are in pursuit, and with such precision
that they catch round their legs and throw them down in an instant.
It is a formidable weapon in their hands, and one they handle
with surprising skill. The LAZO is always retained in the hand.
It is simply a rope, thirty feet long, made of tightly twisted leather,
with a slip knot at the end, which passes through an iron ring.
This noose was thrown by the right hand, while the left keeps fast
hold of the rope, the other end of which is fastened to the saddle.
A long carbine, in the shoulder belt completed the accouterments
of the Patagonian.

He took his place at the head of the party, quite unconscious of
the admiration he was exciting, and they set off, going alternately
at a gallop and walking pace, for the "trot" seemed altogether
unknown to them. Robert proved to be a bold rider, and completely
reassured Glenarvan as to his ability to keep his seat.

The Pampas commenced at the very foot of the Cordilleras. They may be
divided into three parts. The first extends from the chain of the Andes,
and stretches over an extent of 250 miles covered with stunted trees
and bushes; the second 450 miles is clothed with magnificent herbage,
and stops about 180 miles from Buenos Ayres; from this point to the sea,
the foot of the traveler treads over immense prairies of lucerne
and thistles, which constitute the third division of the Pampas.

On issuing from the gorges of the Cordilleras, Glenarvan and his band

came first to plains of sand, called MEDANOS, lying in ridges like waves of the sea, and so extremely fine that the least breath of wind agitated the light particles, and sent them flying in clouds, which rose and fell like water-spouts. It was a spectacle which caused both pleasure and pain, for nothing could be more curious than to see the said water-spouts wandering over the plain, coming in contact and mingling with each other, and falling and rising in wild confusion; but, on the other hand, nothing could be more disagreeable than the dust which was thrown off by these innumerable MEDANOS, which was so impalpable that close one's eyes as they might, it found its way through the lids.

This phenomenon lasted the greater part of the day.
The travelers made good progress, however, and about four o'clock the Cordilleras lay full forty miles behind them, the dark outlines being already almost lost in the evening mists.
They were all somewhat fatigued with the journey, and glad enough to halt for the night on the banks of the Neuquem, called Ramid, or Comoe by certain geographers, a troubled, turbulent rapid flowing between high red banks.

No incident of any importance occurred that night or the following day.
They rode well and fast, finding the ground firm, and the temperature bearable. Toward noon, however, the sun's rays were extremely scorching, and when evening came, a bar of clouds streaked the southwest horizon--a sure sign of a change in the weather.
The Patagonian pointed it out to the geographer, who replied:

"Yes, I know;" and turning to his companions, added, "see, a change of weather is coming! We are going to have a taste of PAMPERO."

And he went on to explain that this PAMPERO is very common in the Argentine plains. It is an extremely dry wind which blows from the southwest. Thalcave was not mistaken, for the PAMPERO blew violently all night, and was sufficiently trying to poor fellows only sheltered by their ponchos. The horses lay down on the ground, and the men stretched themselves beside them in a close group. Glenarvan was afraid they would be delayed by the continuance of the hurricane, but Paganel was able to reassure him on that score, after consulting his barometer.

"The PAMPERO generally brings a tempest which lasts three days, and may be always foretold by the depression of the mercury," he said. "But when the barometer rises, on the contrary, which is the case now, all we need expect is a few violent blasts. So you can make your mind easy, my good friend; by sunrise the sky will be quite clear again."

"You talk like a book, Paganel," replied Glenarvan.

"And I am one; and what's more, you are welcome to turn over my leaves whenever you like."

The book was right. At one o'clock the wind suddenly lulled,
and the weary men fell asleep and woke at daybreak,
refreshed and invigorated.

It was the 20th of October, and the tenth day since they had
left Talcahuano. They were still ninety miles from the point
where the Rio Colorado crosses the thirty-seventh parallel,
that is to say, about two days' journey. Glenarvan kept
a sharp lookout for the appearance of any Indians, intending to
question them, through Thalcave, about Captain Grant, as Paganel
could not speak to him well enough for this. But the track
they were following was one little frequented by the natives,
for the ordinary routes across the Pampas lie further north.
If by chance some nomadic horseman came in sight far away,
he was off again like a dart, not caring to enter into conversation
with strangers. To a solitary individual, a little troop of
eight men, all mounted and well armed, wore a suspicious aspect,
so that any intercourse either with honest men or even banditti,
was almost impossible.

Glenarvan was regretting this exceedingly, when he unexpectedly met
with a singular justification of his rendering of the eventful document.

In pursuing the course the travelers had laid down for themselves,
they had several times crossed the routes over the plains in common use,
but had struck into none of them. Hitherto Thalcave had made no

remark about this. He understood quite well, however, that they were not bound for any particular town, or village, or settlement. Every morning they set out in a straight line toward the rising sun, and went on without the least deviation. Moreover, it must have struck Thalcave that instead of being the guide he was guided; yet, with true Indian reserve, he maintained absolute silence. But on reaching a particular point, he checked his horse suddenly, and said to Paganel:

"The Carmen route."

"Yes, my good Patagonian," replied Paganel in his best Spanish; "the route from Carmen to Mendoza."

"We are not going to take it?"

"No," replied Paganel.

"Where are we going then?"

"Always to the east."

"That's going nowhere."

"Who knows?"

Thalcave was silent, and gazed at the geographer with an air of profound surprise. He had no suspicion that Paganel was joking, for an Indian is always grave.

"You are not going to Carmen, then?" he added, after a moment's pause.

"No."

"Nor to Mendoza?"

"No, nor to Mendoza."

Just then Glenarvan came up to ask the reason of the stoppage, and what he and Thalcave were discussing.

"He wanted to know whether we were going to Carmen or Mendoza, and was very much surprised at my negative reply to both questions."

"Well, certainly, it must seem strange to him."

"I think so. He says we are going nowhere."

"Well, Paganel, I wonder if it is possible to make him understand the object of our expedition, and what our motive is for always going east."

"That would be a difficult matter, for an Indian knows nothing about degrees, and the finding of the document would appear to him a mere fantastic story."

"Is it the story he would not understand, or the storyteller?" said McNabbs, quietly

"Ah, McNabbs, I see you have small faith in my Spanish yet."

"Well, try it, my good friend."

"So I will."

And turning round to the Patagonian he began his narrative, breaking down frequently for the want of a word, and the difficulty of making certain details intelligible to a half-civilized Indian. It was quite a sight to see the learned geographer. He gesticulated and articulated, and so worked himself up over it, that the big drops of sweat fell in a cascade down his forehead on to his chest. When his tongue failed, his arms were called to aid. Paganel got down on the ground and traced a geographical map on the sand, showing where the lines of latitude and longitude cross and where the two oceans were, along which the Carmen route led. Thalcave looked on composedly, without giving any indication of comprehending or not comprehending.

The lesson had lasted half an hour, when the geographer left off, wiped his streaming face, and waited for the Patagonian to speak.

"Does he understand?" said Glenarvan.

"That remains to be seen; but if he doesn't, I give it up," replied Paganel.

Thalcave neither stirred nor spoke. His eyes remained fixed on the lines drawn on the sand, now becoming fast effaced by the wind.

"Well?" said Paganel to him at length.

The Patagonian seemed not to hear. Paganel fancied he could detect an ironical smile already on the lips of the Major, and determined to carry the day, was about to recommence his geographical illustrations, when the Indian stopped him by a gesture, and said:

"You are in search of a prisoner?"

"Yes," replied Paganel.

"And just on this line between the setting and rising sun?" added Thalcave, speaking in Indian fashion of the route from west to east.

"Yes, yes, that's it."

"And it's your God," continued the guide, "that has sent you the secret of this prisoner on the waves."

"God himself."

"His will be accomplished then," replied the native almost solemnly. "We will march east, and if it needs be, to the sun."

Paganel, triumphing in his pupil, immediately translated his replies to his companions, and exclaimed:

"What an intelligent race! All my explanations would have been lost on nineteen in every twenty of the peasants in my own country."

Glenarvan requested him to ask the Patagonian if he had heard of any foreigners who had fallen into the hands of the Indians of the Pampas.

Paganel did so, and waited an answer.

"Perhaps I have."

The reply was no sooner translated than the Patagonian found himself

surrounded by the seven men questioning him with eager glances. Paganel was so excited, he could hardly find words, and he gazed at the grave Indian as if he could read the reply on his lips.

Each word spoken by Thalcave was instantly translated, so that the whole party seemed to hear him speak in their mother tongue.

"And what about the prisoner?" asked Paganel.

"He was a foreigner."

"You have seen him?"

"No; but I have heard the Indian speak of him. He is brave; he has the heart of a bull."

"The heart of a bull!" said Paganel. "Ah, this magnificent Patagonian language. You understand him, my friends, he means a courageous man."

"My father!" exclaimed Robert Grant, and, turning to Paganel, he asked what the Spanish was for, "Is it my father."

"Es mio padre," replied the geographer.

Immediately taking Thalcave's hands in his own, the boy said,

in a soft tone:

"Es mio padre."

"Suo padre," replied the Patagonian, his face lighting up.

He took the child in his arms, lifted him up on his horse,
and gazed at him with peculiar sympathy. His intelligent face
was full of quiet feeling.

But Paganel had not completed his interrogations. "This prisoner,
who was he? What was he doing? When had Thalcave heard of him?"
All these questions poured upon him at once.

He had not long to wait for an answer, and learned that the European
was a slave in one of the tribes that roamed the country between
the Colorado and the Rio Negro.

"But where was the last place he was in?"

"With the Cacique Calfoucoura."

"In the line we have been following?"

"Yes."

"And who is this Cacique?"

"The chief of the Poyuches Indians, a man with two tongues and two hearts."

"That's to say false in speech and false in action," said Paganel, after he had translated this beautiful figure of the Patagonian language.

"And can we deliver our friend?" he added.

"You may if he is still in the hands of the Indians."

"And when did you last hear of him?"

"A long while ago; the sun has brought two summers since then to the Pampas."

The joy of Glenarvan can not be described. This reply agreed perfectly with the date of the document. But one question still remained for him to put to Thalcave.

"You spoke of a prisoner," he said; "but were there not three?"

"I don't know," said Thalcave.

"And you know nothing of his present situation?"

"Nothing."

This ended the conversation. It was quite possible that the three men had become separated long ago; but still this much was certain, that the Indians had spoken of a European that was in their power; and the date of the captivity, and even the descriptive phrase about the captive, evidently pointed to Harry Grant.