

CHAPTER XVIII IN SEARCH OF WATER

LAKE SALINAS ends the string of lagoons connected with the Sierras Ventana

and Guamini. Numerous expeditions were formerly made there from Buenos Ayres, to collect the salt deposited on its banks, as the waters contain great quantities of chloride of sodium.

But when Thalcave spoke of the lake as supplying drinkable water he was thinking of the RIOS of fresh water which run into it. Those streams, however, were all dried up also; the burning sun had drunk up every thing liquid, and the consternation of the travelers may be imagined at the discovery.

Some action must be taken immediately, however; for what little water still remained was almost bad, and could not quench thirst. Hunger and fatigue were forgotten in the face of this imperious necessity. A sort of leather tent, called a ROUKAH, which had been left by the natives, afforded the party a temporary resting-place, and the weary horses stretched themselves along the muddy banks, and tried to browse on the marine plants and dry reeds they found there--nauseous to the taste as they must have been.

As soon as the whole party were ensconced in the ROUKAH, Paganel asked Thalcave what he thought was best to be done.

A rapid conversation followed, a few words of which were intelligible to Glenarvan. Thalcave spoke calmly, but the lively Frenchman gesticulated enough for both. After a little, Thalcave sat silent and folded his arms.

"What does he say?" asked Glenarvan. "I fancied he was advising us to separate."

"Yes, into two parties. Those of us whose horses are so done out with fatigue and thirst that they can scarcely drag one leg after the other, are to continue the route as they best can, while the others, whose steeds are fresher, are to push on in advance toward the river Guamini, which throws itself into Lake San Lucas about thirty-one miles off. If there should be water enough in the river, they are to wait on the banks till their companions reach them; but should it be dried up, they will hasten back and spare them a useless journey."

"And what will we do then?" asked Austin.

"Then we shall have to make up our minds to go seventy-two miles south, as far as the commencement of the Sierra Ventana, where rivers abound."

"It is wise counsel, and we will act upon it without loss of time. My horse is in tolerable good trim, and I volunteer to accompany Thalcave."

"Oh, my Lord, take me," said Robert, as if it were a question of some pleasure party.

"But would you be able for it, my boy?"

"Oh, I have a fine beast, which just wants to have a gallop. Please, my Lord, to take me."

"Come, then, my boy," said Glenarvan, delighted not to leave Robert behind. "If we three don't manage to find out fresh water somewhere," he added, "we must be very stupid."

"Well, well, and what about me?" said Paganel.

"Oh, my dear Paganel, you must stay with the reserve corps," replied the Major. "You are too well acquainted with the 37th parallel and the river Guamini and the whole Pampas for us to let you go. Neither Mulrady, nor Wilson, nor myself would be able to rejoin Thalcave at the given rendezvous, but we will put ourselves under the banner of the brave Jacques Paganel with perfect confidence."

"I resign myself," said the geographer, much flattered at having supreme command.

"But mind, Paganel, no distractions," added the Major. "Don't you take

us to the wrong place--to the borders of the Pacific, for instance."

"Oh, you insufferable Major; it would serve you right,"
replied Paganel, laughing. "But how will you manage to understand
what Thalcave says, Glenarvan?" he continued.

"I suppose," replied Glenarvan, "the Patagonian and I won't have
much to talk about; besides, I know a few Spanish words, and,
at a pinch, I should not fear either making him understand me,
or my understanding him."

"Go, then, my worthy friend," said Paganel.

"We'll have supper first," rejoined Glenarvan, "and then sleep,
if we can, till it is starting time."

The supper was not very reviving without drink of any kind,
and they tried to make up for the lack of it by a good sleep.
But Paganel dreamed of water all night, of torrents and cascades,
and rivers and ponds, and streams and brooks--in fact,
he had a complete nightmare.

Next morning, at six o'clock, the horses of Thalcave, Glenarvan and Robert
were got ready. Their last ration of water was given them, and drunk
with more avidity than satisfaction, for it was filthy, disgusting stuff.
The three travelers then jumped into their saddles, and set off,

shouting "Au revoir!" to their companions.

"Don't come back whatever you do," called Paganel after them.

The Desertio de las Salinas, which they had to traverse, is a dry plain, covered with stunted trees not above ten feet high, and small mimosas, which the Indians call curra-mammel; and JUMES, a bushy shrub, rich in soda. Here and there large spaces were covered with salt, which sparkled in the sunlight with astonishing brilliancy. These might easily have been taken for sheets of ice, had not the intense heat forbidden the illusion; and the contrast these dazzling white sheets presented to the dry, burned-up ground gave the desert a most peculiar character. Eighty miles south, on the contrary, the Sierra Ventana, toward which the travelers might possibly have to betake themselves should the Guamini disappoint their hopes, the landscape was totally different. There the fertility is splendid; the pasturage is incomparable. Unfortunately, to reach them would necessitate a march of one hundred and thirty miles south; and this was why Thalcave thought it best to go first to Guamini, as it was not only much nearer, but also on the direct line of route.

The three horses went forward might and main, as if instinctively knowing whither they were bound. Thaouka especially displayed a courage that neither fatigue nor hunger could damp. He bounded

like a bird over the dried-up CANADAS and the bushes of CURRA-MAMMEL, his loud, joyous neighing seeming to bode success to the search. The horses of Glenarvan and Robert, though not so light-footed, felt the spur of his example, and followed him bravely. Thalcave inspired his companions as much as Thaouka did his four-footed brethren. He sat motionless in the saddle, but often turned his head to look at Robert, and ever and anon gave him a shout of encouragement and approval, as he saw how well he rode. Certainly the boy deserved praise, for he was fast becoming an excellent cavalier.

"Bravo! Robert," said Glenarvan. "Thalcave is evidently congratulating you, my boy, and paying you compliments."

"What for, my Lord?"

"For your good horsemanship."

"I can hold firm on, that's all," replied Robert blushing with pleasure at such an encomium.

"That is the principal thing, Robert; but you are too modest. I tell you that some day you will turn out an accomplished horseman."

"What would papa say to that?" said Robert, laughing.

"He wants me to be a sailor."

"The one won't hinder the other. If all cavaliers wouldn't make good sailors, there is no reason why all sailors should not make good horsemen. To keep one's footing on the yards must teach a man to hold on firm; and as to managing the reins, and making a horse go through all sorts of movements, that's easily acquired. Indeed, it comes naturally."

"Poor father," said Robert; "how he will thank you for saving his life."

"You love him very much, Robert?"

"Yes, my Lord, dearly. He was so good to me and my sister. We were his only thought: and whenever he came home from his voyages, we were sure of some SOUVENIR from all the places he had been to; and, better still, of loving words and caresses. Ah! if you knew him you would love him, too. Mary is most like him. He has a soft voice, like hers. That's strange for a sailor, isn't it?"

"Yes, Robert, very strange."

"I see him still," the boy went on, as if speaking to himself.

"Good, brave papa. He put me to sleep on his knee, crooning an old Scotch ballad about the lochs of our country. The time sometimes comes back to me, but very confused like. So it does to Mary, too. Ah, my Lord, how we loved him.

Well, I do think one needs to be little to love one's father like that."

"Yes, and to be grown up, my child, to venerate him," replied Glenarvan, deeply touched by the boy's genuine affection.

During this conversation the horses had been slackening speed, and were only walking now.

"You will find him?" said Robert again, after a few minutes' silence.

"Yes, we'll find him," was Glenarvan's reply, "Thalcave has set us on the track, and I have great confidence in him."

"Thalcave is a brave Indian, isn't he?" said the boy.

"That indeed he is."

"Do you know something, my Lord?"

"What is it, and then I will tell you?"

"That all the people you have with you are brave.

Lady Helena, whom I love so, and the Major, with his calm manner, and Captain Mangles, and Monsieur Paganel, and all the sailors on the DUNCAN. How courageous and devoted they are."

"Yes, my boy, I know that," replied Glenarvan.

"And do you know that you are the best of all."

"No, most certainly I don't know that."

"Well, it is time you did, my Lord," said the boy, seizing his lordship's hand, and covering it with kisses.

Glenarvan shook his head, but said no more, as a gesture from Thalcave made them spur on their horses and hurry forward.

But it was soon evident that, with the exception of Thaouka, the wearied animals could not go quicker than a walking pace. At noon they were obliged to let them rest for an hour. They could not go on at all, and refused to eat the ALFAFARES, a poor, burnt-up sort of lucerne that grew there.

Glenarvan began to be uneasy. Tokens of sterility were not the least on the decrease, and the want of water might involve serious calamities. Thalcave said nothing, thinking probably, that it would be time enough to despair if the Guamini should be dried up--if, indeed, the heart of an Indian can ever despair.

Spur and whip had both to be employed to induce the poor

animals to resume the route, and then they only crept along, for their strength was gone.

Thaouka, indeed, could have galloped swiftly enough, and reached the RIO in a few hours, but Thalcave would not leave his companions behind, alone in the midst of a desert.

It was hard work, however, to get the animal to consent to walk quietly. He kicked, and reared, and neighed violently, and was subdued at last more by his master's voice than hand. Thalcave positively talked to the beast, and Thaouka understood perfectly, though unable to reply, for, after a great deal of arguing, the noble creature yielded, though he still champed the bit.

Thalcave did not understand Thaouka, it turned out, though Thaouka understood him. The intelligent animal felt humidity in the atmosphere and drank it in with frenzy, moving and making a noise with his tongue, as if taking deep draughts of some cool refreshing liquid.

The Patagonian could not mistake him now--water was not far off.

The two other horses seemed to catch their comrade's meaning, and, inspired by his example, made a last effort, and galloped forward after the Indian.

About three o'clock a white line appeared in a dip of the road, and seemed to tremble in the sunlight.

"Water!" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes, yes! it is water!" shouted Robert.

They were right; and the horses knew it too, for there was no need now to urge them on; they tore over the ground as if mad, and in a few minutes had reached the river, and plunged in up to their chests.

Their masters had to go on too, whether they would or not but they were so rejoiced at being able to quench their thirst, that this compulsory bath was no grievance.

"Oh, how delicious this is!" exclaimed Robert, taking a deep draught.

"Drink moderately, my boy," said Glenarvan; but he did not set the example.

Thalcave drank very quietly, without hurrying himself, taking small gulps, but "as long as a lazo," as the Patagonians say. He seemed as if he were never going to leave off, and really there was some danger of his swallowing up the whole river.

At last Glenarvan said:

"Well, our friends won't be disappointed this time; they will be sure of finding clear, cool water when they get here-- that is to say, if Thalcave leaves any for them."

"But couldn't we go to meet them? It would spare them several hours' suffering and anxiety."

"You're right my boy; but how could we carry them this water? The leather bottles were left with Wilson. No; it is better for us to wait for them as we agreed. They can't be here till about the middle of the night, so the best thing we can do is to get a good bed and a good supper ready for them."

Thalcave had not waited for Glenarvan's proposition to prepare an encampment. He had been fortunate enough to discover on the banks of the rio a ramada, a sort of enclosure, which had served as a fold for flocks, and was shut in on three sides. A more suitable place could not be found for their night's lodging, provided they had no fear of sleeping in the open air beneath the star-lit heavens; and none of Thalcave's companions had much solicitude on that score. Accordingly they took possession at once, and stretched themselves at full length on the ground in the bright sunshine, to dry their dripping garments.

"Well, now we've secured a lodging, we must think of supper," said Glenarvan. "Our friends must not have reason

to complain of the couriers they sent to precede them;
and if I am not much mistaken, they will be very satisfied.
It strikes me that an hour's shooting won't be lost time.
Are you ready, Robert?"

"Yes, my Lord," replied the boy, standing up, gun in hand.

Why Glenarvan proposed this was, that the banks of the Guamini seemed to be the general rendezvous of all the game in the surrounding plains. A sort of partridge peculiar to the Pampas, called TINAMOUS; black wood-hens; a species of plover, called TERU-TERU; yellow rays, and waterfowl with magnificent green plumage, rose in coveys. No quadrupeds, however, were visible, but Thalcave pointed to the long grass and thick brushwood, and gave his friends to understand they were lying there in concealment.

Disdaining the feathered tribes when more substantial game was at hand, the hunters' first shots were fired into the underwood. Instantly there rose by the hundred roebucks and guanacos, like those that had swept over them that terrible night on the Cordilleras, but the timid creatures were so frightened that they were all out of gunshot in a twinkling. The hunters were obliged to content themselves with humbler game, though in an alimentary point of view nothing better could be wished. A dozen of red partridges and rays were speedily brought down, and Glenarvan also managed very cleverly to kill a TAY-TETRE, or peccary, a pachydermatous animal, the flesh of which is excellent eating.

In less than half an hour the hunters had all the game they required. Robert had killed a curious animal belonging to the order EDENTATA, an armadillo, a sort of tatou, covered with a hard bony shell, in movable pieces, and measuring a foot and a half long. It was very fat and would make an excellent dish, the Patagonian said. Robert was very proud of his success.

Thalcave did his part by capturing a NANDOU, a species of ostrich, remarkable for its extreme swiftness.

There could be no entrapping such an animal, and the Indian did not attempt it. He urged Thaouka to a gallop, and made a direct attack, knowing that if the first aim missed the NANDOU would soon tire out horse and rider by involving them in an inextricable labyrinth of windings. The moment, therefore, that Thalcave got to a right distance, he flung his BOLAS with such a powerful hand, and so skillfully, that he caught the bird round the legs and paralyzed his efforts at once. In a few seconds it lay flat on the ground.

The Indian had not made his capture for the mere pleasure and glory of such a novel chase. The flesh of the NANDOU is highly esteemed, and Thalcave felt bound to contribute his share of the common repast.

They returned to the RAMADA, bringing back the string of partridges, the ostrich, the peccary, and the armadillo.

The ostrich and the peccary were prepared for cooking by divesting them of their tough skins, and cutting them up into thin slices. As to the armadillo, he carries his cooking apparatus with him, and all that had to be done was to place him in his own shell over the glowing embers.

The substantial dishes were reserved for the night-comers, and the three hunters contented themselves with devouring the partridges, and washed down their meal with clear, fresh water, which was pronounced superior to all the porter in the world, even to the famous Highland USQUEBAUGH, or whisky.

The horses had not been overlooked. A large quantity of dry fodder was discovered lying heaped up in the RAMADA, and this supplied them amply with both food and bedding.

When all was ready the three companions wrapped themselves in the ponchos, and stretched themselves on an eiderdown of ALFAFARES, the usual bed of hunters on the Pampas.