

## CHAPTER XIX THE RED WOLVES

NIGHT came, but the orb of night was invisible to the inhabitants of the earth, for she was just in her first quarter.

The dim light of the stars was all that illumined the plain.

The waters of the Guamini ran silently, like a sheet of oil over a surface of marble. Birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles were resting motionless after the fatigues of the day, and the silence of the desert brooded over the far-spreading Pampas.

Glenarvan, Robert, and Thalcave, had followed the common example, and lay in profound slumber on their soft couch of lucerne.

The worn-out horses had stretched themselves full length on the ground, except Thaouka, who slept standing, true to his high blood, proud in repose as in action, and ready to start at his master's call. Absolute silence reigned within the inclosure, over which the dying embers of the fire shed a fitful light.

However, the Indian's sleep did not last long; for about ten o'clock he woke, sat up, and turned his ear toward the plain, listening intently, with half-closed eyes. An uneasy look began to depict itself on his usually impassive face. Had he caught scent of some party of Indian marauders, or of jaguars, water tigers, and other terrible animals that haunt the neighborhood of rivers? Apparently it was the latter, for he threw a rapid glance

on the combustible materials heaped up in the inclosure, and the expression of anxiety on his countenance seemed to deepen. This was not surprising, as the whole pile of ALFAFARES would soon burn out and could only ward off the attacks of wild beasts for a brief interval.

There was nothing to be done in the circumstances but wait; and wait he did, in a half-recumbent posture, his head leaning on his hands, and his elbows on his knees, like a man roused suddenly from his night's sleep.

A whole hour passed, and anyone except Thalcave would have lain down again on his couch, reassured by the silence round him. But where a stranger would have suspected nothing, the sharpened senses of the Indian detected the approach of danger.

As he was thus watching and listening, Thaouka gave a low neigh, and stretched his nostrils toward the entrance of the RAMADA.

This startled the Patagonian, and made him rise to his feet at once.

"Thaouka scents an enemy," he said to himself, going toward the opening, to make careful survey of the plains.

Silence still prevailed, but not tranquillity; for Thalcave caught a glimpse of shadows moving noiselessly over the tufts

of CURRA-MAMMEL. Here and there luminous spots appeared, dying out and rekindling constantly, in all directions, like fantastic lights dancing over the surface of an immense lagoon. An inexperienced eye might have mistaken them for fireflies, which shine at night in many parts of the Pampas; but Thalcave was not deceived; he knew the enemies he had to deal with, and lost no time in loading his carbine and taking up his post in front of the fence.

He did not wait long, for a strange cry--a confused sound of barking and howling--broke over the Pampas, followed next instant by the report of the carbine, which made the uproar a hundred times worse.

Glenarvan and Robert woke in alarm, and started to their feet instantly.

"What is it?" exclaimed Robert.

"Is it the Indians?" asked Glenarvan.

"No," replied Thalcave, "the AGUARAS."

"AGUARAS?" said Robert, looking inquiringly at Glenarvan.

"Yes," replied Glenarvan, "the red wolves of the Pampas."

They seized their weapons at once, and stationed themselves

beside the Patagonian, who pointed toward the plain from whence the yelling resounded.

Robert drew back involuntarily.

"You are not afraid of wolves, my boy?" said Glenarvan.

"No, my Lord," said the lad in a firm tone, "and moreover, beside you I am afraid of nothing."

"So much the better. These AGUARAS are not very formidable either; and if it were not for their number I should not give them a thought."

"Never mind; we are all well armed; let them come."

"We'll certainly give them a warm reception," rejoined Glenarvan.

His Lordship only spoke thus to reassure the child, for a secret terror filled him at the sight of this legion of bloodthirsty animals let loose on them at midnight.

There might possibly be some hundreds, and what could three men do, even armed to the teeth, against such a multitude?

As soon as Thalcave said the word AGUARA, Glenarvan knew that he meant the red wolf, for this is the name given to it by

the Pampas Indians. This voracious animal, called by naturalists the *Canis jubatus*, is in shape like a large dog, and has the head of a fox. Its fur is a reddish-cinnamon color, and there is a black mane all down the back. It is a strong, nimble animal, generally inhabiting marshy places, and pursuing aquatic animals by swimming, prowling about by night and sleeping during the day. Its attacks are particularly dreaded at the ESTANCIAS, or sheep stations, as it often commits considerable ravages, carrying off the finest of the flock. Singly, the AGUARA is not much to be feared; but they generally go in immense packs, and one had better have to deal with a jaguar or cougar than with them.

Both from the noise of the howling and the multitude of shadows leaping about, Glenarvan had a pretty good idea of the number of the wolves, and he knew they had scented a good meal of human flesh or horse flesh, and none of them would go back to their dens without a share. It was certainly a very alarming situation to be in.

The assailants were gradually drawing closer. The horses displayed signs of the liveliest terror, with the exception of Thaouka, who stamped his foot, and tried to break loose and get out. His master could only calm him by keeping up a low, continuous whistle.

Glenarvan and Robert had posted themselves so as to defend the opening of the RAMADA. They were just going to fire into the nearest ranks

of the wolves when Thalcave lowered their weapons.

"What does Thalcave mean?" asked Robert.

"He forbids our firing."

"And why?"

"Perhaps he thinks it is not the right time."

But this was not the Indian's reason, and so Glenarvan saw when he lifted the powder-flask, showed him it was nearly empty.

"What's wrong?" asked Robert.

"We must husband our ammunition," was the reply. "To-day's shooting has cost us dear, and we are short of powder and shot. We can't fire more than twenty times."

The boy made no reply, and Glenarvan asked him if he was frightened.

"No, my Lord," he said.

"That's right," returned Glenarvan.

A fresh report resounded that instant. Thalcave had made

short work of one assailant more audacious than the rest, and the infuriated pack had retreated to within a hundred steps of the inclosure.

On a sign from the Indian Glenarvan took his place, while Thalcave went back into the inclosure and gathered up all the dried grass and ALFAFARES, and, indeed, all the combustibles he could rake together, and made a pile of them at the entrance.

Into this he flung one of the still-glowing embers, and soon the bright flames shot up into the dark night.

Glenarvan could now get a good glimpse of his antagonists, and saw that it was impossible to exaggerate their numbers or their fury. The barrier of fire just raised by Thalcave had redoubled their anger, though it had cut off their approach. Several of them, however, urged on by the hindmost ranks, pushed forward into the very flames, and burned their paws for their pains.

From time to time another shot had to be fired, notwithstanding the fire, to keep off the howling pack, and in the course of an hour fifteen dead animals lay stretched on the prairie.

The situation of the besieged was, relatively speaking, less dangerous now. As long as the powder lasted and the barrier of fire burned on, there was no fear of being overmastered.

But what was to be done afterward, when both means of defense

failed at once?

Glenarvan's heart swelled as he looked at Robert. He forgot himself in thinking of this poor child, as he saw him showing a courage so far above his years. Robert was pale, but he kept his gun steady, and stood with firm foot ready to meet the attacks of the infuriated wolves.

However, after Glenarvan had calmly surveyed the actual state of affairs, he determined to bring things to a crisis.

"In an hour's time," he said, "we shall neither have powder nor fire. It will never do to wait till then before we settle what to do."

Accordingly, he went up to Thalcave, and tried to talk to him by the help of the few Spanish words his memory could muster, though their conversation was often interrupted by one or the other having to fire a shot.

It was no easy task for the two men to understand each other, but, most fortunately, Glenarvan knew a great deal of the peculiarities of the red wolf; otherwise he could never have interpreted the Indian's words and gestures.

As it was, fully a quarter of an hour elapsed before he could get any answer from Thalcave to tell Robert in reply to his inquiry.



"What does he say?"

"He says that at any price we must hold out till daybreak.

The AGUARA only prowls about at night, and goes back to his lair with the first streak of dawn. It is a cowardly beast, that loves the darkness and dreads the light--an owl on four feet."

"Very well, let us defend ourselves, then, till morning."

"Yes, my boy, and with knife-thrusts, when gun and shots fail."

Already Thalcave had set the example, for whenever a wolf came too near the burning pile, the long arm of the Patagonian dashed through the flames and came out again reddened with blood.

But very soon this means of defense would be at an end.

About two o'clock, Thalcave flung his last armful of combustibles into the fire, and barely enough powder remained to load a gun five times.

Glenarvan threw a sorrowful glance round him. He thought of the lad standing there, and of his companions and those left behind, whom he loved so dearly.

Robert was silent. Perhaps the danger seemed less imminent to his imagination. But Glenarvan thought for him, and pictured

to himself the horrible fate that seemed to await him inevitably. Quite overcome by his emotion, he took the child in his arms, and straining him convulsively to his heart, pressed his lips on his forehead, while tears he could not restrain streamed down his cheeks.

Robert looked up into his face with a smile, and said, "I am not frightened."

"No, my child, no! and you are right. In two hours daybreak will come, and we shall be saved. Bravo, Thalcave! my brave Patagonian! Bravo!" he added as the Indian that moment leveled two enormous beasts who endeavored to leap across the barrier of flames.

But the fire was fast dying out, and the DENOUEMENT of the terrible drama was approaching. The flames got lower and lower. Once more the shadows of night fell on the prairie, and the glaring eyes of the wolves glowed like phosphorescent balls in the darkness. A few minutes longer, and the whole pack would be in the inclosure.

Thalcave loaded his carbine for the last time, killed one more enormous monster, and then folded his arms. His head sank on his chest, and he appeared buried in deep thought. Was he planning some daring, impossible, mad attempt to repulse the infuriated horde? Glenarvan did not venture to ask.

At this very moment the wolves began to change their tactics.

The deafening howls suddenly ceased: they seemed to be going away.

Gloomy silence spread over the prairie, and made Robert exclaim:

"They're gone!"

But Thalcave, guessing his meaning, shook his head.

He knew they would never relinquish their sure prey till daybreak made them hasten back to their dens.

Still, their plan of attack had evidently been altered.

They no longer attempted to force the entrance, but their new maneuvers only heightened the danger.

They had gone round the RAMADA, as by common consent, and were trying to get in on the opposite side.

The next minute they heard their claws attacking the moldering wood, and already formidable paws and hungry, savage jaws had found their way through the palings. The terrified horses broke loose from their halters and ran about the inclosure, mad with fear.

Glenarvan put his arms round the young lad, and resolved to defend him as long as his life held out. Possibly he might have made a useless attempt at flight when his eye fell on Thalcave.

The Indian had been stalking about the RAMADA like a stag, when he suddenly stopped short, and going up to his horse, who was trembling with impatience, began to saddle him with the most scrupulous care, without forgetting a single strap or buckle. He seemed no longer to disturb himself in the least about the wolves outside, though their yells had redoubled in intensity. A dark suspicion crossed Glenarvan's mind as he watched him.

"He is going to desert us," he exclaimed at last, as he saw him seize the reins, as if preparing to mount.

"He! never!" replied Robert. Instead of deserting them, the truth was that the Indian was going to try and save his friends by sacrificing himself.

Thaouka was ready, and stood champing his bit. He reared up, and his splendid eyes flashed fire; he understood his master.

But just as the Patagonian caught hold of the horse's mane, Glenarvan seized his arm with a convulsive grip, and said, pointing to the open prairie.

"You are going away?"

"Yes," replied the Indian, understanding his gesture.

Then he said a few words in Spanish, which meant:

"Thaouka; good horse; quick; will draw all the wolves away after him."

"Oh, Thalcave," exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Quick, quick!" replied the Indian, while Glenarvan said, in a broken, agitated voice to Robert:

"Robert, my child, do you hear him? He wants to sacrifice himself for us. He wants to rush away over the Pampas, and turn off the wolves from us by attracting them to himself."

"Friend Thalcave," returned Robert, throwing himself at the feet of the Patagonian, "friend Thalcave, don't leave us!"

"No," said Glenarvan, "he shall not leave us."

And turning toward the Indian, he said, pointing to the frightened horses,

"Let us go together."

"No," replied Thalcave, catching his meaning.

"Bad beasts; frightened; Thaouka, good horse."

"Be it so then!" returned Glenarvan. "Thalcave will not leave you, Robert. He teaches me what I must do.

It is for me to go, and for him to stay by you."

Then seizing Thaouka's bridle, he said, "I am going, Thalcave, not you."

"No," replied the Patagonian quietly.

"I am," exclaimed Glenarvan, snatching the bridle out of his hands.

"I, myself! Save this boy, Thalcave! I commit him to you."

Glenarvan was so excited that he mixed up English words with his Spanish. But what mattered the language at such a terrible moment. A gesture was enough. The two men understood each other.

However, Thalcave would not give in, and though every instant's delay but increased the danger, the discussion continued.

Neither Glenarvan nor Thalcave appeared inclined to yield.

The Indian had dragged his companion towards the entrance of the RAMADA,

and showed him the prairie, making him understand that now was the time when it was clear from the wolves; but that not a moment was to be lost, for should this maneuver not succeed, it would only render the situation of those left behind more desperate. and that he knew his horse well enough to be able to trust his wonderful lightness and swiftness to save them all. But Glenarvan was blind and obstinate, and determined to sacrifice himself at

all hazards, when suddenly he felt himself violently pushed back. Thaouka pranced up, and reared himself bolt upright on his hind legs, and made a bound over the barrier of fire, while a clear, young voice called out:

"God save you, my lord."

But before either Thalcave or Glenarvan could get more than a glimpse of the boy, holding on fast by Thaouka's mane, he was out of sight.

"Robert! oh you unfortunate boy," cried Glenarvan.

But even Thalcave did not catch the words, for his voice was drowned in the frightful uproar made by the wolves, who had dashed off at a tremendous speed on the track of the horse.

Thalcave and Glenarvan rushed out of the RAMADA. Already the plain had recovered its tranquillity, and all that could be seen of the red wolves was a moving line far away in the distant darkness.

Glenarvan sank prostrate on the ground, and clasped his hands despairingly. He looked at Thalcave, who smiled with his accustomed calmness, and said:

"Thaouka, good horse. Brave boy. He will save himself!"

"And suppose he falls?" said Glenarvan.

"He'll not fall."

But notwithstanding Thalcave's assurances, poor Glenarvan spent the rest of the night in torturing anxiety. He seemed quite insensible now to the danger they had escaped through the departure of the wolves, and would have hastened immediately after Robert if the Indian had not kept him back by making him understand the impossibility of their horses overtaking Thaouka; and also that boy and horse had outdistanced the wolves long since, and that it would be useless going to look for them till daylight.

At four o'clock morning began to dawn. A pale glimmer appeared in the horizon, and pearly drops of dew lay thick on the plain and on the tall grass, already stirred by the breath of day.

The time for starting had arrived.

"Now!" cried Thalcave, "come."

Glenarvan made no reply, but took Robert's horse and sprung into the saddle. Next minute both men were galloping at full speed toward the west, in the line in which their companions ought to be advancing. They dashed along at a prodigious rate for a full hour, dreading every



minute to come across the mangled corpse of Robert. Glenarvan had torn the flanks of his horse with his spurs in his mad haste, when at last gun-shots were heard in the distance at regular intervals, as if fired as a signal.

"There they are!" exclaimed Glenarvan; and both he and the Indian urged on their steeds to a still quicker pace, till in a few minutes more they came up to the little detachment conducted by Paganel. A cry broke from Glenarvan's lips, for Robert was there, alive and well, still mounted on the superb Thaouka, who neighed loudly with delight at the sight of his master.

"Oh, my child, my child!" cried Glenarvan, with indescribable tenderness in his tone.

Both he and Robert leaped to the ground, and flung themselves into each other's arms. Then the Indian hugged the brave boy in his arms.

"He is alive, he is alive," repeated Glenarvan again and again.

"Yes," replied Robert; "and thanks to Thaouka."

This great recognition of his favorite's services was wholly unexpected by the Indian, who was talking to him that minute, caressing and speaking to him, as if human blood flowed in the veins of the proud creature.

Then turning to Paganel, he pointed to Robert, and said, "A brave!"  
and employing the Indian metaphor, he added, "his spurs did not tremble!"

But Glenarvan put his arms round the boy and said, "Why wouldn't you let  
me or Thalcave run the risk of this last chance of deliverance, my son?"

"My lord," replied the boy in tones of gratitude, "wasn't it  
my place to do it? Thalcave has saved my life already, and you--  
you are going to save my father."