

CHAPTER XX STRANGE SIGNS

AFTER the first joy of the meeting was over, Paganel and his party, except perhaps the Major, were only conscious of one feeling-- they were dying of thirst. Most fortunately for them, the Guamini ran not far off, and about seven in the morning the little troop reached the inclosure on its banks. The precincts were strewn with the dead wolves, and judging from their numbers, it was evident how violent the attack must have been, and how desperate the resistance.

As soon as the travelers had drunk their fill, they began to demolish the breakfast prepared in the RAMADA, and did ample justice to the extraordinary viands. The NANDOU fillets were pronounced first-rate, and the armadillo was delicious.

"To eat moderately," said Paganel, "would be positive ingratitude to Providence. We must eat immoderately."

And so they did, but were none the worse for it.

The water of the Guamini greatly aided digestion apparently.

Glenarvan, however, was not going to imitate Hannibal at Capua, and at ten o'clock next morning gave the signal for starting. The leathern bottles were filled with water, and the day's march commenced.

The horses were so well rested that they were quite fresh again, and kept up a canter almost constantly. The country was not so parched up now, and consequently less sterile, but still a desert. No incident occurred of any importance during the 2d and 3d of November, and in the evening they reached the boundary of the Pampas, and camped for the night on the frontiers of the province of Buenos Ayres. Two-thirds of their journey was now accomplished. It was twenty-two days since they left the Bay of Talcahuano, and they had gone 450 miles.

Next morning they crossed the conventional line which separates the Argentine plains from the region of the Pampas. It was here that Thalcave hoped to meet the Caciques, in whose hands, he had no doubt, Harry Grant and his men were prisoners.

From the time of leaving the Guamini, there was marked change in the temperature, to the great relief of the travelers.

It was much cooler, thanks to the violent and cold winds from Patagonia, which constantly agitate the atmospheric waves. Horses and men were glad enough of this, after what they had suffered from the heat and drought, and they felt animated with fresh ardor and confidence. But contrary to what Thalcave had said, the whole district appeared uninhabited, or rather abandoned.

Their route often led past or went right through small lagoons, sometimes of fresh water, sometimes of brackish. On the banks

and bushes about these, king-wrens were hopping about and larks singing joyously in concert with the tangaras, the rivals in color of the brilliant humming birds. On the thorny bushes the nests of the ANNUBIS swung to and fro in the breeze like an Indian hammock; and on the shore magnificent flamingos stalked in regular order like soldiers marching, and spread out their flaming red wings. Their nests were seen in groups of thousands, forming a complete town, about a foot high, and resembling a truncated cone in shape. The flamingos did not disturb themselves in the least at the approach of the travelers, but this did not suit Paganel.

"I have been very desirous a long time," he said to the Major, "to see a flamingo flying."

"All right," replied McNabbs.

"Now while I have the opportunity, I should like to make the most of it," continued Paganel.

"Very well; do it, Paganel."

"Come with me, then, Major, and you too Robert. I want witnesses."

And all three went off towards the flamingos, leaving the others to go on in advance.

As soon as they were near enough, Paganel fired, only loading his gun, however, with powder, for he would not shed even the blood of a bird uselessly. The shot made the whole assemblage fly away en masse, while Paganel watched them attentively through his spectacles.

"Well, did you see them fly?" he asked the Major.

"Certainly I did," was the reply. "I could not help seeing them, unless I had been blind."

"Well and did you think they resembled feathered arrows when they were flying?"

"Not in the least."

"Not a bit," added Robert.

"I was sure of it," said the geographer, with a satisfied air; "and yet the very proudest of modest men, my illustrious countryman, Chateaubriand, made the inaccurate comparison. Oh, Robert, comparison is the most dangerous figure in rhetoric that I know. Mind you avoid it all your life, and only employ it in a last extremity."

"Are you satisfied with your experiment?" asked McNabbs.

"Delighted."

"And so am I. But we had better push on now, for your illustrious Chateaubriand has put us more than a mile behind."

On rejoining their companions, they found Glenarvan busily engaged in conversation with the Indian, though apparently unable to make him understand. Thalcave's gaze was fixed intently on the horizon, and his face wore a puzzled expression.

The moment Paganel came in sight, Glenarvan called out:

"Come along, friend Paganel. Thalcave and I can't understand each other at all."

After a few minute's talk with the Patagonian, the interpreter turned to Glenarvan and said:

"Thalcave is quite astonished at the fact, and certainly it is very strange that there are no Indians, nor even traces of any to be seen in these plains, for they are generally thick with companies of them, either driving along cattle stolen from the ESTANCIAS, or going to the Andes to sell their zorillo cloths and plaited leather whips."

"And what does Thalcave think is the reason?"

"He does not know; he is amazed and that's all."

"But what description of Indians did he reckon on meeting in this part of the Pampas?"

"Just the very ones who had the foreign prisoners in their hands, the natives under the rule of the Caciques Calfoucoura, Catriel, or Yanchetruz."

"Who are these Caciques?"

"Chiefs that were all powerful thirty years ago, before they were driven beyond the sierras. Since then they have been reduced to subjection as much as Indians can be, and they scour the plains of the Pampas and the province of Buenos Ayres. I quite share Thalcave's surprise at not discovering any traces of them in regions which they usually infest as SALTEADORES, or bandits."

"And what must we do then?"

"I'll go and ask him," replied Paganel.

After a brief colloquy he returned and said:

"This is his advice, and very sensible it is, I think.

He says we had better continue our route to the east as far as Fort Independence, and if we don't get news of Captain Grant there we shall hear, at any rate, what has become of the Indians of the Argentine plains."

"Is Fort Independence far away?" asked Glenarvan.

"No, it is in the Sierra Tandil, a distance of about sixty miles."

"And when shall we arrive?"

"The day after to-morrow, in the evening."

Glenarvan was considerably disconcerted by this circumstance. Not to find an Indian where in general there were only too many, was so unusual that there must be some grave cause for it; but worse still if Harry Grant were a prisoner in the hands of any of those tribes, had he been dragged away with them to the north or south? Glenarvan felt that, cost what it might, they must not lose his track, and therefore decided to follow the advice of Thalcave, and go to the village of Tandil. They would find some one there to speak to, at all events.

About four o'clock in the evening a hill, which seemed a mountain in so flat a country, was sighted in the distance. This was Sierra Tapalquem, at the foot of which the travelers

camped that night.

The passage in the morning over this sierra, was accomplished without the slightest difficulty; after having crossed the Cordillera of the Andes, it was easy work to ascend the gentle heights of such a sierra as this. The horses scarcely slackened their speed.

At noon they passed the deserted fort of Tapalquem, the first of the chain of forts which defend the southern frontiers from Indian marauders. But to the increasing surprise of Thalcave, they did not come across even the shadow of an Indian. About the middle of the day, however, three flying horsemen, well mounted and well armed came in sight, gazed at them for an instant, and then sped away with inconceivable rapidity. Glenarvan was furious.

"Gauchos," said the Patagonian, designating them by the name which had caused such a fiery discussion between the Major and Paganel.

"Ah! the Gauchos," replied McNabbs. "Well, Paganel, the north wind is not blowing to-day. What do you think of those fellows yonder?"

"I think they look like regular bandits."

"And how far is it from looking to being, my good geographer?"

"Only just a step, my dear Major."

Paganel's admission was received with a general laugh, which did not in the least disconcert him. He went on talking about the Indians however, and made this curious observation:

"I have read somewhere," he said, "that about the Arabs there is a peculiar expression of ferocity in the mouth, while the eyes have a kindly look. Now, in these American savages it is quite the reverse, for the eye has a particularly villainous aspect."

No physiognomist by profession could have better characterized the Indian race.

But desolate as the country appeared, Thalcave was on his guard against surprises, and gave orders to his party to form themselves in a close platoon. It was a useless precaution, however; for that same evening, they camped for the night in an immense TOLDERIA, which they not only found perfectly empty, but which the Patagonian declared, after he had examined it all round, must have been uninhabited for a long time.

Next day, the first ESTANCIAS of the Sierra Tandil came in sight. The ESTANCIAS are large cattle stations for breeding cattle; but Thalcave resolved not to stop at any of them, but to go straight on to Fort Independence. They passed several farms fortified by battlements and surrounded by a deep moat,

the principal building being encircled by a terrace, from which the inhabitants could fire down on the marauders in the plain. Glenarvan might, perhaps, have got some information at these houses, but it was the surest plan to go straight on to the village of Tandil. Accordingly they went on without stopping, fording the RIO of Los Huasos and also the Chapaleofu, a few miles further on. Soon they were treading the grassy slopes of the first ridges of the Sierra Tandil, and an hour afterward the village appeared in the depths of a narrow gorge, and above it towered the lofty battlements of Fort Independence.