

## CHAPTER XXI A FALSE TRAIL

THE Sierra Tandil rises a thousand feet above the level of the sea.

It is a primordial chain--that is to say, anterior to all organic and metamorphic creation. It is formed of a semi-circular ridge of gneiss hills, covered with fine short grass.

The district of Tandil, to which it has given its name, includes all the south of the Province of Buenos Ayres, and terminates in a river which conveys north all the RIOS that take their rise on its slopes.

After making a short ascent up the sierra, they reached the postern gate, so carelessly guarded by an Argentine sentinel, that they passed through without difficulty, a circumstance which betokened extreme negligence or extreme security.

A few minutes afterward the Commandant appeared in person.

He was a vigorous man about fifty years of age, of military aspect, with grayish hair, and an imperious eye, as far as one could see through the clouds of tobacco smoke which escaped from his short pipe.

His walk reminded Paganel instantly of the old subalterns in his own country.

Thalcave was spokesman, and addressing the officer, presented

Lord Glenarvan and his companions. While he was speaking, the Commandant

kept staring fixedly at Paganel in rather an embarrassing manner.

The geographer could not understand what he meant by it, and was just about to interrogate him, when the Commandant came forward, and seizing both his hands in the most free-and-easy fashion, said in a joyous voice, in the mother tongue of the geographer:

"A Frenchman!"

"Yes, a Frenchman," replied Paganel.

"Ah! delightful! Welcome, welcome. I am a Frenchman too," he added, shaking Paganel's hand with such vigor as to be almost alarming.

"Is he a friend of yours, Paganel?" asked the Major.

"Yes," said Paganel, somewhat proudly. "One has friends in every division of the globe."

After he had succeeded in disengaging his hand, though not without difficulty, from the living vise in which it was held, a lively conversation ensued. Glenarvan would fain have put in a word about the business on hand, but the Commandant related his entire history, and was not in a mood to stop till he had done. It was evident that the worthy man must have left his native country

many years back, for his mother tongue had grown unfamiliar, and if he had not forgotten the words he certainly did not remember how to put them together. He spoke more like a negro belonging to a French colony.

The fact was that the Governor of Fort Independence was a French sergeant, an old comrade of Parachapee. He had never left the fort since it had been built in 1828; and, strange to say, he commanded it with the consent of the Argentine Government. He was a man about fifty years of age, a Basque by birth, and his name was Manuel Ipharaguerre, so that he was almost a Spaniard. A year after his arrival in the country he was naturalized, took service in the Argentine army, and married an Indian girl, who was then nursing twin babies six months old--two boys, be it understood, for the good wife of the Commandant would have never thought of presenting her husband with girls. Manuel could not conceive of any state but a military one, and he hoped in due time, with the help of God, to offer the republic a whole company of young soldiers.

"You saw them. Charming! good soldiers are Jose, Juan, and Miquele! Pepe, seven year old; Pepe can handle a gun."

Pepe, hearing himself complimented, brought his two little feet together, and presented arms with perfect grace.

"He'll get on!" added the sergeant. "He'll be colonel-major

or brigadier-general some day."

Sergeant Manuel seemed so enchanted that it would have been useless to express a contrary opinion, either to the profession of arms or the probable future of his children. He was happy, and as Goethe says, "Nothing that makes us happy is an illusion."

All this talk took up a quarter of an hour, to the great astonishment of Thalcave. The Indian could not understand how so many words could come out of one throat. No one interrupted the Sergeant, but all things come to an end, and at last he was silent, but not till he had made his guests enter his dwelling, and be presented to Madame Ipharaguerre. Then, and not till then, did he ask his guests what had procured him the honor of their visit. Now or never was the moment to explain, and Paganel, seizing the chance at once, began an account of their journey across the Pampas, and ended by inquiring the reason of the Indians having deserted the country.

"Ah! there was no one!" replied the Sergeant, shrugging his shoulders--"really no one, and us, too, our arms crossed! Nothing to do!"

"But why?"

"War."

"War?"

"Yes, civil war between the Paraguayans and Buenos Ayriens,"  
replied the Sergeant.

"Well?"

"Well, Indians all in the north, in the rear of General Flores.  
Indian pillagers find pillage there."

"But where are the Caciques?"

"Caciques are with them."

"What! Catriel?"

"There is no Catriel."

"And Calfoucoura?"

"There is no Calfoucoura."

"And is there no Yanchetruz?"

"No; no Yanchetruz."

The reply was interpreted by Thalcave, who shook his head and gave an approving look. The Patagonian was either unaware of, or had forgotten that civil war was decimating the two parts of the republic--a war which ultimately required the intervention of Brazil. The Indians have everything to gain by these intestine strifes, and can not lose such fine opportunities of plunder. There was no doubt the Sergeant was right in assigning war then as the cause of the forsaken appearance of the plains.

But this circumstance upset all Glenarvan's projects, for if Harry Grant was a prisoner in the hands of the Caciques, he must have been dragged north with them. How and where should they ever find him if that were the case? Should they attempt a perilous and almost useless journey to the northern border of the Pampas? It was a serious question which would need to be well talked over.

However, there was one inquiry more to make to the Sergeant; and it was the Major who thought of it, for all the others looked at each other in silence.

"Had the Sergeant heard whether any Europeans were prisoners in the hands of the Caciques?"

Manuel looked thoughtful for a few minutes, like a man trying

to ransack his memory. At last he said:

"Yes."

"Ah!" said Glenarvan, catching at the fresh hope.

They all eagerly crowded round the Sergeant, exclaiming,

"Tell us, tell us."

"It was some years ago," replied Manuel. "Yes; all I heard was that some Europeans were prisoners, but I never saw them."

"You are making a mistake," said Glenarvan. "It can't be some years ago; the date of the shipwreck is explicitly given.

The BRITANNIA was wrecked in June, 1862. It is scarcely two years ago."

"Oh, more than that, my Lord."

"Impossible!" said Paganel.

"Oh, but it must be. It was when Pepe was born.

There were two prisoners."

"No, three!" said Glenarvan.

"Two!" replied the Sergeant, in a positive tone.

"Two?" echoed Glenarvan, much surprised. "Two Englishmen?"

"No, no. Who is talking of Englishmen? No; a Frenchman and an Italian."

"An Italian who was massacred by the Poyuches?" exclaimed Paganel.

"Yes; and I heard afterward that the Frenchman was saved."

"Saved!" exclaimed young Robert, his very life hanging on the lips of the Sergeant.

Yes; delivered out of the hands of the Indians."

Paganel struck his forehead with an air of desperation, and said at last,

"Ah! I understand. It is all clear now; everything is explained."

"But what is it?" asked Glenarvan, with as much impatience.

"My friends," replied Paganel, taking both Robert's hands in his own, "we must resign ourselves to a sad disaster.



We have been on a wrong track. The prisoner mentioned is not the captain at all, but one of my own countrymen; and his companion, who was assassinated by the Poyuches, was Marco Vazello. The Frenchman was dragged along by the cruel Indians several times as far as the shores of the Colorado, but managed at length to make his escape, and return to Colorado. Instead of following the track of Harry Grant, we have fallen on that of young Guinnard."

This announcement was heard with profound silence. The mistake was palpable. The details given by the Sergeant, the nationality of the prisoner, the murder of his companions, his escape from the hands of the Indians, all evidenced the fact. Glenarvan looked at Thalcave with a crestfallen face, and the Indian, turning to the Sergeant, asked whether he had never heard of three English captives.

"Never," replied Manuel. "They would have known of them at Tandil, I am sure. No, it cannot be."

After this, there was nothing further to do at Fort Independence but to shake hands with the Commandant, and thank him and take leave.

Glenarvan was in despair at this complete overthrow of his hopes, and Robert walked silently beside him, with his eyes full of tears. Glenarvan could not find a word of comfort to say to him.

Paganel gesticulated and talked away to himself. The Major never opened his mouth, nor Thalcave, whose amour propre, as an Indian, seemed quite wounded by having allowed himself to go on a wrong scent. No one, however, would have thought of reproaching him for an error so pardonable.

They went back to the FONDA, and had supper; but it was a gloomy party that surrounded the table. It was not that any one of them regretted the fatigue they had so heedlessly endured or the dangers they had run, but they felt their hope of success was gone, for there was no chance of coming across Captain Grant between the Sierra Tandil and the sea, as Sergeant Manuel must have heard if any prisoners had fallen into the hands of the Indians on the coast of the Atlantic. Any event of this nature would have attracted the notice of the Indian traders who traffic between Tandil and Carmen, at the mouth of the Rio Negro. The best thing to do now was to get to the DUNCAN as quick as possible at the appointed rendezvous.

Paganel asked Glenarvan, however, to let him have the document again, on the faith of which they had set out on so bootless a search. He read it over and over, as if trying to extract some new meaning out of it.

"Yet nothing can be clearer," said Glenarvan; "it gives the date of the shipwreck, and the manner, and the place of the captivity in the most categorical manner."

"That it does not--no, it does not!" exclaimed Paganel, striking the table with his fist. "Since Harry Grant is not in the Pampas, he is not in America; but where he is the document must say, and it shall say, my friends, or my name is not Jacques Paganel any longer."