

## CHAPTER XXII THE FLOOD

A DISTANCE of 150 miles separates Fort Independence from the shores of the Atlantic. Unless unexpected and certainly improbable delays should occur, in four days Glenarvan would rejoin the DUNCAN. But to return on board without Captain Grant, and after having so completely failed in his search, was what he could not bring himself to do.

Consequently, when next day came, he gave no orders for departure; the Major took it upon himself to have the horses saddled, and make all preparations. Thanks to his activity, next morning at eight o'clock the little troop was descending the grassy slopes of the Sierra.

Glenarvan, with Robert at his side, galloped along without saying a word.

His bold, determined nature made it impossible to take failure quietly.

His heart throbbed as if it would burst, and his head was burning.

Paganel, excited by the difficulty, was turning over and over the words of the document, and trying to discover some new meaning.

Thalcave was perfectly silent, and left Thaouka to lead the way.

The Major, always confident, remained firm at his post, like a man on whom discouragement takes no hold. Tom Austin and his two sailors shared the dejection of their master. A timid rabbit happened to run across their path, and the superstitious men looked at each other in dismay.

"A bad omen," said Wilson.

"Yes, in the Highlands," repeated Mulrady.

"What's bad in the Highlands is not better here,"  
returned Wilson sententiously.

Toward noon they had crossed the Sierra, and descended into the undulating plains which extend to the sea. Limpid RIOS intersected these plains, and lost themselves among the tall grasses. The ground had once more become a dead level, the last mountains of the Pampas were passed, and a long carpet of verdure unrolled itself over the monotonous prairie beneath the horses' tread.

Hitherto the weather had been fine, but to-day the sky presented anything but a reassuring appearance. The heavy vapors, generated by the high temperature of the preceding days, hung in thick clouds, which ere long would empty themselves in torrents of rain. Moreover, the vicinity of the Atlantic, and the prevailing west wind, made the climate of this district particularly damp. This was evident by the fertility and abundance of the pasture and its dark color. However, the clouds remained unbroken for the present, and in the evening, after a brisk gallop of forty miles, the horses stopped on the brink of deep CANADAS, immense natural trenches filled with water. No shelter was near, and ponchos had to serve both for tents and coverlets as each man lay down and fell asleep beneath the threatening sky.

Next day the presence of water became still more sensibly felt; it seemed to exude from every pore of the ground. Soon large ponds, some just beginning to form, and some already deep, lay across the route to the east. As long as they had only to deal with lagoons, circumscribed pieces of water unencumbered with aquatic plants, the horses could get through well enough, but when they encountered moving sloughs called PENTANOS, it was harder work. Tall grass blocked them up, and they were involved in the peril before they were aware.

These bogs had already proved fatal to more than one living thing, for Robert, who had got a good bit ahead of the party, came rushing back at full gallop, calling out:

"Monsieur Paganel, Monsieur Paganel, a forest of horns."

"What!" exclaimed the geographer; "you have found a forest of horns?"

"Yes, yes, or at any rate a coppice."

"A coppice!" replied Paganel, shrugging his shoulders.

"My boy, you are dreaming."

"I am not dreaming, and you will see for yourself. Well, this is a strange country. They sow horns, and they sprout up like wheat. I wish I could get some of the seed."

"The boy is really speaking seriously," said the Major.

"Yes, Mr. Major, and you will soon see I am right."

The boy had not been mistaken, for presently they found themselves in front of an immense field of horns, regularly planted and stretching far out of sight. It was a complete copse, low and close packed, but a strange sort.

"Well," said Robert.

"This is peculiar certainly," said Paganel, and he turned round to question Thalcave on the subject.

"The horns come out of the ground," replied the Indian, "but the oxen are down below."

"What!" exclaimed Paganel; "do you mean to say that a whole herd was caught in that mud and buried alive?"

"Yes," said the Patagonian.

And so it was. An immense herd had been suffocated side by side in this enormous bog, and this was not the first occurrence of the kind which had taken place in the Argentine plains.

An hour afterward and the field of horns lay two miles behind.

Thalcave was somewhat anxiously observing a state of things which appeared to him unusual. He frequently stopped and raised himself on his stirrups and looked around. His great height gave him a commanding view of the whole horizon; but after a keen rapid survey, he quickly resumed his seat and went on. About a mile further he stopped again, and leaving the straight route, made a circuit of some miles north and south, and then returned and fell back in his place at the head of the troop, without saying a syllable as to what he hoped or feared. This strange behavior, several times repeated, made Glenarvan very uneasy, and quite puzzled Paganel. At last, at Glenarvan's request, he asked the Indian about it.

Thalcave replied that he was astonished to see the plains so saturated with water. Never, to his knowledge, since he had followed the calling of guide, had he found the ground in this soaking condition. Even in the rainy season, the Argentine plains had always been passable.

"But what is the cause of this increasing humidity?" said Paganel.

"I do not know, and what if I did?"

"Could it be owing to the RIOS of the Sierra being swollen

to overflowing by the heavy rains?"

"Sometimes they are."

"And is it the case now?"

"Perhaps."

Paganel was obliged to be content with this unsatisfactory reply, and went back to Glenarvan to report the result of his conversation.

"And what does Thalcave advise us to do?" said Glenarvan.

Paganel went back to the guide and asked him.

"Go on fast," was the reply.

This was easier said than done. The horses soon tired of treading over ground that gave way at every step. It sank each moment more and more, till it seemed half under water.

They quickened their pace, but could not go fast enough to escape the water, which rolled in great sheets at their feet. Before two hours the cataracts of the sky opened and deluged the plain in true tropical torrents of rain. Never was there a finer occasion for displaying philosophic equanimity.

There was no shelter, and nothing for it but to bear it stolidly. The ponchos were streaming like the overflowing gutter-spouts on the roof of a house, and the unfortunate horsemen had to submit to a double bath, for their horses dashed up the water to their waists at every step.

In this drenching, shivering state, and worn out with fatigue, they came toward evening to a miserable RANCHO, which could only have been called a shelter by people not very fastidious, and certainly only travelers in extremity would even have entered it; but Glenarvan and his companions had no choice, and were glad enough to burrow in this wretched hovel, though it would have been despised by even a poor Indian of the Pampas. A miserable fire of grass was kindled, which gave out more smoke than heat, and was very difficult to keep alight, as the torrents of rain which dashed against the ruined cabin outside found their way within and fell down in large drops from the roof. Twenty times over the fire would have been extinguished if Mulrady and Wilson had not kept off the water.

The supper was a dull meal, and neither appetizing nor reviving. Only the Major seemed to eat with any relish. The impassive McNabbs was superior to all circumstances. Paganel, Frenchman as he was, tried to joke, but the attempt was a failure.

"My jests are damp," he said, "they miss fire."

The only consolation in such circumstances was to sleep, and accordingly each one lay down and endeavored to find in slumber a temporary forgetfulness of his discomforts and his fatigues. The night was stormy, and the planks of the rancho cracked before the blast as if every instant they would give way. The poor horses outside, exposed to all the inclemency of the weather, were making piteous moans, and their masters were suffering quite as much inside the ruined RANCHO. However, sleep overpowered them at length. Robert was the first to close his eyes and lean his head against Glenarvan's shoulder, and soon all the rest were soundly sleeping too under the guardian eye of Heaven.

The night passed safely, and no one stirred till Thaouka woke them by tapping vigorously against the RANCHO with his hoof. He knew it was time to start, and at a push could give the signal as well as his master. They owed the faithful creature too much to disobey him, and set off immediately.

The rain had abated, but floods of water still covered the ground. Paganel, on consulting his map, came to the conclusion that the RIOS Grande and Vivarota, into which the water from the plains generally runs, must have been united in one large bed several miles in extent.

Extreme haste was imperative, for all their lives depended on it.



Should the inundation increase, where could they find refuge?  
Not a single elevated point was visible on the whole circle  
of the horizon, and on such level plains water would sweep along  
with fearful rapidity.

The horses were spurred on to the utmost, and Thaouka led the way,  
bounding over the water as if it had been his natural element.  
Certainly he might justly have been called a sea-horse--  
better than many of the amphibious animals who bear that name.

All of a sudden, about ten in the morning, Thaouka betrayed symptoms  
of violent agitation. He kept turning round toward the south,  
neighing continually, and snorting with wide open nostrils.  
He reared violently, and Thalcave had some difficulty in keeping  
his seat. The foam from his mouth was tinged with blood  
from the action of the bit, pulled tightly by his master's  
strong hand, and yet the fiery animal would not be still.  
Had he been free, his master knew he would have fled away  
to the north as fast as his legs would have carried him.

"What is the matter with Thaouka?" asked Paganel. "Is he bitten  
by the leeches? They are very voracious in the Argentine streams."

"No," replied the Indian.

"Is he frightened at something, then?"

"Yes, he scents danger."

"What danger?"

"I don't know."

But, though no danger was apparent to the eye, the ear could catch the sound of a murmuring noise beyond the limits of the horizon, like the coming in of the tide. Soon a confused sound was heard of bellowing and neighing and bleating, and about a mile to the south immense flocks appeared, rushing and tumbling over each other in the greatest disorder, as they hurried pell-mell along with inconceivable rapidity. They raised such a whirlwind of water in their course that it was impossible to distinguish them clearly. A hundred whales of the largest size could hardly have dashed up the ocean waves more violently.

"Anda, anda!" (quick, quick), shouted Thalcave, in a voice like thunder.

"What is it, then?" asked Paganel.

"The rising," replied Thalcave.

"He means an inundation," exclaimed Paganel, flying with the others

after Thalcave, who had spurred on his horse toward the north.

It was high time, for about five miles south an immense towering wave was seen advancing over the plain, and changing the whole country into an ocean. The tall grass disappeared before it as if cut down by a scythe, and clumps of mimosas were torn up and drifted about like floating islands.

The wave was speeding on with the rapidity of a racehorse, and the travelers fled before it like a cloud before a storm-wind. They looked in vain for some harbor of refuge, and the terrified horses galloped so wildly along that the riders could hardly keep their saddles.

"Anda, anda!" shouted Thalcave, and again they spurred on the poor animals till the blood ran from their lacerated sides. They stumbled every now and then over great cracks in the ground, or got entangled in the hidden grass below the water. They fell, and were pulled up only to fall again and again, and be pulled up again and again. The level of the waters was sensibly rising, and less than two miles off the gigantic wave reared its crested head.

For a quarter of an hour this supreme struggle with the most terrible of elements lasted. The fugitives could not tell how far they had gone, but, judging by the speed, the distance must have

been considerable. The poor horses, however, were breast-high in water now, and could only advance with extreme difficulty. Glenarvan and Paganel, and, indeed, the whole party, gave themselves up for lost, as the horses were fast getting out of their depth, and six feet of water would be enough to drown them.

It would be impossible to tell the anguish of mind these eight men endured; they felt their own impotence in the presence of these cataclysms of nature so far beyond all human power. Their salvation did not lie in their own hands.

Five minutes afterward, and the horses were swimming; the current alone carried them along with tremendous force, and with a swiftness equal to their fastest gallop; they must have gone fully twenty miles an hour.

All hope of delivery seemed impossible, when the Major suddenly called out:

"A tree!"

"A tree?" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes, there, there!" replied Thalcave, pointing with his finger to a species of gigantic walnut-tree, which raised its solitary head above the waters.

His companions needed no urging forward now; this tree, so opportunely discovered, they must reach at all hazards. The horses very likely might not be able to get to it, but, at all events, the men would, the current bearing them right down to it.

Just at that moment Tom Austin's horse gave a smothered neigh and disappeared. His master, freeing his feet from the stirrups, began to swim vigorously.

"Hang on to my saddle," called Glenarvan.

"Thanks, your honor, but I have good stout arms."

"Robert, how is your horse going?" asked his Lordship, turning to young Grant.

"Famously, my Lord, he swims like a fish."

"Lookout!" shouted the Major, in a stentorian voice.

The warning was scarcely spoken before the enormous billow, a monstrous wave forty feet high, broke over the fugitives with a fearful noise.

Men and animals all disappeared in a whirl of foam; a liquid mass, weighing several millions of tons, engulfed them in its seething waters.

When it had rolled on, the men reappeared on the surface, and counted each other rapidly; but all the horses, except Thaouka, who still bore his master, had gone down forever.

"Courage, courage," repeated Glenarvan, supporting Paganel with one arm, and swimming with the other.

"I can manage, I can manage," said the worthy savant.

"I am even not sorry--"

But no one ever knew what he was not sorry about, for the poor man was obliged to swallow down the rest of his sentence with half a pint of muddy water. The Major advanced quietly, making regular strokes, worthy of a master swimmer.

The sailors took to the water like porpoises, while Robert clung to Thaouka's mane, and was carried along with him.

The noble animal swam superbly, instinctively making for the tree in a straight line.

The tree was only twenty fathoms off, and in a few minutes was safely reached by the whole party; but for this refuge they must all have perished in the flood.

The water had risen to the top of the trunk, just to where the parent branches fork out. It was consequently, quite easy to clamber up to it.

Thalcave climbed up first, and got off his horse to hoist up Robert and help the others. His powerful arms had soon placed all the exhausted swimmers in a place of security.

But, meantime, Thaouka was being rapidly carried away by the current. He turned his intelligent face toward his master, and, shaking his long mane, neighed as if to summon him to his rescue.

"Are you going to forsake him, Thalcave?" asked Paganel.

"I!" replied the Indian, and forthwith he plunged down into the tumultuous waters, and came up again ten fathoms off. A few instants afterward his arms were round Thaouka's neck, and master and steed were drifting together toward the misty horizon of the north.