

CHAPTER XXIII A SINGULAR ABODE

THE tree on which Glenarvan and his companions had just found refuge, resembled a walnut-tree, having the same glossy foliage and rounded form. In reality, however, it was the OMBU, which grows solitarily on the Argentine plains. The enormous and twisted trunk of this tree is planted firmly in the soil, not only by its great roots, but still more by its vigorous shoots, which fasten it down in the most tenacious manner. This was how it stood proof against the shock of the mighty billow.

This OMBU measured in height a hundred feet, and covered with its shadow a circumference of one hundred and twenty yards. All this scaffolding rested on three great boughs which sprang from the trunk. Two of these rose almost perpendicularly, and supported the immense parasol of foliage, the branches of which were so crossed and intertwined and entangled, as if by the hand of a basket-maker, that they formed an impenetrable shade. The third arm, on the contrary, stretched right out in a horizontal position above the roaring waters, into which the lower leaves dipped. There was no want of room in the interior of this gigantic tree, for there were great gaps in the foliage, perfect glades, with air in abundance, and freshness everywhere. To see the innumerable branches rising to the clouds, and the creepers running from bough to bough, and attaching them together while the sunlight glinted here and there among

the leaves, one might have called it a complete forest instead of a solitary tree sheltering them all.

On the arrival of the fugitives a myriad of the feathered tribes fled away into the topmost branches, protesting by their outcries against this flagrant usurpation of their domicile. These birds, who themselves had taken refuge in the solitary OMBU, were in hundreds, comprising blackbirds, starlings, isacas, HILGUEROS, and especially the pica-flor, humming-birds of most resplendent colors. When they flew away it seemed as though a gust of wind had blown all the flowers off the tree.

Such was the asylum offered to the little band of Glenarvan. Young Grant and the agile Wilson were scarcely perched on the tree before they had climbed to the upper branches and put their heads through the leafy dome to get a view of the vast horizon. The ocean made by the inundation surrounded them on all sides, and, far as the eye could reach, seemed to have no limits. Not a single tree was visible on the liquid plain; the OMBU stood alone amid the rolling waters, and trembled before them. In the distance, drifting from south to north, carried along by the impetuous torrent, they saw trees torn up by the roots, twisted branches, roofs torn off, destroyed RANCHOS, planks of sheds stolen by the deluge from ESTANCIAS, carcasses of drowned animals, blood-stained skins, and on a shaky tree a complete family of jaguars, howling and clutching hold of their frail raft. Still farther away,

a black spot almost invisible, already caught Wilson's eye.

It was Thalcave and his faithful Thaouka.

"Thalcave, Thalcave!" shouted Robert, stretching out his hands toward the courageous Patagonian.

"He will save himself, Mr. Robert," replied Wilson; "we must go down to his Lordship."

Next minute they had descended the three stages of boughs, and landed safely on the top of the trunk, where they found Glenarvan, Paganel, the Major, Austin, and Mulrady, sitting either astride or in some position they found more comfortable.

Wilson gave an account of their investigations aloft, and all shared his opinion with respect to Thalcave. The only question was whether it was Thalcave who would save Thaouka, or Thaouka save Thalcave.

Their own situation meantime was much more alarming than his. No doubt the tree would be able to resist the current, but the waters might rise higher and higher, till the topmost branches were covered, for the depression of the soil made this part of the plain a deep reservoir. Glenarvan's first care, consequently, was to make notches by which to ascertain the progress of the inundation. For the present it was stationary, having apparently reached its height. This was reassuring.

"And now what are we going to do?" said Glenarvan.

"Make our nest, of course!" replied Paganel

"Make our nest!" exclaimed Robert.

"Certainly, my boy, and live the life of birds, since we can't
that of fishes."

"All very well, but who will fill our bills for us?" said Glenarvan.

"I will," said the Major.

All eyes turned toward him immediately, and there he sat in a natural
arm-chair, formed of two elastic boughs, holding out his ALFORJAS damp,
but still intact.

"Oh, McNabbs, that's just like you," exclaimed Glenarvan,
"you think of everything even under circumstances which would
drive all out of your head."

"Since it was settled we were not going to be drowned,
I had no intention of starving of hunger."

"I should have thought of it, too," said Paganel, "but I

am so DISTRAIT."

"And what is in the ALFORJAS?" asked Tom Austin.

"Food enough to last seven men for two days," replied McNabbs.

"And I hope the inundation will have gone down in twenty-four hours," said Glenarvan.

"Or that we shall have found some way of regaining terra firma," added Paganel.

"Our first business, then, now is to breakfast," said Glenarvan.

"I suppose you mean after we have made ourselves dry," observed the Major.

"And where's the fire?" asked Wilson.

"We must make it," returned Paganel.

"Where?"

"On the top of the trunk, of course."

"And what with?"

"With the dead wood we cut off the tree."

"But how will you kindle it?" asked Glenarvan. "Our tinder is just like wet sponge."

"We can dispense with it," replied Paganel. "We only want a little dry moss and a ray of sunshine, and the lens of my telescope, and you'll see what a fire I'll get to dry myself by. Who will go and cut wood in the forest?"

"I will," said Robert.

And off he scampered like a young cat into the depths of the foliage, followed by his friend Wilson. Paganel set to work to find dry moss, and had soon gathered sufficient. This he laid on a bed of damp leaves, just where the large branches began to fork out, forming a natural hearth, where there was little fear of conflagration.

Robert and Wilson speedily reappeared, each with an armful of dry wood, which they threw on the moss. By the help of the lens it was easily kindled, for the sun was blazing overhead.

In order to ensure a proper draught, Paganel stood over the hearth with his long legs straddled out in the Arab manner. Then stooping down and raising himself with a rapid motion, he made a violent current of air with his poncho,

which made the wood take fire, and soon a bright flame roared in the improvised brasier. After drying themselves, each in his own fashion, and hanging their ponchos on the tree, where they were swung to and fro in the breeze, they breakfasted, carefully however rationing out the provisions, for the morrow had to be thought of; the immense basin might not empty so soon as Glenarvan expected, and, anyway, the supply was very limited. The OMBU produced no fruit, though fortunately, it would likely abound in fresh eggs, thanks to the numerous nests stowed away among the leaves, not to speak of their feathered proprietors. These resources were by no means to be despised.

The next business was to install themselves as comfortably as they could, in prospect of a long stay.

"As the kitchen and dining-room are on the ground floor," said Paganel, "we must sleep on the first floor. The house is large, and as the rent is not dear, we must not cramp ourselves for room. I can see up yonder natural cradles, in which once safely tucked up we shall sleep as if we were in the best beds in the world. We have nothing to fear. Besides, we will watch, and we are numerous enough to repulse a fleet of Indians and other wild animals."

"We only want fire-arms."

"I have my revolvers," said Glenarvan.

"And I have mine," replied Robert.

"But what's the good of them?" said Tom Austin, "unless Monsieur Paganel can find out some way of making powder."

"We don't need it," replied McNabbs, exhibiting a powder flask in a perfect state of preservation.

"Where did you get it from, Major," asked Paganel.

"From Thalcave. He thought it might be useful to us, and gave it to me before he plunged into the water to save Thaouka."

"Generous, brave Indian!" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes," replied Tom Austin, "if all the Patagonians are cut after the same pattern, I must compliment Patagonia."

"I protest against leaving out the horse," said Paganel. "He is part and parcel of the Patagonian, and I'm much mistaken if we don't see them again, the one on the other's back."

"What distance are we from the Atlantic?" asked the Major.

"About forty miles at the outside," replied Paganel; "and now,

friends, since this is Liberty Hall, I beg to take leave of you. I am going to choose an observatory for myself up there, and by the help of my telescope, let you know how things are going on in the world."

Forthwith the geographer set off, hoisting himself up very cleverly from bough to bough, till he disappeared beyond the thick foliage. His companions began to arrange the night quarters, and prepare their beds. But this was neither a long nor difficult task, and very soon they resumed their seats round the fire to have a talk.

As usual their theme was Captain Grant. In three days, should the water subside, they would be on board the DUNCAN once more. But Harry Grant and his two sailors, those poor shipwrecked fellows, would not be with them. Indeed, it even seemed after this ill success and this useless journey across America, that all chance of finding them was gone forever. Where could they commence a fresh quest? What grief Lady Helena and Mary Grant would feel on hearing there was no further hope.

"Poor sister!" said Robert. "It is all up with us."

For the first time Glenarvan could not find any comfort to give him. What could he say to the lad?

Had they not searched exactly where the document stated?

"And yet," he said, "this thirty-seventh degree of latitude is not a mere figure, and that it applies to the shipwreck or captivity of Harry Grant, is no mere guess or supposition. We read it with our own eyes."

"All very true, your Honor," replied Tom Austin, "and yet our search has been unsuccessful."

"It is both a provoking and hopeless business," replied Glenarvan.

"Provoking enough, certainly," said the Major, "but not hopeless. It is precisely because we have an uncon-testable figure, provided for us, that we should follow it up to the end."

"What do you mean?" asked Glenarvan. "What more can we do?"

"A very logical and simple thing, my dear Edward. When we go on board the DUNCAN, turn her beak head to the east, and go right along the thirty-seventh parallel till we come back to our starting point if necessary."

"Do you suppose that I have not thought of that, Mr. McNabbs?" replied Glenarvan. "Yes, a hundred times. But what chance is there of success? To leave the American continent, wouldn't it be to go away from the very spot indicated by Harry Grant,

from this very Patagonia so distinctly named in the document."

"And would you recommence your search in the Pampas, when you have the certainty that the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA neither occurred on the coasts of the Pacific nor the Atlantic?"

Glenarvan was silent.

"And however small the chance of finding Harry Grant by following up the given parallel, ought we not to try?"

"I don't say no," replied Glenarvan.

"And are you not of my opinion, good friends," added the Major, addressing the sailors.

"Entirely," said Tom Austin, while Mulrady and Wilson gave an assenting nod.

"Listen to me, friends," said Glenarvan after a few minutes' reflection; "and remember, Robert, this is a grave discussion. I will do my utmost to find Captain Grant; I am pledged to it, and will devote my whole life to the task if needs be. All Scotland would unite with me to save so devoted a son as he has been to her. I too quite think with you that we must follow the thirty-seventh parallel round the globe if necessary, however slight our chance

of finding him. But that is not the question we have to settle. There is one much more important than that is--should we from this time, and all together, give up our search on the American continent?"

No one made any reply. Each one seemed afraid to pronounce the word.

"Well?" resumed Glenarvan, addressing himself especially to the Major.

"My dear Edward," replied McNabbs, "it would be incurring too great a responsibility for me to reply *hic et nunc*. It is a question which requires reflection. I must know first, through which countries the thirty-seventh parallel of southern latitude passes?"

"That's Paganel's business; he will tell you that," said Glenarvan.

"Let's ask him, then," replied the Major.

But the learned geographer was nowhere to be seen. He was hidden among the thick leafage of the OMBU, and they must call out if they wanted him.

"Paganel, Paganel!" shouted Glenarvan.

"Here," replied a voice that seemed to come from the clouds.

"Where are you?"

"In my tower."

"What are you doing there?"

"Examining the wide horizon."

"Could you come down for a minute?"

"Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"To know what countries the thirty-seventh parallel passes through."

"That's easily said. I need not disturb myself to come down for that."

"Very well, tell us now."

"Listen, then. After leaving America the thirty-seventh parallel crosses the Atlantic Ocean."

"And then?"

"It encounters Isle Tristan d'Acunha."

"Yes."

"It goes on two degrees below the Cape of Good Hope."

"And afterwards?"

"Runs across the Indian Ocean, and just touches Isle St. Pierre,
in the Amsterdam group."

"Go on."

"It cuts Australia by the province of Victoria."

"And then."

"After leaving Australia in--"

This last sentence was not completed. Was the geographer hesitating,
or didn't he know what to say?

No; but a terrible cry resounded from the top of the tree.

Glenarvan and his friends turned pale and looked at each other.

What fresh catastrophe had happened now? Had the unfortunate

Paganel slipped his footing?

Already Wilson and Mulrady had rushed to his rescue when his long body appeared tumbling down from branch to branch.

But was he living or dead, for his hands made no attempt to seize anything to stop himself. A few minutes more, and he would have fallen into the roaring waters had not the Major's strong arm barred his passage.

"Much obliged, McNabbs," said Paganel.

"How's this? What is the matter with you? What came over you? Another of your absent fits."

"Yes, yes," replied Paganel, in a voice almost inarticulate with emotion.

"Yes, but this was something extraordinary."

"What was it?"

"I said we had made a mistake. We are making it still, and have been all along."

"Explain yourself."

"Glenarvan, Major, Robert, my friends," exclaimed Paganel,

"all you that hear me, we are looking for Captain Grant where he is not to be found."

"What do you say?" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Not only where he is not now, but where he has never been."