

CHAPTER XXIV PAGANEL'S DISCLOSURE

PROFOUND astonishment greeted these unexpected words of the learned geographer. What could he mean? Had he lost his sense? He spoke with such conviction, however, that all eyes turned toward Glenarvan, for Paganel's affirmation was a direct answer to his question, but Glenarvan shook his head, and said nothing, though evidently he was not inclined to favor his friend's views.

"Yes," began Paganel again, as soon as he had recovered himself a little; "yes, we have gone a wrong track, and read on the document what was never there."

"Explain yourself, Paganel," said the Major, "and more calmly if you can."

"The thing is very simple, Major. Like you, I was in error; like you, I had rushed at a false interpretation, until about an instant ago, on the top of the tree, when I was answering your questions, just as I pronounced the word 'Australia,' a sudden flash came across my mind, and the document became clear as day."

"What!" exclaimed Glenarvan, "you mean to say that Harry Grant--"

"I mean to say," replied Paganel, "that the word AUSTRAL that occurs

in the document is not a complete word, as we have supposed up till now, but just the root of the word AUSTRALIE."

"Well, that would be strange," said the Major.

"Strange!" repeated Glenarvan, shrugging his shoulders; "it is simply impossible."

"Impossible?" returned Paganel. "That is a word we don't allow in France."

"What!" continued Glenarvan, in a tone of the most profound incredulity, "you dare to contend, with the document in your hand, that the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA happened on the shores of Australia."

"I am sure of it," replied Paganel.

"My conscience," exclaimed Glenarvan, "I must say I am surprised at such a declaration from the Secretary of a Geographical Society!"

"And why so?" said Paganel, touched in his weak point.

"Because, if you allow the word AUSTRALIE! you must also allow the word INDIENS, and Indians are never seen there."

Paganel was not the least surprised at this rejoinder.

Doubtless he expected it, for he began to smile, and said:

"My dear Glenarvan, don't triumph over me too fast. I am going to floor you completely, and never was an Englishman more thoroughly defeated than you will be. It will be the revenge for Cressy and Agincourt."

"I wish nothing better. Take your revenge, Paganel."

"Listen, then. In the text of the document, there is neither mention of the Indians nor of Patagonia! The incomplete word INDI does not mean INDIENS, but of course, INDIGENES, aborigines! Now, do you admit that there are aborigines in Australia?"

"Bravo, Paganel!" said the Major.

"Well, do you agree to my interpretation, my dear Lord?" asked the geographer again.

"Yes," replied Glenarvan, "if you will prove to me that the fragment of a word GONIE, does not refer to the country of the Patagonians."

"Certainly it does not. It has nothing to do with Patagonia," said Paganel. "Read it any way you please except that."

"How?"

"Cosmogonie, theogonie, agonie."

"AGONIE," said the Major.

"I don't care which," returned Paganel. "The word is quite unimportant; I will not even try to find out its meaning. The main point is that AUSTRAL means AUSTRALIE, and we must have gone blindly on a wrong track not to have discovered the explanation at the very beginning, it was so evident. If I had found the document myself, and my judgment had not been misled by your interpretation, I should never have read it differently."

A burst of hurrahs, and congratulations, and compliments followed Paganel's words. Austin and the sailors, and the Major and Robert, most all overjoyed at this fresh hope, applauded him heartily; while even Glenarvan, whose eyes were gradually getting open, was almost prepared to give in.

"I only want to know one thing more, my dear Paganel," he said, "and then I must bow to your perspicacity."

"What is it?"

"How will you group the words together according to your

new interpretation? How will the document read?"

"Easily enough answered. Here is the document," replied Paganel, taking out the precious paper he had been studying so conscientiously for the last few days.

For a few minutes there was complete silence, while the worthy SAVANT took time to collect his thoughts before complying with his lordship's request. Then putting his finger on the words, and emphasizing some of them, he began as follows:

"Le 7 juin 1862 le trois-mats Britannia de Glasgow a sombre apres,'-- put, if you please, 'deux jours, trois jours,' or 'une longue agonie,' it doesn't signify, it is quite a matter of indifference,--'sur les cotes de l'Australie. Se dirigeant a terre, deux matelots et le Capitaine Grant vont essayer d'aborder,' or 'ont aborde le continent ou ils seront,' or, 'sont prisonniers de cruels indigenes. Ils ont jete ce documents,' etc. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough," replied Glenarvan, "if the word continent can be applied to Australia, which is only an island."

"Make yourself easy about that, my dear Glenarvan; the best geographers have agreed to call the island the Australian Continent."

"Then all I have now to say is, my friends," said Glenarvan,

"away to Australia, and may Heaven help us!"

"To Australia!" echoed his companions, with one voice.

"I tell you what, Paganel," added Glenarvan, "your being on board the DUNCAN is a perfect providence."

"All right. Look on me as a messenger of providence, and let us drop the subject."

So the conversation ended--a conversation which great results were to follow; it completely changed the moral condition of the travelers; it gave the clew of the labyrinth in which they had thought themselves hopelessly entangled, and, amid their ruined projects, inspired them with fresh hope. They could now quit the American Continent without the least hesitation, and already their thoughts had flown to the Australias. In going on board the DUNCAN again they would not bring despair with them, and Lady Helena and Mary Grant would not have to mourn the irrevocable loss of Captain Grant. This thought so filled them with joy that they forgot all the dangers of their actual situation, and only regretted that they could not start immediately.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and they determined to have supper at six. Paganel wished to get up a splendid spread in honor of the occasion, but as the materials were very scanty,

he proposed to Robert to go and hunt in the neighboring forest. Robert clapped his hands at the idea, so they took Thalcave's powder flask, cleaned the revolvers and loaded them with small shot, and set off.

"Don't go too far," said the Major, gravely, to the two hunters.

After their departure, Glenarvan and McNabbs went down to examine the state of the water by looking at the notches they had made on the tree, and Wilson and Mulrady replenished the fire.

No sign of decrease appeared on the surface of the immense lake, yet the flood seemed to have reached its maximum height; but the violence with which it rushed from the south to north proved that the equilibrium of the Argentine rivers was not restored. Before getting lower the liquid mass must remain stationary, as in the case with the ocean before the ebb tide commences.

While Glenarvan and his cousin were making these observations, the report of firearms resounded frequently above their heads, and the jubilant outcries of the two sportsmen--for Paganel was every whit as much a child as Robert. They were having a fine time of it among the thick leaves, judging by the peals of laughter which rang out in the boy's clear treble voice and Paganel's deep bass. The chase was evidently successful, and wonders in culinary art might be expected. Wilson had a good idea to begin with,

which he had skilfully carried out; for when Glenarvan came back to the brasier, he found that the brave fellow had actually managed to catch, with only a pin and a piece of string, several dozen small fish, as delicate as smelts, called MOJARRAS, which were all jumping about in a fold of his poncho, ready to be converted into an exquisite dish.

At the same moment the hunters reappeared. Paganel was carefully carrying some black swallows' eggs, and a string of sparrows, which he meant to serve up later under the name of field larks. Robert had been clever enough to bring down several brace of HILGUEROS, small green and yellow birds, which are excellent eating, and greatly in demand in the Montevideo market. Paganel, who knew fifty ways of dressing eggs, was obliged for this once to be content with simply hardening them on the hot embers. But notwithstanding this, the viands at the meal were both dainty and varied. The dried beef, hard eggs, grilled MOJARRAS, sparrows, and roast HILGUEROS, made one of those gala feasts the memory of which is imperishable.

The conversation was very animated. Many compliments were paid Paganel on his twofold talents as hunter and cook, which the SAVANT accepted with the modesty which characterizes true merit.

Then he turned the conversation on the peculiarities of the OMBU, under whose canopy they had found shelter, and whose depths he declared were immense.

"Robert and I," he added, jestingly, "thought ourselves hunting in the open forest. I was afraid, for the minute, we should lose ourselves, for I could not find the road.

The sun was sinking below the horizon; I sought vainly for footmarks; I began to feel the sharp pangs of hunger, and the gloomy depths of the forest resounded already with the roar of wild beasts.

No, not that; there are no wild beasts here, I am sorry to say."

"What!" exclaimed Glenarvan, "you are sorry there are no wild beasts?"

"Certainly I am."

"And yet we should have every reason to dread their ferocity."

"Their ferocity is non-existent, scientifically speaking," replied the learned geographer.

"Now come, Paganel," said the Major, "you'll never make me admit the utility of wild beasts. What good are they?"

"Why, Major," exclaimed Paganel, "for purposes of classification into orders, and families, and species, and sub-species."

"A mighty advantage, certainly!" replied McNabbs, "I could dispense with all that. If I had been one of Noah's companions at the time of the deluge, I should most assuredly have hindered the imprudent patriarch

from putting in pairs of lions, and tigers, and panthers, and bears, and such animals, for they are as malevolent as they are useless."

"You would have done that?" asked Paganel.

"Yes, I would."

"Well, you would have done wrong in a zoological point of view," returned Paganel.

"But not in a humanitarian one," rejoined the Major.

"It is shocking!" replied Paganel. "Why, for my part, on the contrary, I should have taken special care to preserve megatheriums and pterodactyles, and all the antediluvian species of which we are unfortunately deprived by his neglect."

"And I say," returned McNabbs, "that Noah did a very good thing when he abandoned them to their fate--that is, if they lived in his day."

"And I say he did a very bad thing," retorted Paganel, "and he has justly merited the malediction of SAVANTS to the end of time!"

The rest of the party could not help laughing at hearing the two friends disputing over old Noah. Contrary to all his principles,

the Major, who all his life had never disputed with anyone, was always sparring with Paganel. The geographer seemed to have a peculiarly exciting effect on him.

Glenarvan, as usual, always the peacemaker, interfered in the debate, and said:

"Whether the loss of ferocious animals is to be regretted or not, in a scientific point of view, there is no help for it now; we must be content to do without them. Paganel can hardly expect to meet with wild beasts in this aerial forest."

"Why not?" asked the geographer.

"Wild beasts on a tree!" exclaimed Tom Austin.

"Yes, undoubtedly. The American tiger, the jaguar, takes refuge in the trees, when the chase gets too hot for him. It is quite possible that one of these animals, surprised by the inundation, might have climbed up into this OMBU, and be hiding now among its thick foliage."

"You haven't met any of them, at any rate, I suppose?" said the Major.

"No," replied Paganel, "though we hunted all through the wood.

It is vexing, for it would have been a splendid chase.
A jaguar is a bloodthirsty, ferocious creature. He can
twist the neck of a horse with a single stroke of his paw.
When he has once tasted human flesh he scents it greedily.
He likes to eat an Indian best, and next to him a negro,
then a mulatto, and last of all a white man."

"I am delighted to hear we come number four," said McNabbs.

"That only proves you are insipid," retorted Paganel,
with an air of disdain.

"I am delighted to be insipid," was the Major's reply.

"Well, it is humiliating enough," said the intractable Paganel.

"The white man proclaimed himself chief of the human race;
but Mr. Jaguar is of a different opinion it seems."

"Be that as it may, my brave Paganel, seeing there are
neither Indians, nor negroes, nor mulattoes among us,
I am quite rejoiced at the absence of your beloved jaguars.
Our situation is not so particularly agreeable."

"What! not agreeable!" exclaimed Paganel, jumping at
the word as likely to give a new turn to the conversation.

"You are complaining of your lot, Glenarvan."

"I should think so, indeed," replied Glenarvan. "Do you find these uncomfortable hard branches very luxurious?"

"I have never been more comfortable, even in my study. We live like the birds, we sing and fly about. I begin to believe men were intended to live on trees."

"But they want wings," suggested the Major.

"They'll make them some day."

"And till then," put in Glenarvan, "with your leave, I prefer the gravel of a park, or the floor of a house, or the deck of a ship, to this aerial dwelling."

"We must take things as they come, Glenarvan," returned Paganel. "If good, so much the better; if bad, never mind. Ah, I see you are wishing you had all the comforts of Malcolm Castle."

"No, but--"

"I am quite certain Robert is perfectly happy," interrupted Paganel, eager to insure one partisan at least.

"Yes, that I am!" exclaimed Robert, in a joyous tone.

"At his age it is quite natural," replied Glenarvan.

"And at mine, too," returned the geographer. "The fewer one's comforts, the fewer one's needs; and the fewer one's needs, the greater one's happiness."

"Now, now," said the Major, "here is Paganel running a tilt against riches and gilt ceilings."

"No, McNabbs," replied the SAVANT, "I'm not; but if you like, I'll tell you a little Arabian story that comes into my mind, very APROPOS this minute."

"Oh, do, do," said Robert.

"And what is your story to prove, Paganel?" inquired the Major.

"Much what all stories prove, my brave comrade."

"Not much then," rejoined McNabbs. "But go on, Scheherazade, and tell us the story."

"There was once," said Paganel, "a son of the great Haroun-al-Raschid, who was unhappy, and went to consult an old Dervish. The old sage told him that happiness was a difficult thing to find in this world."

'However,' he added, 'I know an infallible means of procuring your happiness.' 'What is it?' asked the young Prince. 'It is to put the shirt of a happy man on your shoulders.'

Whereupon the Prince embraced the old man, and set out at once to search for his talisman. He visited all the capital cities in the world.

He tried on the shirts of kings, and emperors, and princes and nobles; but all in vain: he could not find a man among them that was happy.

Then he put on the shirts of artists, and warriors, and merchants; but these were no better. By this time he had traveled a long way, without finding what he sought. At last he began to despair of success, and began sorrowfully to retrace his steps back to his father's palace,

when one day he heard an honest peasant singing so merrily as he drove the plow, that he thought, 'Surely this man is happy, if there is such a thing as happiness on earth.' Forthwith he accosted him, and said, 'Are you happy?' 'Yes,' was the reply.

'There is nothing you desire?' 'Nothing.' 'You would not change your lot for that of a king?' 'Never!' 'Well, then, sell me your shirt.'

'My shirt! I haven't one!'"