

CHAPTER XXVI THE RETURN ON BOARD

FOR two hours the OMBU navigated the immense lake without reaching terra firma. The flames which were devouring it had gradually died out. The chief danger of their frightful passage was thus removed, and the Major went the length of saying, that he should not be surprised if they were saved after all.

The direction of the current remained unchanged, always running from southwest to northeast. Profound darkness had again set in, only illumined here and there by a parting flash of lightning. The storm was nearly over. The rain had given place to light mists, which a breath of wind dispersed, and the heavy masses of cloud had separated, and now streaked the sky in long bands.

The OMBU was borne onward so rapidly by the impetuous torrent, that anyone might have supposed some powerful locomotive engine was hidden in its trunk. It seemed likely enough they might continue drifting in this way for days.

About three o'clock in the morning, however, the Major noticed that the roots were beginning to graze the ground occasionally, and by sounding the depth of the water with a long branch, Tom Austin found that they were getting on rising ground. Twenty minutes afterward, the OMBU stopped short with a violent jolt.

"Land! land!" shouted Paganel, in a ringing tone.

The extremity of the calcined bough had struck some hillock, and never were sailors more glad; the rock to them was the port.

Already Robert and Wilson had leaped on to the solid plateau with a loud, joyful hurrah! when a well-known whistle was heard. The gallop of a horse resounded over the plain, and the tall form of Thalcave emerged from the darkness.

"Thalcave! Thalcave!" they all cried with one voice.

"Amigos!" replied the Patagonian, who had been waiting for the travelers here in the same place where the current had landed himself.

As he spoke he lifted up Robert in his arms, and hugged him to his breast, never imagining that Paganel was hanging on to him. A general and hearty hand-shaking followed, and everyone rejoiced at seeing their faithful guide again. Then the Patagonian led the way into the HANGAR of a deserted ESTANCIA, where there was a good, blazing fire to warm them, and a substantial meal of fine, juicy slices of venison soon broiling, of which they did not leave a crumb.

When their minds had calmed down a little, and they were able to reflect on the dangers they had come through from flood, and fire, and alligators, they could scarcely believe they had escaped.

Thalcave, in a few words, gave Paganel an account of himself since they parted, entirely ascribing his deliverance to his intrepid horse. Then Paganel tried to make him understand their new interpretation of the document, and the consequent hopes they were indulging. Whether the Indian actually understood his ingenious hypothesis was a question; but he saw that they were glad and confident, and that was enough for him.

As can easily be imagined, after their compulsory rest on the OMBU, the travelers were up betimes and ready to start. At eight o'clock they set off. No means of transport being procurable so far south, they were compelled to walk. However, it was not more than forty miles now that they had to go, and Thaouka would not refuse to give a lift occasionally to a tired pedestrian, or even to a couple at a pinch. In thirty-six hours they might reach the shores of the Atlantic.

The low-lying tract of marshy ground, still under water, soon lay behind them, as Thalcave led them upward to the higher plains. Here the Argentine territory resumed its monotonous aspect. A few clumps of trees, planted by European hands, might chance to be visible among the pasturage, but quite as rarely as in Tandil and Tapalquem Sierras. The native trees are only found on the edge of long prairies and about Cape Corrientes.

Next day, though still fifteen miles distant, the proximity of the ocean was sensibly felt. The VIRAZON, a peculiar wind, which blows regularly

half of the day and night, bent down the heads of the tall grasses. Thinly planted woods rose to view, and small tree-like mimosas, bushes of acacia, and tufts of CURRA-MANTEL. Here and there, shining like pieces of broken glass, were salinous lagoons, which increased the difficulty of the journey as the travelers had to wind round them to get past. They pushed on as quickly as possible, hoping to reach Lake Salado, on the shores of the ocean, the same day; and at 8 P. M., when they found themselves in front of the sand hills two hundred feet high, which skirt the coast, they were all tolerably tired. But when the long murmur of the distant ocean fell on their ears, the exhausted men forgot their fatigue, and ran up the sandhills with surprising agility. But it was getting quite dark already, and their eager gaze could discover no traces of the DUNCAN on the gloomy expanse of water that met their sight.

"But she is there, for all that," exclaimed Glenarvan, "waiting for us, and running alongside."

"We shall see her to-morrow," replied McNabbs.

Tom Austin hailed the invisible yacht, but there was no response. The wind was very high and the sea rough. The clouds were scudding along from the west, and the spray of the waves dashed up even to the sand-hills. It was little wonder, then, if the man on the look-out could neither hear nor make himself heard, supposing the DUNCAN were there. There was no shelter on the coast for her, neither bay nor cove, nor port;

not so much as a creek. The shore was composed of sand-banks which ran out into the sea, and were more dangerous to approach than rocky shoals. The sand-banks irritate the waves, and make the sea so particularly rough, that in heavy weather vessels that run aground there are invariably dashed to pieces.

Though, then, the DUNCAN would keep far away from such a coast, John Mangles is a prudent captain to get near.

Tom Austin, however, was of the opinion that she would be able to keep five miles out.

The Major advised his impatient relative to restrain himself to circumstances. Since there was no means of dissipating the darkness, what was the use of straining his eyes by vainly endeavoring to pierce through it.

He set to work immediately to prepare the night's encampment beneath the shelter of the sand-hills; the last provisions supplied the last meal, and afterward, each, following the Major's example, scooped out a hole in the sand, which made a comfortable enough bed, and then covered himself with the soft material up to his chin, and fell into a heavy sleep.

But Glenarvan kept watch. There was still a stiff breeze of wind, and the ocean had not recovered its equilibrium after the recent storm. The waves, at all times tumultuous,

now broke over the sand-banks with a noise like thunder. Glenarvan could not rest, knowing the DUNCAN was so near him. As to supposing she had not arrived at the appointed rendezvous, that was out of the question. Glenarvan had left the Bay of Talcahuano on the 14th of October, and arrived on the shores of the Atlantic on the 12th of November. He had taken thirty days to cross Chili, the Cordilleras, the Pampas, and the Argentine plains, giving the DUNCAN ample time to double Cape Horn, and arrive on the opposite side. For such a fast runner there were no impediments. Certainly the storm had been very violent, and its fury must have been terrible on such a vast battlefield as the Atlantic, but the yacht was a good ship, and the captain was a good sailor. He was bound to be there, and he would be there.

These reflections, however, did not calm Glenarvan. When the heart and the reason are struggling, it is generally the heart that wins the mastery. The laird of Malcolm Castle felt the presence of loved ones about him in the darkness as he wandered up and down the lonely strand. He gazed, and listened, and even fancied he caught occasional glimpses of a faint light.

"I am not mistaken," he said to himself; "I saw a ship's light, one of the lights on the DUNCAN! Oh! why can't I see in the dark?"

All at once the thought rushed across him that Paganel said he was

a nyctalope, and could see at night. He must go and wake him.

The learned geographer was sleeping as sound as a mole.

A strong arm pulled him up out of the sand and made him call out:

"Who goes there?"

"It is I, Paganel."

"Who?"

"Glenarvan. Come, I need your eyes."

"My eyes," replied Paganel, rubbing them vigorously.

"Yes, I need your eyes to make out the DUNCAN in this darkness, so come."

"Confound the nyctalopia!" said Paganel, inwardly, though delighted to be of any service to his friend.

He got up and shook his stiffened limbs, and stretching and yawning as most people do when roused from sleep, followed Glenarvan to the beach.

Glenarvan begged him to examine the distant horizon across the sea, which he did most conscientiously for some minutes.

"Well, do you see nothing?" asked Glenarvan.

"Not a thing. Even a cat couldn't see two steps before her."

"Look for a red light or a green one--her larboard or starboard light."

"I see neither a red nor a green light, all is pitch dark,"
replied Paganel, his eyes involuntarily beginning to close.

For half an hour he followed his impatient friend, mechanically letting his head frequently drop on his chest, and raising it again with a start. At last he neither answered nor spoke, and he reeled about like a drunken man. Glenarvan looked at him, and found he was sound asleep!

Without attempting to wake him, he took his arm, led him back to his hole, and buried him again comfortably.

At dawn next morning, all the slumberers started to their feet and rushed to the shore, shouting "Hurrah, hurrah!" as Lord Glenarvan's loud cry, "The DUNCAN, the DUNCAN!" broke upon his ear.

There she was, five miles out, her courses carefully reefed, and her steam half up. Her smoke was lost in the morning mist. The sea was so violent that a vessel of her tonnage could not

have ventured safely nearer the sand-banks.

Glenarvan, by the aid of Paganel's telescope, closely observed the movements of the yacht. It was evident that John Mangles had not perceived his passengers, for he continued his course as before.

But at this very moment Thalcave fired his carbine in the direction of the yacht. They listened and looked, but no signal of recognition was returned. A second and a third time the Indian fired, awakening the echoes among the sand-hills.

At last a white smoke was seen issuing from the side of the yacht.

"They see us!" exclaimed Glenarvan. "That's the cannon of the DUNCAN."

A few seconds, and the heavy boom of the cannon came across the water and died away on the shore. The sails were instantly altered, and the steam got up, so as to get as near the coast as possible.

Presently, through the glass, they saw a boat lowered.

"Lady Helena will not be able to come," said Tom Austin.

"It is too rough."

"Nor John Mangles," added McNabbs; "he cannot leave the ship."

"My sister, my sister!" cried Robert, stretching out his arms toward the yacht, which was now rolling violently.

"Oh, how I wish I could get on board!" said Glenarvan.

"Patience, Edward! you will be there in a couple of hours," replied the Major.

Two hours! But it was impossible for a boat--a six-oared one--to come and go in a shorter space of time.

Glenarvan went back to Thalcave, who stood beside Thaouka, with his arms crossed, looking quietly at the troubled waves.

Glenarvan took his hand, and pointing to the yacht, said: "Come!"

The Indian gently shook his head.

"Come, friend," repeated Glenarvan.

"No," said Thalcave, gently. "Here is Thaouka, and there--the Pampas," he added, embracing with a passionate gesture the wide-stretching prairies.

Glenarvan understood his refusal. He knew that the Indian would never forsake the prairie, where the bones of his fathers

were whitening, and he knew the religious attachment of these sons of the desert for their native land. He did not urge Thalcave longer, therefore, but simply pressed his hand. Nor could he find it in his heart to insist, when the Indian, smiling as usual, would not accept the price of his services, pushing back the money, and saying:

"For the sake of friendship."

Glenarvan could not reply; but he wished at least, to leave the brave fellow some souvenir of his European friends. What was there to give, however? Arms, horses, everything had been destroyed in the unfortunate inundation, and his friends were no richer than himself.

He was quite at a loss how to show his recognition of the disinterestedness of this noble guide, when a happy thought struck him. He had an exquisite portrait of Lady Helena in his pocket, a CHEF-D'OEUVRE of Lawrence. This he drew out, and offered to Thalcave, simply saying:

"My wife."

The Indian gazed at it with a softened eye, and said:

"Good and beautiful."

Then Robert, and Paganel, and the Major, and the rest, exchanged touching farewells with the faithful Patagonian. Thalcave embraced them each, and pressed them to his broad chest. Paganel made him accept a map of South America and the two oceans, which he had often seen the Indian looking at with interest. It was the most precious thing the geographer possessed. As for Robert, he had only caresses to bestow, and these he lavished on his friend, not forgetting to give a share to Thaouka.

The boat from the DUNCAN was now fast approaching, and in another minute had glided into a narrow channel between the sand-banks, and run ashore.

"My wife?" were Glenarvan's first words.

"My sister?" said Robert.

"Lady Helena and Miss Grant are waiting for you on board," replied the coxswain; "but lose no time your honor, we have not a minute, for the tide is beginning to ebb already."

The last kindly adieux were spoken, and Thalcave accompanied his friends to the boat, which had been pushed back into the water. Just as Robert was going to step in, the Indian took him in his arms, and gazed tenderly into his face. Then he said:

"Now go. You are a man."

"Good-by, good-by, friend!" said Glenarvan, once more.

"Shall we never see each other again?" Paganel called out.

"Quien sabe?" (Who knows?) replied Thalcave, lifting his arms toward heaven.

These were the Indian's last words, dying away on the breeze, as the boat receded gradually from the shore. For a long time, his dark, motionless SILHOUETTE stood out against the sky, through the white, dashing spray of the waves. Then by degrees his tall form began to diminish in size, till at last his friends of a day lost sight of him altogether.

An hour afterward Robert was the first to leap on board the DUNCAN. He flung his arms round Mary's neck, amid the loud, joyous hurrahs of the crew on the yacht.

Thus the journey across South America was accomplished, the given line of march being scrupulously adhered to throughout.

Neither mountains nor rivers had made the travelers change their course; and though they had not had to encounter any ill-will from men,

their generous intrepidity had been often enough roughly put to the proof by the fury of the unchained elements.

END OF BOOK ONE

In Search of the Castaways

Australia

CHAPTER I A NEW DESTINATION

FOR the first few moments the joy of reunion completely filled the hearts. Lord Glenarvan had taken care that the ill-success of their expedition should not throw a gloom over the pleasure of meeting, his very first words being:

"Cheer up, friends, cheer up! Captain Grant is not with us, but we have a certainty of finding him!"

Only such an assurance as this would have restored hope to those on board the DUNCAN. Lady Helena and Mary Grant had been sorely tried