

CHAPTER IX A COUNTRY OF PARADOXES

IT was the 23d of December, 1864, a dull, damp, dreary month in the northern hemisphere; but on the Australian continent it might be called June. The hottest season of the year had already commenced, and the sun's rays were almost tropical, when Lord Glenarvan started on his new expedition.

Most fortunately the 37th parallel did not cross the immense deserts, inaccessible regions, which have cost many martyrs to science already. Glenarvan could never have encountered them. He had only to do with the southern part of Australia--viz., with a narrow portion of the province of Adelaide, with the whole of Victoria, and with the top of the reversed triangle which forms New South Wales.

It is scarcely sixty-two miles from Cape Bernouilli to the frontiers of Victoria. It was not above a two days' march, and Ayrton reckoned on their sleeping next night at Apsley, the most westerly town of Victoria.

The commencement of a journey is always marked by ardor, both in the horses and the horsemen. This is well enough in the horsemen, but if the horses are to go far, their speed must be moderated and their strength husbanded. It was, therefore, fixed that the average journey every day

should not be more than from twenty-five to thirty miles.

Besides, the pace of the horses must be regulated by the slower pace of the bullocks, truly mechanical engines which lose in time what they gain in power. The wagon, with its passengers and provisions, was the very center of the caravan, the moving fortress.

The horsemen might act as scouts, but must never be far away from it.

As no special marching order had been agreed upon, everybody was at liberty to follow his inclinations within certain limits.

The hunters could scour the plain, amiable folks could talk to the fair occupants of the wagon, and philosophers could philosophize. Paganel, who was all three combined, had to be and was everywhere at once.

The march across Adelaide presented nothing of any particular interest.

A succession of low hills rich in dust, a long stretch of what they call in Australia "bush," several prairies covered with a small prickly bush, considered a great dainty by the ovine tribe, embraced many miles.

Here and there they noticed a species of sheep peculiar to New Holland--sheep with pig's heads, feeding between the posts of the telegraph line recently made between Adelaide and the coast.

Up to this time there had been a singular resemblance in the country to the monotonous plains of the Argentine Pampas. There was the same grassy flat soil, the same sharply-defined horizon against

the sky. McNabbs declared they had never changed countries; but Paganel told him to wait, and he would soon see a difference. And on the faith of this assurance marvelous things were expected by the whole party.

In this fashion, after a march of sixty miles in two days, the caravan reached the parish of Apsley, the first town in the Province of Victoria in the Wimerra district.

The wagon was put up at the Crown Inn. Supper was soon smoking on the table. It consisted solely of mutton served up in various ways.

They all ate heartily, but talked more than they ate, eagerly asking Paganel questions about the wonders of the country they were just beginning to traverse. The amiable geographer needed no pressing, and told them first that this part of it was called Australia Felix.

"Wrongly named!" he continued. "It had better have been called rich, for it is true of countries, as individuals, that riches do not make happiness. Thanks to her gold mines, Australia has been abandoned to wild devastating adventurers. You will come across them when we reach the gold fields."

"Is not the colony of Victoria of but a recent origin?"
asked Lady Glenarvan.

"Yes, madam, it only numbers thirty years of existence.

It was on the 6th of June, 1835, on a Tuesday--"

"At a quarter past seven in the evening," put in the Major, who delighted in teasing the Frenchman about his precise dates.

"No, at ten minutes past seven," replied the geographer, gravely, "that Batman and Falckner first began a settlement at Port Phillip, the bay on which the large city of Melbourne now stands. For fifteen years the colony was part of New South Wales, and recognized Sydney as the capital; but in 1851, she was declared independent, and took the name of Victoria."

"And has greatly increased in prosperity since then, I believe," said Glenarvan.

"Judge for yourself, my noble friend," replied Paganel. "Here are the numbers given by the last statistics; and let McNabbs say as he likes, I know nothing more eloquent than statistics."

"Go on," said the Major.

"Well, then, in 1836, the colony of Port Phillip had 224 inhabitants. To-day the province of Victoria numbers 550,000. Seven millions of vines produce annually 121,- 000 gallons of wine. There are 103,000 horses spreading over the plains, and 675,272

horned cattle graze in her wide-stretching pastures."

"Is there not also a certain number of pigs?" inquired McNabbs.

"Yes, Major, 79,625."

"And how many sheep?"

"7,115,943, McNabbs."

"Including the one we are eating at this moment."

"No, without counting that, since it is three parts devoured."

"Bravo, Monsieur Paganel," exclaimed Lady Helena, laughing heartily.

"It must be owned you are posted up in geographical questions, and my cousin McNabbs need not try and find you tripping."

"It is my calling, Madam, to know this sort of thing, and to give you the benefit of my information when you please. You may therefore believe me when I tell you that wonderful things are in store for you in this strange country."

"It does not look like it at present," said McNabbs, on purpose to tease Paganel.

"Just wait, impatient Major," was his rejoinder. "You have hardly put your foot on the frontier, when you turn round and abuse it. Well, I say and say again, and will always maintain that this is the most curious country on the earth. Its formation, and nature, and products, and climate, and even its future disappearance have amazed, and are now amazing, and will amaze, all the SAVANTS in the world. Think, my friends, of a continent, the margin of which, instead of the center, rose out of the waves originally like a gigantic ring, which encloses, perhaps, in its center, a sea partly evaporated, the waves of which are drying up daily; where humidity does not exist either in the air or in the soil; where the trees lose their bark every year, instead of their leaves; where the leaves present their sides to the sun and not their face, and consequently give no shade; where the wood is often incombustible, where good-sized stones are dissolved by the rain; where the forests are low and the grasses gigantic; where the animals are strange; where quadrupeds have beaks, like the echidna, or ornithorhynchus, and naturalists have been obliged to create a special order for them, called monotremes; where the kangaroos leap on unequal legs, and sheep have pigs' heads; where foxes fly about from tree to tree; where the swans are black; where rats make nests; where the bower-bird opens her reception-rooms to receive visits from her feathered friends; where the birds astonish the imagination by the variety of their notes and their aptness; where one bird serves for a clock, and another makes a sound like a postilion cracking of a whip, and a third imitates a knife-grinder, and a fourth the motion of a pendulum;

where one laughs when the sun rises, and another cries when the sun sets!
Oh, strange, illogical country, land of paradoxes and anomalies,
if ever there was one on earth--the learned botanist Grimard was
right when he said, 'There is that Australia, a sort of parody,
or rather a defiance of universal laws in the face of the rest
of the world.'

Paganel's tirade was poured forth in the most impetuous manner,
and seemed as if it were never coming to an end.
The eloquent secretary of the Geographical Society was no longer
master of himself. He went on and on, gesticulating furiously,
and brandishing his fork to the imminent danger of his neighbors.
But at last his voice was drowned in a thunder of applause,
and he managed to stop.

Certainly after such an enumeration of Australian peculiarities, he might
have been left in peace but the Major said in the coolest tone possible:
"And is that all, Paganel?"

"No, indeed not," rejoined the Frenchman, with renewed vehemence.

"What!" exclaimed Lady Helena; "there are more wonders
still in Australia?"

"Yes, Madam, its climate. It is even stranger than its productions."

"Is it possible?" they all said.

"I am not speaking of the hygienic qualities of the climate," continued Paganel, "rich as it is in oxygen and poor in azote. There are no damp winds, because the trade winds blow regularly on the coasts, and most diseases are unknown, from typhus to measles, and chronic affections."

"Still, that is no small advantage," said Glenarvan.

"No doubt; but I am not referring to that, but to one quality it has which is incomparable."

"And what is that?"

"You will never believe me."

"Yes, we will," exclaimed his auditors, their curiosity aroused by this preamble.

"Well, it is--"

"It is what?"

"It is a moral regeneration."

"A moral regeneration?"

"Yes," replied the SAVANT, in a tone of conviction. "Here metals do not get rust on them by exposure to the air, nor men. Here the pure, dry atmosphere whitens everything rapidly, both linen and souls. The virtue of the climate must have been well known in England when they determined to send their criminals here to be reformed."

"What! do you mean to say the climate has really any such influence?" said Lady Helena.

"Yes, Madam, both on animals and men."

"You are not joking, Monsieur Paganel?"

"I am not, Madam. The horses and the cattle here are of incomparable docility. You see it?"

"It is impossible!"

"But it is a fact. And the convicts transported into this reviving, salubrious air, become regenerated in a few years. Philanthropists know this. In Australia all natures grow better."

"But what is to become of you then, Monsieur Paganel, in this privileged country--you who are so good already?"

said Lady Helena. "What will you turn out?"

"Excellent, Madam, just excellent, and that's all."