

CHAPTER X AN ACCIDENT

THE next day, the 24th of December, they started at daybreak.

The heat was already considerable, but not unbearable, and the road was smooth and good, and allowed the cavalcade to make speedy progress.

In the evening they camped on the banks of the White Lake, the waters of which are brackish and undrinkable.

Jacques Paganel was obliged to own that the name of this lake was a complete misnomer, for the waters were no more white than the Black Sea is black, or the Red Sea red, or the Yellow River yellow, or the Blue Mountains blue.

However, he argued and disputed the point with all the amour propre of a geographer, but his reasoning made no impression.

M. Olbinett prepared the evening meal with his accustomed punctuality, and after this was dispatched, the travelers disposed themselves for the night in the wagon and in the tent, and were soon sleeping soundly, notwithstanding the melancholy howling of the "dingoes," the jackals of Australia.

A magnificent plain, thickly covered with chrysanthemums, stretched out beyond the lake, and Glenarvan and his friends would gladly have explored its beauties when they awoke next morning, but they had to start. As far as the eye could reach, nothing was visible but one stretch of prairie,

enameled with flower, in all the freshness and abundance of spring. The blue flowers of the slender-leaved flax, combined with the bright hues of the scarlet acanthus, a flower peculiar to the country.

A few cassowaries were bounding over the plain, but it was impossible to get near them. The Major was fortunate enough, however, to hit one very rare animal with a ball in the leg. This was the jabiru, a species which is fast disappearing, the gigantic crane of the English colonies. This winged creature was five feet high, and his wide, conical, extremely pointed beak, measured eighteen inches in length. The violet and purple tints of his head contrasted vividly with the glossy green of his neck, and the dazzling whiteness of his throat, and the bright red of his long legs. Nature seems to have exhausted in its favor all the primitive colors on her palette.

Great admiration was bestowed on this bird, and the Major's spoil would have borne the honors of the day, had not Robert come across an animal a few miles further on, and bravely killed it. It was a shapeless creature, half porcupine, half ant-eater, a sort of unfinished animal belonging to the first stage of creation. A long glutinous extensible tongue hung out of his jaws in search of the ants, which formed its principal food.

"It is an echidna," said Paganel. "Have you ever seen such a creature?"

"It is horrible," replied Glenarvan.

"Horrible enough, but curious, and, what's more, peculiar to Australia. One might search for it in vain in any other part of the world."

Naturally enough, the geographer wished to preserve this interesting specimen of monotremata, and wanted to stow it away in the luggage; but M. Olbinett resented the idea so indignantly, that the SAVANT was obliged to abandon his project.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, John Mangles descried an enormous column of smoke about three miles off, gradually overspreading the whole horizon. What could be the cause of this phenomenon? Paganel was inclined to think it was some description of meteor, and his lively imagination was already in search of an explanation, when Ayrton cut short all his conjectures summarily, by announcing that the cloud of dust was caused by a drove of cattle on the road.

The quartermaster proved right, for as the cloud came nearer, quite a chorus of bleatings and neighings, and bel-lowings escaped from it, mingled with the loud tones of a human voice, in the shape of cries, and whistles, and vo-ciferations.

Presently a man came out of the cloud. This was the leader-in-chief of the four-footed army. Glenarvan advanced toward him, and friendly relations were speedily established between them. The leader, or to give him his proper designation, the stock-keeper, was part owner of the drove. His name was Sam Machell, and he was on his way from the eastern provinces to Portland Bay.

The drove numbered 12,075 head in all, or 1,000 bullocks, 11,000 sheep, and 75 horses. All these had been bought in the Blue Mountains in a poor, lean condition, and were going to be fattened up on the rich pasture lands of Southern Australia, and sold again at a great profit.

Sam Machell expected to get pounds 2 on each bullock, and 10s. on every sheep, which would bring him in pounds 3,750. This was doing good business; but what patience and energy were required to conduct such a restive, stubborn lot to their destination, and what fatigues must have to be endured. Truly the gain was hardly earned.

Sam Machell told his history in a few words, while the drove continued their march among the groves of mimosas.

Lady Helena and Mary and the rest of the party seated themselves under the shade of a wide-spreading gum-tree, and listened to his recital.

It was seven months since Sam Machell had started. He had gone at the rate of ten miles a day, and his interminable journey would last three months longer. His assistants in the laborious task

comprised twenty dogs and thirty men, five of whom were blacks, and very serviceable in tracking up any strayed beasts.

Six wagons made the rear-guard. All the men were armed with stockwhips, the handles of which are eighteen inches long, and the lash nine feet, and they move about among the ranks, bringing refractory animals back into order, while the dogs, the light cavalry of the regiment, preserved discipline in the wings.

The travelers were struck with the admirable arrangement of the drove. The different stock were kept apart, for wild sheep and bullocks would not have got on together at all.

The bullocks would never have grazed where the sheep had passed along, and consequently they had to go first, divided into two battalions.

Five regiments of sheep followed, in charge of twenty men, and last of all came the horses.

Sam Machell drew the attention of his auditors to the fact that the real guides of the drove were neither the men nor the dogs, but the oxen themselves, beasts of superior intelligence, recognized as leaders by their congenitors. They advanced in front with perfect gravity, choosing the best route by instinct, and fully alive to their claim to respect. Indeed, they were obliged to be studied and humored in everything, for the whole drove obeyed them implicitly. If they took it into their heads to stop, it was a matter of necessity to yield to their good pleasure,

for not a single animal would move a step till these leaders gave the signal to set off.

Sundry details, added by the stock-keeper, completed the history of this expedition, worthy of being written, if not commended by Xenophon himself. As long as the troop marched over the plains it was well enough, there was little difficulty or fatigue.

The animals fed as they went along, and slaked their thirst at the numerous creeks that watered the plains, sleeping at night and making good progress in the day, always obedient and tractable to the dogs. But when they had to go through great forests and groves of eucalyptus and mimosas, the difficulties increased.

Platoons, battalions and regiments got all mixed together or scattered, and it was a work of time to collect them again.

Should a "leader" unfortunately go astray, he had to be found, cost what it might, on pain of a general disbandment, and the blacks were often long days in quest of him, before their search was successful. During the heavy rains the lazy beasts refused to stir, and when violent storms chanced to occur, the creatures became almost mad with terror, and were seized with a wild, disorderly panic.

However, by dint of energy and ambition, the stock-keeper triumphed over these difficulties, incessantly renewed though they were.

He kept steadily on; mile after mile of plains and woods, and mountains, lay behind. But in addition to all his other qualities,

there was one higher than all that he specially needed when they came to rivers. This was patience--patience that could stand any trial, and not only could hold out for hours and days, but for weeks. The stock-keeper would be himself forced to wait on the banks of a stream that might have been crossed at once. There was nothing to hinder but the obstinacy of the herd. The bullocks would taste the water and turn back. The sheep fled in all directions, afraid to brave the liquid element. The stock-keeper hoped when night came he might manage them better, but they still refused to go forward. The rams were dragged in by force, but the sheep would not follow. They tried what thirst would do, by keeping them without drink for several days, but when they were brought to the river again, they simply quenched their thirst, and declined a more intimate acquaintance with the water. The next expedient employed was to carry all the lambs over, hoping the mothers would be drawn after them, moved by their cries. But the lambs might bleat as pitifully as they liked, the mothers never stirred. Sometimes this state of affairs would last a whole month, and the stock-keeper would be driven to his wits' end by his bleating, bellowing, neighing army. Then all of a sudden, one fine day, without rhyme or reason, a detachment would take it into their heads to make a start across, and the only difficulty now was to keep the whole herd from rushing helter-skelter after them. The wildest confusion set in among the ranks, and numbers of the animals were drowned in the passage.

Such was the narrative of Sam Machell. During its recital, a considerable part of the troop had filed past in good order. It was time for him to return to his place at their head, that he might be able to choose the best pasturage.

Taking leave of Lord Glenarvan, he sprang on a capital horse of the native breed, that one of his men held waiting for him, and after shaking hands cordially with everybody all round, took his departure. A few minutes later, nothing was visible of the stock-keeper and his troop but a cloud of dust.

The wagon resumed its course in the opposite direction, and did not stop again till they halted for the night at the foot of Mount Talbot.

Paganel made the judicious observation that it was the 25th of December, the Christmas Day so dear to English hearts. But the steward had not forgotten it, and an appetizing meal was soon ready under the tent, for which he deserved and received warm compliments from the guests. Indeed, M. Olbinett had quite excelled himself on this occasion. He produced from his stores such an array of European dishes as is seldom seen in the Australian desert.

Reindeer hams, slices of salt beef, smoked salmon, oat cakes, and barley meal scones; tea ad libitum, and whisky in abundance, and several bottles of port, composed this astonishing meal.

The little party might have thought themselves in the grand dining-hall of Malcolm Castle, in the heart of the Highlands of Scotland.

The next day, at 11 A. M., the wagon reached the banks of the Wimmera on the 143d meridian.

The river, half a mile in width, wound its limpid course between tall rows of gum-trees and acacias. Magnificent specimens of the MYRTACEA, among others, the *metrosideros speciosa*, fifteen feet high, with long drooping branches, adorned with red flowers. Thousands of birds, the lories, and greenfinches, and gold-winged pigeons, not to speak of the noisy paroquets, flew about in the green branches. Below, on the bosom of the water, were a couple of shy and unapproachable black swans. This *rara avis* of the Australian rivers soon disappeared among the windings of the Wimmera, which water the charming landscape in the most capricious manner.

The wagon stopped on a grassy bank, the long fringes of which dipped in the rapid current. There was neither raft nor bridge, but cross over they must. Ayrton looked about for a practicable ford. About a quarter of a mile up the water seemed shallower, and it was here they determined to try to pass over. The soundings in different parts showed a depth of three feet only, so that the wagon might safely enough venture.

"I suppose there is no other way of fording the river?"
said Glenarvan to the quartermaster.

"No, my Lord; but the passage does not seem dangerous.

We shall manage it."

"Shall Lady Glenarvan and Miss Grant get out of the wagon?"

"Not at all. My bullocks are surefooted, and you may rely on me for keeping them straight."

"Very well, Ayrton; I can trust you."

The horsemen surrounded the ponderous vehicle, and all stepped boldly into the current. Generally, when wagons have to ford rivers, they have empty casks slung all round them, to keep them floating on the water; but they had no such swimming belt with them on this occasion, and they could only depend on the sagacity of the animals and the prudence of Ayrton, who directed the team. The Major and the two sailors were some feet in advance. Glenarvan and John Mangles went at the sides of the wagon, ready to lend any assistance the fair travelers might require, and Paganel and Robert brought up the rear.

All went well till they reached the middle of the Wimerra, but then the hollow deepened, and the water rose to the middle of the wheels. The bullocks were in danger of losing their footing, and dragging with them the oscillating vehicle.

Ayrton devoted himself to his task courageously.

He jumped into the water, and hanging on by the bullocks' horns, dragged them back into the right course.

Suddenly the wagon made a jolt that it was impossible to prevent; a crack was heard, and the vehicle began to lean over in a most precarious manner. The water now rose to the ladies' feet; the whole concern began to float, though John Mangles and Lord Glenarvan hung on to the side. It was an anxious moment.

Fortunately a vigorous effort drove the wagon toward the opposite shore, and the bank began to slope upward, so that the horses and bullocks were able to regain their footing, and soon the whole party found themselves on the other side, glad enough, though wet enough too.

The fore part of the wagon, however, was broken by the jolt, and Glenarvan's horse had lost a shoe.

This was an accident that needed to be promptly repaired.

They looked at each other hardly knowing what to do, till Ayrton proposed he should go to Black Point Station, twenty miles further north, and bring back a blacksmith with him.

"Yes, go, my good fellow," said Glenarvan. "How long will it take you to get there and back?"

"About fifteen hours," replied Ayrton, "but not longer."

"Start at once, then, and we will camp here, on the banks of the Wimerra, till you return."