

CHAPTER XI CRIME OR CALAMITY

IT was not without apprehension that the Major saw Ayrton quit the Wimerra camp to go and look for a blacksmith at the Black Point Station. But he did not breathe a word of his private misgivings, and contented himself with watching the neighborhood of the river; nothing disturbed the repose of those tranquil glades, and after a short night the sun reappeared on the horizon.

As to Glenarvan, his only fear was lest Ayrton should return alone. If they fail to find a workman, the wagon could not resume the journey. This might end in a delay of many days, and Glenarvan, impatient to succeed, could brook no delay, in his eagerness to attain his object.

Ayrton luckily had lost neither his time nor his trouble. He appeared next morning at daybreak, accompanied by a man who gave himself out as the blacksmith from BlackPoint Station. He was a powerful fellow, and tall, but his features were of a low, brutal type, which did not prepossess anyone in his favor. But that was nothing, provided he knew his business. He scarcely spoke, and certainly he did not waste his breath in useless words.

"Is he a good workman?" said John Mangles to the quartermaster.

"I know no more about him than you do, captain," said Ayrton.

"But we shall see."

The blacksmith set to work. Evidently that was his trade, as they could plainly see from the way he set about repairing the forepart of the wagon. He worked skilfully and with uncommon energy.

The Major observed that the flesh of his wrists was deeply furrowed, showing a ring of extravasated blood. It was the mark of a recent injury, which the sleeve of an old woolen shirt could not conceal.

McNabbs questioned the blacksmith about those sores which looked so painful. The man continued his work without answering.

Two hours more and the damage the carriage had sustained was made good. As to Glenarvan's horse, it was soon disposed of.

The blacksmith had had the forethought to bring the shoes with him.

These shoes had a peculiarity which did not escape the Major; it was a trefoil clumsily cut on the back part. McNabbs pointed it out to Ayrton.

"It is the Black-Point brand," said the quartermaster.

"That enables them to track any horses that may stray from the station, and prevents their being mixed with other herds."

The horse was soon shod. The blacksmith claimed his wage, and went off without uttering four words.

Half an hour later, the travelers were on the road.

Beyond the grove of mimosas was a stretch of sparsely timbered country, which quite deserved its name of "open plain."

Some fragments of quartz and ferruginous rock lay among the scrub and the tall grass, where numerous flocks were feeding.

Some miles farther the wheels of the wagon plowed deep into the alluvial soil, where irregular creeks murmured in their beds, half hidden among giant reeds. By-and-by they skirted vast salt lakes, rapidly evaporating. The journey was accomplished without trouble, and, indeed, without fatigue.

Lady Helena invited the horsemen of the party to pay her a visit in turns, as her reception-room was but small, and in pleasant converse with this amiable woman they forgot the fatigue of their day's ride.

Lady Helena, seconded by Miss Mary, did the honors of their ambulatory house with perfect grace. John Mangles was not forgotten in these daily invitations, and his somewhat serious conversation was not unpleasing.

The party crossed, in a diagonal direction, the mail-coach road from Crowland to Horsham, which was a very dusty one, and little used by pedestrians.

The spurs of some low hills were skirted at the boundary of Talbot County, and in the evening the travelers reached a point about three miles

from Maryborough. The fine rain was falling, which, in any other country, would have soaked the ground; but here the air absorbed the moisture so wonderfully that the camp did not suffer in the least.

Next day, the 29th of December, the march was delayed somewhat by a succession of little hills, resembling a miniature Switzerland. It was a constant repetition of up and down hill, and many a jolt besides, all of which were scarcely pleasant. The travelers walked part of the way, and thought it no hardship.

At eleven o'clock they arrived at Carisbrook, rather an important municipality. Ayrton was for passing outside the town without going through it, in order, he said, to save time. Glenarvan concurred with him, but Paganel, always eager for novelties, was for visiting Carisbrook. They gave him his way, and the wagon went on slowly.

Paganel, as was his custom, took Robert with him. His visit to the town was very short, but it sufficed to give him an exact idea of Australian towns. There was a bank, a court-house, a market, a church, and a hundred or so of brick houses, all exactly alike. The whole town was laid out in squares, crossed with parallel streets in the English fashion.

Nothing could be more simple, nothing less attractive.

As the town grows, they lengthen the streets as we lengthen the trousers of a growing child, and thus the original

symmetry is undisturbed.

Carisbrook was full of activity, a remarkable feature in these towns of yesterday. It seems in Australia as if towns shot up like trees, owing to the heat of the sun. Men of business were hurrying along the streets; gold buyers were hastening to meet the in-coming escort; the precious metal, guarded by the local police, was coming from the mines at Bendigo and Mount Alexander. All the little world was so absorbed in its own interests, that the strangers passed unobserved amid the laborious inhabitants.

After an hour devoted to visiting Carisbrook, the two visitors rejoined their companions, and crossed a highly cultivated district. Long stretches of prairie, known as the "Low Level Plains," next met their gaze, dotted with countless sheep, and shepherds' huts. And then came a sandy tract, without any transition, but with the abruptness of change so characteristic of Australian scenery. Mount Simpson and Mount Terrengower marked the southern point where the boundary of the Loddon district cuts the 144th meridian.

As yet they had not met with any of the aboriginal tribes living in the savage state. Glenarvan wondered if the Australians were wanting in Australia, as the Indians had been wanting in the Pampas of the Argentine district; but Paganel told him that, in that latitude, the natives frequented chiefly the Murray Plains, about one hundred miles to the eastward.

"We are now approaching the gold district," said he,
"in a day or two we shall cross the rich region of
Mount Alexander. It was here that the swarm of diggers
alighted in 1852; the natives had to fly to the interior.
We are in civilized districts without seeing any sign of it;
but our road will, before the day is over, cross the railway
which connects the Murray with the sea. Well, I must confess,
a railway in Australia does seem to me an astonishing thing!"

"And pray, why, Paganel?" said Glenarvan.

"Why? because it jars on one's ideas. Oh! I know you English are so used
to colonizing distant possessions. You, who have electric telegraphs and
universal exhibitions in New Zealand, you think it is all quite natural.
But it dumb-founders the mind of a Frenchman like myself, and confuses
all one's notions of Australia!"

"Because you look at the past, and not at the present,"
said John Mangles.

A loud whistle interrupted the discussion. The party were
within a mile of the railway. Quite a number of persons
were hastening toward the railway bridge. The people from
the neighboring stations left their houses, and the shepherds
their flocks, and crowded the approaches to the railway.

Every now and then there was a shout, "The railway! the railway!"

Something serious must have occurred to produce such an agitation.

Perhaps some terrible accident.

Glenarvan, followed by the rest, urged on his horse.

In a few minutes he arrived at Camden Bridge and then he became aware of the cause of such an excitement.

A fearful accident had occurred; not a collision, but a train

had gone off the line, and then there had been a fall.

The affair recalled the worst disasters of American railways.

The river crossed by the railway was full of broken carriages

and the engine. Whether the weight of the train had been too much

for the bridge, or whether the train had gone off the rails,

the fact remained that five carriages out of six fell into the bed

of the Loddon, dragged down by the locomotive. The sixth carriage,

miraculously preserved by the breaking of the coupling chain,

remained on the rails, six feet from the abyss. Below nothing was

discernible but a melancholy heap of twisted and blackened axles,

shattered wagons, bent rails, charred sleepers; the boiler,

burst by the shock, had scattered its plates to enormous distances.

From this shapeless mass of ruins flames and black smoke still rose.

After the fearful fall came fire, more fearful still!

Great tracks of blood, scattered limbs, charred trunks of bodies,

showed here and there; none could guess how many victims lay dead

and mangled under those ruins.

Glenarvan, Paganel, the Major, Mangles, mixing with the crowd, heard the current talk. Everyone tried to account for the accident, while doing his utmost to save what could be saved.

"The bridge must have broken," said one.

"Not a bit of it. The bridge is whole enough; they must have forgotten to close it to let the train pass. That is all."

It was, in fact, a swing bridge, which opened for the convenience of the boats. Had the guard, by an unpardonable oversight, omitted to close it for the passage of the train, so that the train, coming on at full speed, was precipitated into the Loddon? This hypothesis seemed very admissible; for although one-half of the bridge lay beneath the ruins of the train, the other half, drawn up to the opposite shore, hung, still unharmed, by its chains. No one could doubt that an oversight on the part of the guard had caused the catastrophe.

The accident had occurred in the night, to the express train which left Melbourne at 11:45 in the evening. About a quarter past three in the morning, twenty-five minutes after leaving Castlemaine, it arrived at Camden Bridge, where the terrible disaster befell.

The passengers and guards of the last and only remaining carriage at once tried to obtain help. But the telegraph, whose posts were lying on the ground, could not be worked.

It was three hours before the authorities from Castlemaine reached the scene of the accident, and it was six o'clock in the morning when the salvage party was organized, under the direction of Mr. Mitchell, the surveyor-general of the colony, and a detachment of police, commanded by an inspector. The squatters and their "hands" lent their aid, and directed their efforts first to extinguishing the fire which raged in the ruined heap with unconquerable violence.

A few unrecognizable bodies lay on the slope of the embankment, but from that blazing mass no living thing could be saved.

The fire had done its work too speedily. Of the passengers ten only survived--those in the last carriage. The railway authorities sent a locomotive to bring them back to Castlemaine.

Lord Glenarvan, having introduced himself to the surveyor-general, entered into conversation with him and the inspector of police.

The latter was a tall, thin man, imperturbably cool, and, whatever he may have felt, allowed no trace of it to appear on his features.

He contemplated this calamity as a mathematician does a problem; he was seeking to solve it, and to find the unknown; and when Glenarvan observed, "This is a great misfortune," he quietly replied, "Better than that, my Lord."

"Better than that?" cried Glenarvan. "I do not understand you."

"It is better than a misfortune, it is a crime!" he replied, in the same quiet tone.

Glenarvan looked inquiringly at Mr. Mitchell for a solution.

"Yes, my Lord," replied the surveyor-general, "our inquiries have resulted in the conclusion that the catastrophe is the result of a crime. The last luggage-van has been robbed. The surviving passengers were attacked by a gang of five or six villains. The bridge was intentionally opened, and not left open by the negligence of the guard; and connecting with this fact the guard's disappearance, we may conclude that the wretched fellow was an accomplice of these ruffians."

The police-officer shook his head at this inference.

"You do not agree with me?" said Mr. Mitchell.

"No, not as to the complicity of the guard."

"Well, but granting that complicity, we may attribute the crime to the natives who haunt the Murray. Without him the blacks could never have opened a swing-bridge; they know nothing of its mechanism."

"Exactly so," said the police-inspector.

"Well," added Mr. Mitchell, "we have the evidence of a boatman whose boat passed Camden Bridge at 10:40 P. M., that the bridge was properly shut after he passed."

"True."

"Well, after that I cannot see any doubt as to the complicity of the guard."

The police-officer shook his head gently, but continuously.

"Then you don't attribute the crime to the natives?"

"Not at all."

"To whom then?"

Just at this moment a noise was heard from about half a mile up the river. A crowd had gathered, and quickly increased. They soon reached the station, and in their midst were two men carrying a corpse.

It was the body of the guard, quite cold, stabbed to the heart.

The murderers had no doubt hoped, by dragging their victim to a distance, that the police would be put on a wrong scent in their first inquiries.

This discovery, at any rate, justified the doubts of the police-inspector.

The poor blacks had had no hand in the matter.

"Those who dealt that blow," said he, "were already well used to this little instrument"; and so saying he produced a pair of "darbies," a kind of handcuff made of a double ring of iron secured by a lock. "I shall soon have the pleasure of presenting them with these bracelets as a New Year's gift."

"Then you suspect--"

"Some folks who came out free in Her Majesty's ships."

"What! convicts?" cried Paganel, who recognized the formula employed in the Australian colonies.

"I thought," said Glenarvan, "convicts had no right in the province of Victoria."

"Bah!" said the inspector, "if they have no right, they take it! They escape sometimes, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, this lot have come straight from Perth, and, take my word for it, they will soon be there again."

Mr. Mitchell nodded acquiescence in the words of the police-inspector. At this moment the wagon arrived at the level crossing of the railway. Glenarvan wished to spare the ladies the horrible spectacle at Camden Bridge. He took courteous leave of the surveyor-general,

and made a sign to the rest to follow him. "There is no reason," said he, "for delaying our journey."

When they reached the wagon, Glenarvan merely mentioned to Lady Helena that there had been a railway accident, without a hint of the crime that had played so great a part in it; neither did he make mention of the presence of a band of convicts in the neighborhood, reserving that piece of information solely for Ayrton's ear.

The little procession now crossed the railway some two hundred yards below the bridge, and then resumed their eastward course.