CHAPTER XV SUSPICIOUS OCCURRENCES

AN immense barrier lay across the route to the southeast.
It was the Australian Alps, a vast fortification, the fantastic
curtain of which extended 1,500 miles, and pierced the clouds
at the height of 4,000 feet.

The cloudy sky only allowed the heat to reach the ground through
a close veil of mist. The temperature was just bearable,
but the road was toilsome from its uneven character.
The extumescences on the plain became more and more marked.
Several mounds planted with green young gum trees appeared
here and there. Further on these protuberances rising sharply,
formed the first steps of the great Alps. From this time their
course was a continual ascent, as was soon evident in the strain
it made on the bullocks to drag along the cumbrous wagon.
Their yoke creaked, they breathed heavily, and the muscles
of their houghs were stretched as if they would burst.
The planks of the vehicle groaned at the unexpected jolts,
which Ayrton with all his skill could not prevent.
The ladies bore their share of discomfort bravely.

John Mangles and his two sailors acted as scouts, and went about
a hundred steps in advance. They found out practical paths,
or passes, indeed they might be called, for these projections

of the ground were like so many rocks, between which the wagon had to steer carefully. It required absolute navigation to find a safe way over the billowy region.

It was a difficult and often perilous task. Many a time Wilson's hatchet was obliged to open a passage through thick tangles of shrubs. The damp argillaceous soil gave way under their feet. The route was indefinitely prolonged owing to the insurmountable obstacles, huge blocks of granite, deep ravines, suspected lagoons, which obliged them to make a thousand detours. When night came they found they had only gone over half a degree. They camped at the foot of the Alps, on the banks of the creek of Cobongra, on the edge of a little plain, covered with little shrubs four feet high, with bright red leaves which gladdened the eye.

"We shall have hard work to get over," said Glenarvan, looking at the chain of mountains, the outlines of which were fast fading away in the deepening darkness. "The very name Alps gives plenty of room for reflection."

"It is not quite so big as it sounds, my dear Glenarvan. Don't suppose you have a whole Switzerland to traverse. In Australia there are the Grampians, the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Blue Mountains, as in Europe and America, but in miniature. This simply implies either that the imagination of geographers is not infinite, or that their vocabulary of proper names

is very poor."

"Then these Australian Alps," said Lord Glenarvan, "are--"

"Mere pocket mountains," put in Paganel; "we shall get over them without knowing it."

"Speak for yourself," said the Major. "It would certainly take a very absent man who could cross over a chain of mountains and not know it."

"Absent! But I am not an absent man now. I appeal to the ladies. Since ever I set foot on the Australian continent, have I been once at fault? Can you reproach me with a single blunder?"

"Not one. Monsieur Paganel," said Mary Grant. "You are now the most perfect of men."

"Too perfect," added Lady Helena, laughing; "your blunders suited you admirably."

"Didn't they, Madam? If I have no faults now, I shall soon get like everybody else. I hope then I shall make some outrageous mistake before long, which will give you a good laugh. You see, unless I make mistakes, it seems to me I fail in my vocation."

Next day, the 9th of January, notwithstanding the assurances of the confident geographer, it was not without great difficulty that the little troop made its way through the Alpine pass. They were obliged to go at a venture, and enter the depths of narrow gorges without any certainty of an outlet. Ayrton would doubtless have found himself very much embarrassed if a little inn, a miserable public house, had not suddenly presented itself.

"My goodness!" cried Paganel, "the landlord of this inn won't make his fortune in a place like this. What is the use of it here?"

"To give us the information we want about the route," replied Glenarvan. "Let us go in."

Glenarvan, followed by Ayrton, entered the inn forthwith. The landlord of the "Bush Inn," as it was called, was a coarse man with an ill-tempered face, who must have considered himself his principal customer for the gin, brandy and whisky he had to sell. He seldom saw any one but the squatters and rovers. He answered all the questions put to him in a surly tone. But his replies sufficed to make the route clear to Ayrton, and that was all that was wanted. Glenarvan rewarded him with a handful of silver for his trouble, and was about to leave the tavern, when a placard against the wall arrested his attention.

It was a police notice, and announcing the escape of the convicts from Perth, and offering a reward for the capture of Ben Joyce of pounds 100 sterling.

"He's a fellow that's worth hanging, and no mistake," said Glenarvan to the quartermaster.

"And worth capturing still more. But what a sum to offer! He is not worth it!"

"I don't feel very sure of the innkeeper though, in spite of the notice," said Glenarvan.

"No more do I," replied Ayrton.

They went back to the wagon, toward the point where the route to Lucknow stopped. A narrow path wound away from this which led across the chain in a slanting direction. They had commenced the ascent.

It was hard work. More than once both the ladies and gentlemen had to get down and walk. They were obliged to help to push round the wheels of the heavy vehicle, and to support it frequently in dangerous declivities, to unhar-ness the bullocks when the team could not go well round sharp turnings, prop up the wagon when it threatened to roll back, and more than once Ayrton had to reinforce

his bullocks by harnessing the horses, although they were tired out already with dragging themselves along.

Whether it was this prolonged fatigue, or from some other cause altogether, was not known, but one of the horses sank suddenly, without the slightest symptom of illness. It was Mulrady's horse that fell, and on attempting to pull it up, the animal was found to be dead. Ayrton examined it immediately, but was quite at a loss to account for the disaster.

"The beast must have broken some blood vessels," said Glenarvan.

"Evidently," replied Ayrton.

"Take my horse, Mulrady," added Glenarvan. "I will join Lady Helena in the wagon."

Mulrady obeyed, and the little party continued their fatiguing ascent, leaving the carcass of the dead animal to the ravens.

The Australian Alps are of no great thickness, and the base is not more than eight miles wide. Consequently if the pass chosen by Ayrton came out on the eastern side, they might hope to get over the high barrier within forty-eight hours more. The difficulty of the route would then be surmounted, and they would only have to get to the sea.

During the 18th the travelers reached the top-most point of the pass,
about 2,000 feet high. They found themselves on an open plateau,
with nothing to intercept the view. Toward the north the quiet waters
of Lake Omco, all alive with aquatic birds, and beyond this lay
the vast plains of the Murray. To the south were the wide spreading
plains of Gippsland, with its abundant gold-fields and tall forests.
There nature was still mistress of the products and water,
and great trees where the woodman's ax was as yet unknown,
and the squatters, then five in number, could not struggle against her.
It seemed as if this chain of the Alps separated two different
countries, one of which had retained its primitive wildness.
The sun went down, and a few solitary rays piercing the rosy clouds,
lighted up the Murray district, leaving Gippsland in deep shadow,
as if night had suddenly fallen on the whole region. The contrast
was presented very vividly to the spectators placed between
these two countries so divided, and some emotion filled the minds
of the travelers, as they contemplated the almost unknown district
they were about to traverse right to the frontiers of Victoria.

They camped on the plateau that night, and next day
the descent commenced. It was tolerably rapid.
A hailstorm of extreme violence assailed the travelers,
and obliged them to seek a shelter among the rocks.
It was not hail-stones, but regular lumps of ice,
as large as one's hand, which fell from the stormy clouds.

A waterspout could not have come down with more violence,
and sundry big bruises warned Paganel and Robert to retreat.
The wagon was riddled in several places, and few coverings
would have held out against those sharp icicles, some of
which had fastened themselves into the trunks of the trees.
It was impossible to go on till this tremendous shower was over,
unless the travelers wished to be stoned. It lasted about an hour,
and then the march commenced anew over slanting rocks still
slippery after the hail.

Toward evening the wagon, very much shaken and disjointed
in several parts, but still standing firm on its wooden disks,
came down the last slopes of the Alps, among great isolated pines.
The passage ended in the plains of Gippsland. The chain
of the Alps was safely passed, and the usual arrangements
were made for the nightly encampment.

On the 21st, at daybreak, the journey was resumed with an ardor which
never relaxed. Everyone was eager to reach the goal--that is to say
the Pacific Ocean--at that part where the wreck of the BRITANNIA
had occurred. Nothing could be done in the lonely wilds of Gippsland,
and Ayrton urged Lord Glenarvan to send orders at once for the DUNCAN
to repair to the coast, in order to have at hand all means of research.
He thought it would certainly be advisable to take advantage of
the Lucknow route to Melbourne. If they waited it would be difficult
to find any way of direct communication with the capital.

This advice seemed good, and Paganel recommended that they should act upon it. He also thought that the presence of the yacht would be very useful, and he added, that if the Lucknow road was once passed, it would be impossible to communicate with Melbourne.

Glenarvan was undecided what to do, and perhaps he would have yielded to Ayrton's arguments, if the Major had not combated this decision vigorously. He maintained that the presence of Ayrton was necessary to the expedition, that he would know the country about the coast, and that if any chance should put them on the track of Harry Grant, the quartermaster would be better able to follow it up than any one else, and, finally, that he alone could point out the exact spot where the shipwreck occurred.

McNabbs voted therefore for the continuation of the voyage, without making the least change in their programme.
John Mangles was of the same opinion. The young captain said even that orders would reach the DUNCAN more easily from Twofold Bay, than if a message was sent two hundred miles over a wild country.

His counsel prevailed. It was decided that they should wait till they came to Twofold Bay. The Major watched Ayrton narrowly, and noticed his disappointed look. But he said nothing, keeping his observations, as usual, to himself.

The plains which lay at the foot of the Australian Alps were level,
but slightly inclined toward the east. Great clumps of mimosas
and eucalyptus, and various odorous gum-trees, broke the uniform
monotony here and there. The gastrolobium grandiflorum
covered the ground, with its bushes covered with gay flowers.
Several unimportant creeks, mere streams full of little rushes,
and half covered up with orchids, often interrupted the route.
They had to ford these. Flocks of bustards and emus fled
at the approach of the travelers. Below the shrubs,
kangaroos were leaping and springing like dancing jacks.
But the hunters of the party were not thinking much of the sport,
and the horses little needed any additional fatigue.

Moreover, a sultry heat oppressed the plain. The atmosphere
was completely saturated with electricity, and its influence
was felt by men and beasts. They just dragged themselves along,
and cared for nothing else. The silence was only interrupted
by the cries of Ayrton urging on his burdened team.

From noon to two o'clock they went through a curious forest of ferns,
which would have excited the admiration of less weary travelers.
These plants in full flower measured thirty feet in height.
Horses and riders passed easily beneath their drooping leaves,
and sometimes the spurs would clash against the woody stems.
Beneath these immovable parasols there was a refreshing coolness

which every one appreciated. Jacques Paganel, always demonstrative, gave such deep sighs of satisfaction that the paroquets and cockatoos flew out in alarm, making a deafening chorus of noisy chatter.

The geographer was going on with his sighs and jubilations with the utmost coolness, when his companions suddenly saw him reel forward, and he and his horse fell down in a lump. Was it giddiness, or worse still, suffocation, caused by the high temperature? They ran to him, exclaiming: "Paganel! Paganel! what is the matter?"

"Just this. I have no horse, now!" he replied, disengaging his feet from the stirrups.

"What! your horse?"

"Dead like Mulrady's, as if a thunderbolt had struck him."

Glenarvan, John Mangles, and Wilson examined the animal; and found Paganel was right. His horse had been suddenly struck dead.

"That is strange," said John.

"Very strange, truly," muttered the Major.

Glenarvan was greatly disturbed by this fresh accident. He could not get a fresh horse in the desert, and if an epidemic

was going to seize their steeds, they would be seriously
embarrassed how to proceed.

Before the close of the day, it seemed as if the word epidemic was
really going to be justified. A third horse, Wilson's, fell dead,
and what was, perhaps equally disastrous, one of the bullocks also.
The means of traction and transport were now reduced to three bullocks
and four horses.

The situation became grave. The unmounted horsemen
might walk, of course, as many squatters had done already;
but if they abandoned the wagon, what would the ladies do?
Could they go over the one hundred and twenty miles which lay
between them and Twofold Bay? John Mangles and Lord Glenarvan
examined the surviving horses with great uneasiness, but there
was not the slightest symptom of illness or feebleness in them.
The animals were in perfect health, and bravely bearing
the fatigues of the voyage. This somewhat reassured Glenarvan,
and made him hope the malady would strike no more victims.
Ayrton agreed with him, but was unable to find the least solution
of the mystery.

They went on again, the wagon serving, from time to time,
as a house of rest for the pedestrians. In the evening,
after a march of only ten miles, the signal to halt was given,
and the tent pitched. The night passed without inconvenience

beneath a vast mass of bushy ferns, under which enormous bats, properly called flying foxes, were flapping about.

The next day's journey was good; there were no new calamities. The health of the expedition remained satisfactory; horses and cattle did their task cheerily. Lady Helena's drawing-room was very lively, thanks to the number of visitors. M. Olbinett busied himself in passing round refreshments which were very acceptable in such hot weather. Half a barrel of Scotch ale was sent in bodily. Barclay and Co. was declared to be the greatest man in Great Britain, even above Wellington, who could never have manufactured such good beer. This was a Scotch estimate. Jacques Paganel drank largely, and discoursed still more de omni re scibili.

A day so well commenced seemed as if it could not but end well; they had gone fifteen good miles, and managed to get over a pretty hilly district where the soil was reddish. There was every reason to hope they might camp that same night on the banks of the Snowy River, an important river which throws itself into the Pacific, south of Victoria.

Already the wheels of the wagon were making deep ruts on the wide plains, covered with blackish alluvium, as it passed on between tufts of luxuriant grass and fresh fields of gastrolobium. As evening came on, a white mist on the horizon marked the course of the Snowy River. Several additional miles were got over,

and a forest of tall trees came in sight at a bend of the road, behind a gentle eminence. Ayrton turned his team a little toward the great trunks, lost in shadow, and he had got to the skirts of the wood, about half-a-mile from the river, when the wagon suddenly sank up to the middle of the wheels.

"Stop!" he called out to the horsemen following him.

"What is wrong?" inquired Glenarvan.

"We have stuck in the mud," replied Ayrton.

He tried to stimulate the bullocks to a fresh effort by voice and goad, but the animals were buried half-way up their legs, and could not stir.

"Let us camp here," suggested John Mangles.

"It would certainly be the best place," said Ayrton. "We shall see by daylight to-morrow how to get ourselves out."

Glenarvan acted on their advice, and came to a halt.
Night came on rapidly after a brief twilight, but the heat did not withdraw with the light. Stifling vapors filled the air, and occasionally bright flashes of lightning, the reflections of a distant storm, lighted up the sky with a fiery glare.

Arrangements were made for the night immediately.
They did the best they could with the sunk wagon, and the tent
was pitched beneath the shelter of the great trees; and if the rain
did not come, they had not much to complain about.

Ayrton succeeded, though with some difficulty, in extricating
the three bullocks. These courageous beasts were engulfed up to
their flanks. The quartermaster turned them out with the four horses,
and allowed no one but himself to see after their pasturage.
He always executed his task wisely, and this evening Glenarvan noticed
he redoubled his care, for which he took occasion to thank him,
the preservation of the team being of supreme importance.

Meantime, the travelers were dispatching a hasty supper.
Fatigue and heat destroy appetite, and sleep was needed more than food.
Lady Helena and Miss Grant speedily bade the company good-night,
and retired. Their companions soon stretched themselves under
the tent or outside under the trees, which is no great hardship
in this salubrious climate.

Gradually they all fell into a heavy sleep. The darkness deepened
owing to a thick current of clouds which overspread the sky.
There was not a breath of wind. The silence of night was only
interrupted by the cries of the "morepork" in the minor key,
like the mournful cuckoos of Europe.

Towards eleven o'clock, after a wretched, heavy, unre-freshing sleep, the Major woke. His half-closed eyes were struck with a faint light running among the great trees. It looked like a white sheet, and glittered like a lake, and McNabbs thought at first it was the commencement of a fire.

He started up, and went toward the wood; but what was his surprise to perceive a purely natural phenomenon! Before him lay an immense bed of mushrooms, which emitted a phosphorescent light. The luminous spores of the cryptograms shone in the darkness with intensity.

The Major, who had no selfishness about him, was going to waken Paganel, that he might see this phenomenon with his own eyes, when something occurred which arrested him. This phosphorescent light illumined the distance half a mile, and McNabbs fancied he saw a shadow pass across the edge of it. Were his eyes deceiving him? Was it some hallucination?

McNabbs lay down on the ground, and, after a close scrutiny, he could distinctly see several men stooping down and lifting themselves up alternately, as if they were looking on the ground for recent marks.

The Major resolved to find out what these fellows were about, and without the least hesitation or so much as arousing his companions,

crept along, lying flat on the ground, like a savage on the prairies, completely hidden among the long grass.