

## CHAPTER XVI A STARTLING DISCOVERY

IT was a frightful night. At two A. M. the rain began to fall in torrents from the stormy clouds, and continued till daybreak. The tent became an insufficient shelter. Glenarvan and his companions took refuge in the wagon; they did not sleep, but talked of one thing and another. The Major alone, whose brief absence had not been noticed, contented himself with being a silent listener. There was reason to fear that if the storm lasted longer the Snowy River would overflow its banks, which would be a very unlucky thing for the wagon, stuck fast as it was already in the soft ground. Mulrady, Ayrton and Mangles went several times to ascertain the height of the water, and came back dripping from head to foot.

At last day appeared; the rain ceased, but sunlight could not break through the thick clouds. Large patches of yellowish water--muddy, dirty ponds indeed they were--covered the ground. A hot steam rose from the soaking earth, and saturated the atmosphere with unhealthy humidity.

Glenarvan's first concern was the wagon; this was the main thing in his eyes. They examined the ponderous vehicle, and found it sunk in the mud in a deep hollow in the stiff clay. The forepart had disappeared completely, and the hind part up to the axle.

It would be a hard job to get the heavy conveyance out, and would need the united strength of men, bullocks, and horses.

"At any rate, we must make haste," said John Mangles. "If the clay dries, it will make our task still more difficult."

"Let us be quick, then," replied Ayrton.

Glenarvan, his two sailors, John Mangles, and Ayrton went off at once into the wood, where the animals had passed the night. It was a gloomy-looking forest of tall gum-trees; nothing but dead trees, with wide spaces between, which had been barked for ages, or rather skinned like the cork-oak at harvest time. A miserable network of bare branches was seen above two hundred feet high in the air. Not a bird built its nest in these aerial skeletons; not a leaf trembled on the dry branches, which rattled together like bones. To what cataclysm is this phenomenon to be attributed, so frequent in Australia, entire forests struck dead by some epidemic; no one knows; neither the oldest natives, nor their ancestors who have lain long buried in the groves of the dead, have ever seen them green.

Glenarvan as he went along kept his eye fixed on the gray sky, on which the smallest branch of the gum-trees was sharply defined. Ayrton was astonished not to discover the horses and bullocks where he had left them the preceding night. They could not have wandered far with the hobbles on their legs.

They looked over the wood, but saw no signs of them, and Ayrton returned to the banks of the river, where magnificent mimosas were growing.

He gave a cry well known to his team, but there was no reply.

The quartermaster seemed uneasy, and his companions looked at him with disappointed faces. An hour had passed in vain endeavors, and Glenarvan was about to go back to the wagon, when a neigh struck on his ear, and immediately after a bellow.

"They are there!" cried John Mangles, slipping between the tall branches of gastrolobium, which grew high enough to hide a whole flock.

Glenarvan, Mulrady, and Ayrton darted after him, and speedily shared his stupefaction at the spectacle which met their gaze.

Two bullocks and three horses lay stretched on the ground, struck down like the rest. Their bodies were already cold, and a flock of half-starved looking ravens croaking among the mimosas were watching the unexpected prey.

Glenarvan and his party gazed at each other and Wilson could not keep back the oath that rose to his lips.

"What do you mean, Wilson?" said Glenarvan, with difficulty controlling himself. "Ayrton, bring away the bullock and the horse we have left; they will have to serve us now."

"If the wagon were not sunk in the mud," said John Mangles,

"these two animals, by making short journeys, would be able to take us to the coast; so we must get the vehicle out, cost what it may."

"We will try, John," replied Glenarvan. "Let us go back now, or they will be uneasy at our long absence."

Ayrton removed the hobbles from the bullock and Mulrady from the horse, and they began to return to the encampment, following the winding margin of the river. In half an hour they rejoined Paganel, and McNabbs, and the ladies, and told them of this fresh disaster.

"Upon my honor, Ayrton," the Major could not help saying, "it is a pity that you hadn't had the shoeing of all our beasts when we forded the Wimerra."

"Why, sir?" asked Ayrton.

"Because out of all our horses only the one your blacksmith had in his hands has escaped the common fate."

"That's true," said John Mangles. "It's strange it happens so."

"A mere chance, and nothing more," replied the quartermaster, looking firmly at the Major.

Major McNabbs bit his lips as if to keep back something he was about to say. Glenarvan and the rest waited for him to speak out his thoughts, but the Major was silent, and went up to the wagon, which Ayrton was examining.

"What was he going to say. Mangles?" asked Glenarvan.

"I don't know," replied the young captain; "but the Major is not at all a man to speak without reason."

"No, John," said Lady Helena. "McNabbs must have suspicions about Ayrton."

"Suspicions!" exclaimed Paganel, shrugging his shoulders.

"And what can they be?" asked Glenarvan. "Does he suppose him capable of having killed our horses and bullocks? And for what purpose? Is not Ayrton's interest identical with our own?"

"You are right, dear Edward," said Lady Helena! "and what is more, the quartermaster has given us incontestable proofs of his devotion ever since the commencement of the journey."

"Certainly he has," replied Mangles; "but still, what could the Major mean? I wish he would speak his mind plainly out."

"Does he suppose him acting in concert with the convicts?"  
asked Paganel, imprudently.

"What convicts?" said Miss Grant.

"Monsieur Paganel is making a mistake," replied John Mangles, instantly.

"He knows very well there are no convicts in the province of Victoria."

"Ah, that is true," returned Paganel, trying to get out of his  
unlucky speech. "Whatever had I got in my head? Convicts! who ever  
heard of convicts being in Australia? Besides, they would scarcely  
have disembarked before they would turn into good, honest men.  
The climate, you know, Miss Mary, the regenerative climate--"

Here the poor SAVANT stuck fast, unable to get further,  
like the wagon in the mud. Lady Helena looked at him in surprise,  
which quite deprived him of his remaining sang-froid; but seeing  
his embarrassment, she took Mary away to the side of the tent,  
where M. Olbinett was laying out an elaborate breakfast.

"I deserve to be transported myself," said Paganel, woefully.

"I think so," said Glenarvan.

And after this grave reply, which completely overwhelmed  
the worthy geographer, Glenarvan and John Mangles went

toward the wagon.

They found Ayrton and the two sailors doing their best to get it out of the deep ruts, and the bullock and horse, yoked together, were straining every muscle. Wilson and Mulrady were pushing the wheels, and the quartermaster urging on the team with voice and goad; but the heavy vehicle did not stir, the clay, already dry, held it as firmly as if sealed by some hydraulic cement.

John Mangles had the clay watered to loosen it, but it was of no use.

After renewed vigorous efforts, men and animals stopped.

Unless the vehicle was taken to pieces, it would be impossible to extricate it from the mud; but they had no tools for the purpose, and could not attempt such a task.

However, Ayrton, who was for conquering this obstacle at all costs, was about to commence afresh, when Glenarvan stopped him by saying: "Enough, Ayrton, enough. We must husband the strength of our remaining horse and bullock. If we are obliged to continue our journey on foot, the one animal can carry the ladies and the other the provisions. They may thus still be of great service to us."

"Very well, my Lord," replied the quartermaster, un-yoking the exhausted beasts.

"Now, friends," added Glenarvan, "let us return to the encampment

and deliberately examine our situation, and determine on our course of action."

After a tolerably good breakfast to make up for their bad night, the discussion was opened, and every one of the party was asked to give his opinion. The first point was to ascertain their exact position, and this was referred to Paganel, who informed them, with his customary rigorous accuracy, that the expedition had been stopped on the 37th parallel, in longitude 147 degrees 53 minutes, on the banks of the Snowy River.

"What is the exact longitude of Twofold Bay?" asked Glenarvan.

"One hundred and fifty degrees," replied Paganel; "two degrees seven minutes distant from this, and that is equal to seventy-five miles."

"And Melbourne is?"

"Two hundred miles off at least."

"Very good. Our position being then settled, what is best to do?"

The response was unanimous to get to the coast without delay.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant undertook to go five miles a day.

The courageous ladies did not shrink, if necessary, from walking the whole distance between the Snowy River and Twofold Bay.



"You are a brave traveling companion, dear Helena," said Lord Glenarvan. "But are we sure of finding at the bay all we want when we get there?"

"Without the least doubt," replied Paganel. "Eden is a municipality which already numbers many years in existence; its port must have frequent communication with Melbourne. I suppose even at Delegete, on the Victoria frontier, thirty-five miles from here, we might revictual our expedition, and find fresh means of transport."

"And the DUNCAN?" asked Ayrton. "Don't you think it advisable to send for her to come to the bay?"

"What do you think, John?" said Glenarvan.

"I don't think your lordship should be in any hurry about it," replied the young captain, after brief reflection.

"There will be time enough to give orders to Tom Austin, and summon him to the coast."

"That's quite certain," added Paganel.

"You see," said John, "in four or five days we shall reach Eden."

"Four or five days!" repeated Ayrton, shaking his head;

"say fifteen or twenty, Captain, if you don't want to repent your mistake when it is too late."

"Fifteen or twenty days to go seventy-five miles?" cried Glenarvan.

"At the least, my Lord. You are going to traverse the most difficult portion of Victoria, a desert, where everything is wanting, the squatters say; plains covered with scrub, where is no beaten track and no stations. You will have to walk hatchet or torch in hand, and, believe me, that's not quick work."

Ayrton had spoken in a firm tone, and Paganel, at whom all the others looked inquiringly, nodded his head in token of his agreement in opinion with the quartermaster.

But John Mangles said, "Well, admitting these difficulties, in fifteen days at most your Lordship can send orders to the DUNCAN."

"I have to add," said Ayrton, "that the principal difficulties are not the obstacles in the road, but the Snowy River has to be crossed, and most probably we must wait till the water goes down."

"Wait!" cried John. "Is there no ford?"

"I think not," replied Ayrton. "This morning I was looking for some practical crossing, but could not find any."

It is unusual to meet with such a tumultuous river at this time of the year, and it is a fatality against which I am powerless."

"Is this Snowy River wide?" asked Lady Helena.

"Wide and deep, Madam," replied Ayrton; "a mile wide, with an impetuous current. A good swimmer could not go over without danger."

"Let us build a boat then," said Robert, who never stuck at anything.

"We have only to cut down a tree and hollow it out, and get in and be off."

"He's going ahead, this boy of Captain Grant's!" said Paganel.

"And he's right," returned John Mangles. "We shall be forced to come to that, and I think it is useless to waste our time in idle discussion."

"What do you think of it, Ayrton?" asked Glenarvan seriously.

"I think, my Lord, that a month hence, unless some help arrives, we shall find ourselves still on the banks of the Snowy."

"Well, then, have you any better plan to propose?" said John Mangles, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes, that the DUNCAN should leave Melbourne, and go to the east coast."

"Oh, always the same story! And how could her presence at the bay facilitate our means of getting there?"

Ayrton waited an instant before answering, and then said, rather evasively: "I have no wish to obtrude my opinions. What I do is for our common good, and I am ready to start the moment his honor gives the signal." And he crossed his arms and was silent.

"That is no reply, Ayrton," said Glenarvan. "Tell us your plan, and we will discuss it. What is it you propose?"

Ayrton replied in a calm tone of assurance: "I propose that we should not venture beyond the Snowy in our present condition. It is here we must wait till help comes, and this help can only come from the DUNCAN. Let us camp here, where we have provisions, and let one of us take your orders to Tom Austin to go on to Twofold Bay."

This unexpected proposition was greeted with astonishment, and by John Mangles with openly-expressed opposition.

"Meantime," continued Ayrton, "either the river will get lower,

and allow us to ford it, or we shall have time to make a canoe.

This is the plan I submit for your Lordship's approval."

"Well, Ayrton," replied Glenarvan, "your plan is worthy of serious consideration. The worst thing about it is the delay it would cause; but it would save us great fatigue, and perhaps danger. What do you think of it, friends?"

"Speak your mind, McNabbs," said Lady Helena. "Since the beginning of the discussion you have been only a listener, and very sparing of your words."

"Since you ask my advice," said the Major, "I will give it you frankly. I think Ayrton has spoken wisely and well, and I side with him."

Such a reply was hardly looked for, as hitherto the Major had been strongly opposed to Ayrton's project. Ayrton himself was surprised, and gave a hasty glance at the Major. However, Paganel, Lady Helena, and the sailors were all of the same way of thinking; and since McNabbs had come over to his opinion, Glenarvan decided that the quartermaster's plan should be adopted in principle.

"And now, John," he added, "don't you think yourself it would be prudent to encamp here, on the banks of the river Snowy, till we can get some means of conveyance."

"Yes," replied John Mangles, "if our messenger can get across the Snowy when we cannot."

All eyes were turned on the quartermaster, who said, with the air of a man who knew what he was about:

"The messenger will not cross the river."

"Indeed!" said John Mangles.

"He will simply go back to the Lucknow Road which leads straight to Melbourne."

"Go two hundred and fifty miles on foot!" cried the young Captain.

"On horseback," replied Ayrton. "There is one horse sound enough at present. It will only be an affair of four days.

Allow the DUNCAN two days more to get to the bay and twenty hours to get back to the camp, and in a week the messenger can be back with the entire crew of the vessel."

The Major nodded approvingly as Ayrton spoke, to the profound astonishment

of John Mangles; but as every one was in favor of the plan all there was to do was to carry it out as quickly as possible.

"Now, then, friends," said Glenarvan, "we must settle

who is to be our messenger. It will be a fatiguing, perilous mission. I would not conceal the fact from you. Who is disposed, then, to sacrifice himself for his companions and carry our instructions to Melbourne?"

Wilson and Mulrady, and also Paganel, John Mangles and Robert instantly offered their services. John particularly insisted that he should be intrusted with the business; but Ayrton, who had been silent till that moment, now said: "With your Honor's permission I will go myself. I am accustomed to all the country round. Many a time I have been across worse parts. I can go through where another would stick. I ask then, for the good of all, that I may be sent to Melbourne. A word from you will accredit me with your chief officer, and in six days I guarantee the DUNCAN shall be in Twofold Bay."

"That's well spoken," replied Glenarvan. "You are a clever, daring fellow, and you will succeed."

It was quite evident the quartermaster was the fittest man for the mission. All the rest withdrew from the competition. John Mangles made this one last objection, that the presence of Ayrton was necessary to discover traces of the BRITANNIA or Harry Grant. But the Major justly observed that the expedition would remain on the banks of the Snowy till the return of Ayrton, that they had no idea of resuming their search without him, and that consequently his absence would not in the least

prejudice the Captain's interests.

"Well, go, Ayrton," said Glenarvan. "Be as quick as you can, and come back by Eden to our camp."

A gleam of satisfaction shot across the quartermaster's face. He turned away his head, but not before John Mangles caught the look and instinctively felt his old distrust of Ayrton revive.

The quartermaster made immediate preparations for departure, assisted by the two sailors, one of whom saw to the horse and the other to the provisions. Glenarvan, meantime, wrote his letter for Tom Austin. He ordered his chief officer to repair without delay to Twofold Bay. He introduced the quartermaster to him as a man worthy of all confidence. On arriving at the coast, Tom was to dispatch a detachment of sailors from the yacht under his orders.

Glenarvan was just at this part of his letter, when McNabbs, who was following him with his eyes, asked him in a singular tone, how he wrote Ayrton's name.

"Why, as it is pronounced, of course," replied Glenarvan.

"It is a mistake," replied the Major quietly. "He pronounces it AYRTON, but he writes it Ben Joyce!"