

## CHAPTER XVII THE PLOT UNVEILED

THE revelation of Tom Ayrton's name was like a clap of thunder.

Ayrton had started up quickly and grasped his revolver.

A report was heard, and Glenarvan fell wounded by a ball.

Gunshots resounded at the same time outside.

John Mangles and the sailors, after their first surprise, would have seized Ben Joyce; but the bold convict had already disappeared and rejoined his gang scattered among the gum-trees.

The tent was no shelter against the balls. It was necessary to beat a retreat. Glenarvan was slightly wounded, but could stand up.

"To the wagon--to the wagon!" cried John Mangles, dragging Lady Helena and Mary Grant along, who were soon in safety behind the thick curtains.

John and the Major, and Paganel and the sailors seized their carbines in readiness to repulse the convicts.

Glenarvan and Robert went in beside the ladies, while Olbinett rushed to the common defense.

These events occurred with the rapidity of lightning.

John Mangles watched the skirts of the wood attentively.

The reports had ceased suddenly on the arrival of Ben Joyce; profound silence had succeeded the noisy fusillade.

A few wreaths of white smoke were still curling over the tops of the gum trees. The tall tufts of gastrolobium were motionless. All signs of attack had disappeared.

The Major and John Mangles examined the wood closely as far as the great trees; the place was abandoned. Numerous footmarks were there and several half-burned caps were lying smoking on the ground. The Major, like a prudent man, extinguished these carefully, for a spark would be enough to kindle a tremendous conflagration in this forest of dry trees.

"The convicts have disappeared!" said John Mangles.

"Yes," replied the Major; "and the disappearance of them makes me uneasy. I prefer seeing them face to face. Better to meet a tiger on the plain than a serpent in the grass. Let us beat the bushes all round the wagon."

The Major and John hunted all round the country, but there was not a convict to be seen from the edge of the wood right down to the river. Ben Joyce and his gang seemed to have flown away like a flock of marauding birds. It was too sudden a disappearance to let the travelers feel perfectly safe; consequently they resolved to keep a sharp lookout. The wagon, a regular fortress buried in mud, was made the center

of the camp, and two men mounted guard round it, who were relieved hour by hour.

The first care of Lady Helena and Mary was to dress Glenarvan's wound. Lady Helena rushed toward him in terror, as he fell down struck by Ben Joyce's ball. Controlling her agony, the courageous woman helped her husband into the wagon. Then his shoulder was bared, and the Major found, on examination, that the ball had only gone into the flesh, and there was no internal lesion. Neither bone nor muscle appeared to be injured. The wound bled profusely, but Glenarvan could use his fingers and forearm; and consequently there was no occasion for any uneasiness about the issue. As soon as his shoulder was dressed, he would not allow any more fuss to be made about himself, but at once entered on the business in hand.

All the party, except Mulrady and Wilson, who were on guard, were brought into the wagon, and the Major was asked to explain how this DENOUEMENT had come about.

Before commencing his recital, he told Lady Helena about the escape of the convicts at Perth, and their appearance in Victoria; as also their complicity in the railway catastrophe. He handed her the Australian and New Zealand Gazette they had bought in Seymour, and added that a reward had been offered by the police for the apprehension of Ben Joyce,

a redoubtable bandit, who had become a noted character during the last eighteen months, for doing deeds of villainy and crime.

But how had McNabbs found out that Ayrton and Ben Joyce were one and the same individual? This was the mystery to be unraveled, and the Major soon explained it.

Ever since their first meeting, McNabbs had felt an instinctive distrust of the quartermaster. Two or three insignificant facts, a hasty glance exchanged between him and the blacksmith at the Wimerra River, his unwillingness to cross towns and villages, his persistence about getting the DUNCAN summoned to the coast, the strange death of the animals entrusted to his care, and, lastly, a want of frankness in all his behavior--all these details combined had awakened the Major's suspicions.

However, he could not have brought any direct accusation against him till the events of the preceding evening had occurred. He then told of his experience.

McNabbs, slipping between the tall shrubs, got within reach of the suspicious shadows he had noticed about half a mile away from the encampment. The phosphorescent furze emitted a faint light, by which he could discern three men examining marks on the ground, and one of the three was the blacksmith of Black Point.

"It is them!" said one of the men. 'Yes,' replied another, 'there is the trefoil on the mark of the horseshoe. It has been like that since the Wimerra.' 'All the horses are dead.' 'The poison is not far off.' 'There is enough to kill a regiment of cavalry.' 'A useful plant this gastrolobium.'

"I heard them say this to each other, and then they were quite silent; but I did not know enough yet, so I followed them. Soon the conversation began again. 'He is a clever fellow, this Ben Joyce,' said the blacksmith. 'A capital quartermaster, with his invention of shipwreck.' 'If his project succeeds, it will be a stroke of fortune.' 'He is a very devil, is this Ayrton.' 'Call him Ben Joyce, for he has well earned his name.' And then the scoundrels left the forest.

"I had all the information I wanted now, and came back to the camp quite convinced, begging Paganel's pardon, that Australia does not reform criminals."

This was all the Major's story, and his companions sat silently thinking over it.

"Then Ayrton has dragged us here," said Glenarvan, pale with anger, "on purpose to rob and assassinate us."

"For nothing else," replied the Major; "and ever since we left the Wimerra, his gang has been on our track and spying on us, waiting for a favorable opportunity."

"Yes."

"Then the wretch was never one of the sailors on the BRITANNIA; he had stolen the name of Ayrton and the shipping papers."

They were all looking at McNabbs for an answer, for he must have put the question to himself already.

"There is no great certainty about the matter," he replied, in his usual calm voice; "but in my opinion the man's name is really Ayrton. Ben Joyce is his nom de guerre.

It is an incontestible fact that he knew Harry Grant, and also that he was quartermaster on the BRITANNIA. These facts were proved by the minute details given us by Ayrton, and are corroborated by the conversation between the convicts, which I repeated to you. We need not lose ourselves in vain conjectures, but consider it as certain that Ben Joyce is Ayrton, and that Ayrton is Ben Joyce; that is to say, one of the crew of the BRITANNIA has turned leader of the convict gang."

The explanations of McNabbs were accepted without discussion.

"Now, then," said Glenarvan, "will you tell us how and why Harry Grant's quartermaster comes to be in Australia?"

"How, I don't know," replied McNabbs; "and the police declare they are as ignorant on the subject as myself. Why, it is impossible to say; that is a mystery which the future may explain."

"The police are not even aware of Ayrton's identity with Ben Joyce," said John Mangles.

"You are right, John," replied the Major, "and this circumstance would throw light on their search."

"Then, I suppose," said Lady Helena, "the wicked wretch had got work on Paddy O'Moore's farm with a criminal intent?"

"There is not the least doubt of it. He was planning some evil design against the Irishman, when a better chance presented itself. Chance led us into his presence. He heard Paganel's story and all about the shipwreck, and the audacious fellow determined to act his part immediately. The expedition was decided on. At the Wimerra he found means of communicating with one of his gang, the blacksmith of Black Point, and left traces of our journey which might be easily recognized. The gang followed us. A poisonous plant enabled them gradually to kill our bullocks and horses. At the right moment he sunk us in the marshes of the Snowy,

and gave us into the hands of his gang."

Such was the history of Ben Joyce. The Major had shown him up in his character--a bold and formidable criminal. His manifestly evil designs called for the utmost vigilance on the part of Glenarvan. Happily the unmasked bandit was less to be feared than the traitor.

But one serious consequence must come out of this revelation; no one had thought of it yet except Mary Grant. John Mangles was the first to notice her pale, despairing face; he understood what was passing in her mind at a glance.

"Miss Mary! Miss Mary!" he cried; "you are crying!"

"Crying, my child!" said Lady Helena.

"My father, madam, my father!" replied the poor girl.

She could say no more, but the truth flashed on every mind. They all knew the cause of her grief, and why tears fell from her eyes and her father's name came to her lips.

The discovery of Ayrton's treachery had destroyed all hope; the convict had invented a shipwreck to entrap Glenarvan. In the conversation overheard by McNabbs, the convicts had plainly said that the BRITANNIA



had never been wrecked on the rocks in Twofold Bay. Harry Grant had never set foot on the Australian continent!

A second time they had been sent on the wrong track by an erroneous interpretation of the document. Gloomy silence fell on the whole party at the sight of the children's sorrow, and no one could find a cheering word to say. Robert was crying in his sister's arms. Paganel muttered in a tone of vexation: "That unlucky document! It may boast of having half-crazed a dozen peoples' wits!" The worthy geographer was in such a rage with himself, that he struck his forehead as if he would smash it in.

Glenarvan went out to Mulrady and Wilson, who were keeping watch. Profound silence reigned over the plain between the wood and the river. Ben Joyce and his band must be at considerable distance, for the atmosphere was in such a state of complete torpor that the slightest sound would have been heard. It was evident, from the flocks of birds on the lower branches of the trees, and the kangaroos feeding quietly on the young shoots, and a couple of emus whose confiding heads passed between the great clumps of bushes, that those peaceful solitudes were untroubled by the presence of human beings.

"You have neither seen nor heard anything for the last hour?" said Glenarvan to the two sailors.

"Nothing whatever, your honor," replied Wilson. "The convicts must be miles away from here."

"They were not in numbers enough to attack us, I suppose," added Mulrady. "Ben Joyce will have gone to recruit his party, with some bandits like himself, among the bush-rangers who may be lurking about the foot of the Alps."

"That is probably the case, Mulrady," replied Glenarvan. "The rascals are cowards; they know we are armed, and well armed too. Perhaps they are waiting for nightfall to commence the attack. We must redouble our watchfulness. Oh, if we could only get out of this bog, and down the coast; but this swollen river bars our passage. I would pay its weight in gold for a raft which would carry us over to the other side."

"Why does not your honor give orders for a raft to be constructed? We have plenty of wood."

"No, Wilson," replied Glenarvan; "this Snowy is not a river, it is an impassable torrent."

John Mangles, the Major, and Paganel just then came out of the wagon on purpose to examine the state of the river. They found it still so swollen by the heavy rain that the water was a foot above the level. It formed an impetuous current, like the American rapids.

To venture over that foaming current and that rushing flood, broken into a thousand eddies and hollows and gulfs, was impossible.

John Mangles declared the passage impracticable. "But we must not stay here," he added, "without attempting anything. What we were going to do before Ayrton's treachery is still more necessary now."

"What do you mean, John?" asked Glenarvan.

"I mean that our need is urgent, and that since we cannot go to Twofold Bay, we must go to Melbourne. We have still one horse. Give it to me, my Lord, and I will go to Melbourne."

"But that will be a dangerous venture, John," said Glenarvan. "Not to speak of the perils of a journey of two hundred miles over an unknown country, the road and the by-ways will be guarded by the accomplices of Ben Joyce."

"I know it, my Lord, but I know also that things can't stay long as they are; Ayrton only asked a week's absence to fetch the crew of the DUNCAN, and I will be back to the Snowy River in six days. Well, my Lord, what are your commands?"

"Before Glenarvan decides," said Paganel, "I must make an observation. That some one must go to Melbourne is evident, but that John Mangles

should be the one to expose himself to the risk, cannot be.

He is the captain of the DUNCAN, and must be careful of his life.

I will go instead."

"That is all very well, Paganel," said the Major; "but why should you be the one to go?"

"Are we not here?" said Mulrady and Wilson.

"And do you think," replied McNabbs, "that a journey of two hundred miles on horseback frightens me."

"Friends," said Glenarvan, "one of us must go, so let it be decided by drawing lots. Write all our names, Paganel."

"Not yours, my Lord," said John Mangles.

"And why not?"

"What! separate you from Lady Helena, and before your wound is healed, too!"

"Glenarvan," said Paganel, "you cannot leave the expedition."

"No," added the Major. "Your place is here, Edward, you ought not to go."

"Danger is involved in it," said Glenarvan, "and I will take my share along with the rest. Write the names, Paganel, and put mine among them, and I hope the lot may fall on me."

His will was obeyed. The names were written, and the lots drawn. Fate fixed on Mulrady. The brave sailor shouted hurrah! and said: "My Lord, I am ready to start." Glenarvan pressed his hand, and then went back to the wagon, leaving John Mangles and the Major on watch.

Lady Helena was informed of the determination to send a message to Melbourne, and that they had drawn lots who should go, and Mulrady had been chosen. Lady Helena said a few kind words to the brave sailor, which went straight to his heart. Fate could hardly have chosen a better man, for he was not only brave and intelligent, but robust and superior to all fatigue.

Mulrady's departure was fixed for eight o'clock, immediately after the short twilight. Wilson undertook to get the horse ready. He had a project in his head of changing the horse's left shoe, for one off the horses that had died in the night. This would prevent the convicts from tracking Mulrady, or following him, as they were not mounted.

While Wilson was arranging this, Glenarvan got his letter ready for Tom Austin, but his wounded arm troubled him, and he asked

Paganel to write it for him. The SAVANT was so absorbed in one fixed idea that he seemed hardly to know what he was about.

In all this succession of vexations, it must be said

the document was always uppermost in Paganel's mind.

He was always worrying himself about each word, trying to discover some new meaning, and losing the wrong interpretation of it, and going over and over himself in perplexities.

He did not hear Glenarvan when he first spoke, but on the request being made a second time, he said: "Ah, very well. I'm ready."

While he spoke he was mechanically getting paper from his note-book.

He tore a blank page off, and sat down pencil in hand to write.

Glenarvan began to dictate as follows: "Order to Tom Austin, Chief Officer, to get to sea without delay, and bring the DUNCAN to--"

Paganel was just finishing the last word, when his eye chanced to fall on the Australian and New Zealand Gazette lying on the ground.

The paper was so folded that only the last two syllables of the title were visible. Paganel's pencil stopped, and he seemed to become oblivious of Glenarvan and the letter entirely, till his friends called out:

"Come, Paganel!"

"Ah!" said the geographer, with a loud exclamation.

"What is the matter?" asked the Major.

"Nothing, nothing," replied Paganel. Then he muttered to himself,  
"Aland! aland! aland!"

He had got up and seized the newspaper. He shook it in his efforts to keep back the words that involuntarily rose to his lips.

Lady Helena, Mary, Robert, and Glenarvan gazed at him in astonishment, at a loss to understand this unaccountable agitation.

Paganel looked as if a sudden fit of insanity had come over him.

But his excitement did not last. He became by degrees calmer.

The gleam of joy that shone in his eyes died away.

He sat down again, and said quietly:

"When you please, my Lord, I am ready." Glenarvan resumed his dictation at once, and the letter was soon completed.

It read as follows: "Order to Tom Austin to go to sea without delay; and take the DUNCAN to Melbourne by the 37th degree of latitude to the eastern coast of Australia."

"Of Australia?" said Paganel. "Ah yes! of Australia."

Then he finished the letter, and gave it to Glenarvan to sign, who went through the necessary formality as well as he could,

and closed and sealed the letter. Paganel, whose hand still trembled with emotion, directed it thus: "Tom Austin, Chief Officer on board the Yacht DUNCAN, Melbourne."

Then he got up and went out of the wagon, gesticulating and repeating the incomprehensible words:

"Aland aland! aland!"