

CHAPTER X A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW

AN unfathomable gulf twenty-five miles long, and twenty miles broad was produced, but long before historic times, by the falling in of caverns among the trachytic lavas of the center of the island. And these waters falling from the surrounding heights have taken possession of this vast basin. The gulf has become a lake, but it is also an abyss, and no lead-line has yet sounded its depths.

Such is the wondrous lake of Taupo, lying 1,250 feet above the level of the sea, and in view of an amphitheater of mountains 2,400 feet high. On the west are rocky peaks of great size; on the north lofty summits clothed with low trees; on the east a broad beach with a road track, and covered with pumice stones, which shimmer through the leafy screen of the bushes; on the southern side rise volcanic cones behind a forest flat. Such is the majestic frame that incloses this vast sheet of water whose roaring tempests rival the cyclones of Ocean.

The whole region boils like an immense cauldron hung over subterranean fires. The ground vibrates from the agitation of the central furnace. Hot springs filter out everywhere. The crust of the earth cracks in great rifts like a cake, too quickly baked.

About a quarter of a mile off, on a craggy spur of the mountain stood a "pah," or Maori fortress. The prisoners, whose feet and hands were liberated, were landed one by one, and conducted into it by the warriors. The path which led up to the intrenchment, lay across fields of "phormium" and a grove of beautiful trees, the "kai-kateas" with persistent leaves and red berries; "dracaenas australis," the "ti-trees" of the natives, whose crown is a graceful counterpart of the cabbage-palm, and "huious," which are used to give a black dye to cloth. Large doves with metallic sheen on their plumage, and a world of starlings with reddish carmeles, flew away at the approach of the natives.

After a rather circuitous walk, Glenarvan and his party arrived at the "pah."

The fortress was defended by an outer inclosure of strong palisades, fifteen feet high; a second line of stakes; then a fence composed of osiers, with loop-holes, inclosed Verne the inner space, that is the plateau of the "pah," on which were erected the Maori buildings, and about forty huts arranged symmetrically.

When the captives approached they were horror-struck at the sight of the heads which adorned the posts of the inner circle.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant turned away their eyes more with disgust

than with terror. These heads were those of hostile chiefs who had fallen in battle, and whose bodies had served to feed the conquerors. The geographer recognized that it was so, from their eye sockets being hollow and deprived of eye-balls.

Glenarvan and his companions had taken in all this scene at a glance. They stood near an empty house, waiting the pleasure of the chief, and exposed to the abuse of a crowd of old crones. This troop of harpies surrounded them, shaking their fists, howling and vociferating. Some English words that escaped their coarse mouths left no doubt that they were clamoring for immediate vengeance.

In the midst of all these cries and threats, Lady Helena, tranquil to all outward seeming, affected an indifference she was far from feeling. This courageous woman made heroic efforts to restrain herself, lest she should disturb Glenarvan's coolness. Poor Mary Grant felt her heart sink within her, and John Mangles stood by ready to die in her behalf. His companions bore the deluge of invectives each according to his disposition; the Major with utter indifference, Paganel with exasperation that increased every moment.

Glenarvan, to spare Lady Helena the attacks of these witches, walked straight up to Kai-Koumou, and pointing to the hideous group:

"Send them away," said he.

The Maori chief stared fixedly at his prisoner without speaking; and then, with a nod, he silenced the noisy horde. Glenarvan bowed, as a sign of thanks, and went slowly back to his place.

At this moment a hundred Maories were assembled in the "pah," old men, full grown men, youths; the former were calm, but gloomy, awaiting the orders of Kai-Koumou; the others gave themselves up to the most violent sorrow, bewailing their parents and friends who had fallen in the late engagements.

Kai-Koumou was the only one of all the chiefs that obeyed the call of William Thompson, who had returned to the lake district, and he was the first to announce to his tribe the defeat of the national insurrection, beaten on the plains of the lower Waikato. Of the two hundred warriors who, under his orders, hastened to the defence of the soil, one hundred and fifty were missing on his return. Allowing for a number being made prisoners by the invaders, how many must be lying on the field of battle, never to return to the country of their ancestors!

This was the secret of the outburst of grief with which the tribe saluted the arrival of Kai-Koumou. Up to that moment nothing had been known of the last defeat, and the fatal news fell on them like a thunder clap.

Among the savages, sorrow is always manifested by physical signs; the parents and friends of deceased warriors, the women especially, lacerated their faces and shoulders with sharpened shells.

The blood spurted out and blended with their tears.

Deep wounds denoted great despair. The unhappy Maories, bleeding and excited, were hideous to look upon.

There was another serious element in their grief.

Not only had they lost the relative or friend they mourned, but his bones would be missing in the family mausoleum.

In the Maori religion the possession of these relics is regarded as indispensable to the destinies of the future life; not the perishable flesh, but the bones, which are collected with the greatest care, cleaned, scraped, polished, even varnished, and then deposited in the "oudoupa," that is the "house of glory." These tombs are adorned with wooden statues, representing with perfect exactness the tattoo of the deceased. But now their tombs would be left empty, the religious rites would be unsolemnized, and the bones that escaped the teeth of the wild dog would whiten without burial on the field of battle.

Then the sorrowful chorus redoubled. The menaces of the women were intensified by the imprecations of the men against the Europeans. Abusive epithets were lavished, the accompanying gestures became more violent. The howl was about to end in brutal action.

Kai-Koumou, fearing that he might be overpowered by the fanatics of his tribe, conducted his prisoners to a sacred place, on an abruptly raised plateau at the other end of the "pah." This hut rested against a mound elevated a hundred feet above it, which formed the steep outer buttress of the entrenchment. In this "Ware-Atoua," sacred house, the priests or arikis taught the Maories about a Triune God, father, son, and bird, or spirit. The large, well constructed hut, contained the sacred and choice food which Maoui-Ranga-Rangui eats by the mouths of his priests.

In this place, and safe for the moment from the frenzied natives, the captives lay down on the flax mats. Lady Helena was quite exhausted, her moral energies prostrate, and she fell helpless into her husband's arms.

Glenarvan pressed her to his bosom and said:

"Courage, my dear Helena; Heaven will not forsake us!"

Robert was scarcely in when he jumped on Wilson's shoulders, and squeezed his head through a crevice left between the roof and the walls, from which chaplets of amulets were hung. From that elevation he could see the whole extent of the "pah," and as far as Kai-Koumou's house.

"They are all crowding round the chief," said he softly.

"They are throwing their arms about. . . . They are howling. . . .
. Kai-Koumou is trying to speak."

Then he was silent for a few minutes.

"Kai-Koumou is speaking. . . . The savages are quieter.
. . . . They are listening. . . ."

"Evidently," said the Major, "this chief has a personal interest
in protecting us. He wants to exchange his prisoners for some chiefs
of his tribe! But will his warriors consent?"

"Yes! . . . They are listening. . . . They have dispersed, some are
gone into their huts. . . . The others have left the intrenchment."

"Are you sure?" said the Major.

"Yes, Mr. McNabbs," replied Robert, "Kai-Koumou is
left alone with the warriors of his canoe. . . . Oh! one
of them is coming up here. . . ."

"Come down, Robert," said Glenarvan.

At this moment, Lady Helena who had risen, seized her husband's arm.

"Edward," she said in a resolute tone, "neither Mary Grant nor I must fall into the hands of these savages alive!"

And so saying, she handed Glenarvan a loaded revolver.

"Fire-arm!" exclaimed Glenarvan, with flashing eyes.

"Yes! the Maories do not search their prisoners. But, Edward, this is for us, not for them."

Glenarvan slipped the revolver under his coat; at the same moment the mat at the entrance was raised, and a native entered.

He motioned to the prisoners to follow him. Glenarvan and the rest walked across the "pah" and stopped before Kai-Koumou. He was surrounded by the principal warriors of his tribe, and among them the Maori whose canoe joined that of the Kai-Koumou at the confluence of Pohain-henna, on the Waikato. He was a man about forty years of age, powerfully built and of fierce and cruel aspect.

His name was Kara-Tete, meaning "the irascible" in the native tongue.

Kai-Koumou treated him with a certain tone of respect, and by the fineness of his tattoo, it was easy to perceive that Kara-Tete held a lofty position in the tribe, but a keen observer would have guessed the feeling of rivalry that existed between these two chiefs.

The Major observed that the influence of Kara-Tete gave umbrage to Kai-Koumou. They both ruled the Waikato tribes, and were equal

in authority. During this interview Kai-Koumou smiled, but his eyes betrayed a deep-seated enmity.

Kai-Koumou interrogated Glenarvan.

"You are English?" said he.

"Yes," replied Glenarvan, unhesitatingly, as his nationality would facilitate the exchange.

"And your companions?" said Kai-Koumou.

"My companions are English like myself. We are shipwrecked travelers, but it may be important to state that we have taken no part in the war."

"That matters little!" was the brutal answer of Kara-Tete.

"Every Englishman is an enemy. Your people invaded our island! They robbed our fields! they burned our villages!"

"They were wrong!" said Glenarvan, quietly. "I say so, because I think it, not because I am in your power."

"Listen," said Kai-Koumou, "the Tohonga, the chief priest of Noui-Atoua has fallen into the hands of your brethren; he is a prisoner among the Pakekas. Our deity has commanded us to ransom him. For my own part,

I would rather have torn out your heart, I would have stuck your head, and those of your companions, on the posts of that palisade.

But Noui-Atoua has spoken."

As he uttered these words, Kai-Koumou, who till now had been quite unmoved, trembled with rage, and his features expressed intense ferocity.

Then after a few minutes' interval he proceeded more calmly.

"Do you think the English will exchange you for our Tohonga?"

Glenarvan hesitated, all the while watching the Maori chief.

"I do not know," said he, after a moment of silence.

"Speak," returned Kai-Koumou, "is your life worth that of our Tohonga?"

"No," replied Glenarvan. "I am neither a chief nor a priest among my own people."

Paganel, petrified at this reply, looked at Glenarvan in amazement.

Kai-Koumou appeared equally astonished.

"You doubt it then?" said he.

"I do not know," replied Glenarvan.

"Your people will not accept you as an exchange for Tohonga?"

"Me alone? no," repeated Glenarvan. "All of us perhaps they might."

"Our Maori custom," replied Kai-Koumou, "is head for head."

"Offer first these ladies in exchange for your priest," said Glenarvan, pointing to Lady Helena and Mary Grant.

Lady Helena was about to interrupt him. But the Major held her back.

"Those two ladies," continued Glenarvan, bowing respectfully toward Lady Helena and Mary Grant, "are personages of rank in their own country."

The warrior gazed coldly at his prisoner. An evil smile relaxed his lips for a moment; then he controlled himself, and in a voice of ill-concealed anger:

"Do you hope to deceive Kai-Koumou with lying words, accursed Pakeka? Can not the eyes of Kai-Koumou read hearts?"

And pointing to Lady Helena: "That is your wife?" he said.

"No! mine!" exclaimed Kara-Tete.

And then pushing his prisoners aside, he laid his hand on the shoulder of Lady Helena, who turned pale at his touch.

"Edward!" cried the unfortunate woman in terror.

Glenarvan, without a word, raised his arm, a shot! and Kara-Tete fell at his feet.

The sound brought a crowd of natives to the spot. A hundred arms were ready, and Glenarvan's revolver was snatched from him.

Kai-Koumou glanced at Glenarvan with a curious expression: then with one hand protecting Glenarvan, with the other he waved off the crowd who were rushing on the party.

At last his voice was heard above the tumult.

"Taboo! Taboo!" he shouted.

At that word the crowd stood still before Glenarvan and his companions, who for the time were preserved by a supernatural influence.

A few minutes after they were re-conducted to Ware-Atoua, which was their prison. But Robert Grant and Paganel were not with them.