

CHAPTER XII STRANGELY LIBERATED

JUST as the sun was sinking beyond Lake Taupo, behind the peaks of Tuhahua and Pukepapu, the captives were conducted back to their prison. They were not to leave it again till the tops of the Wahiti Ranges were lit with the first fires of day.

They had one night in which to prepare for death.

Overcome as they were with horror and fatigue, they took their last meal together.

"We shall need all our strength," Glenarvan had said, "to look death in the face. We must show these savages how Europeans can die."

The meal ended. Lady Helena repeated the evening prayer aloud, her companions, bare-headed, repeated it after her.

Who does not turn his thoughts toward God in the hour of death?

This done, the prisoners embraced each other. Mary Grant and Helena, in a corner of the hut, lay down on a mat. Sleep, which keeps all sorrow in abeyance, soon weighed down their eyelids; they slept in each other's arms, overcome by exhaustion and prolonged watching.

Then Glenarvan, taking his friends aside, said: "My dear friends, our lives and the lives of these poor women are in God's hands.

If it is decreed that we die to-morrow, let us die bravely, like Christian men, ready to appear without terror before the Supreme Judge. God, who reads our hearts, knows that we had a noble end in view. If death awaits us instead of success, it is by His will. Stern as the decree may seem, I will not repine. But death here, means not death only, it means torture, insult, perhaps, and here are two ladies--"

Glenarvan's voice, firm till now, faltered. He was silent a moment, and having overcome his emotion, he said, addressing the young captain:

"John, you have promised Mary what I promised Lady Helena. What is your plan?"

"I believe," said John, "that in the sight of God I have a right to fulfill that promise."

"Yes, John; but we are unarmed."

"No!" replied John, showing him a dagger. "I snatched it from Kara-Tete when he fell at your feet. My Lord, whichever of us survives the other will fulfill the wish of Lady Helena and Mary Grant."

After these words were said, a profound silence ensued.

At last the Major said: "My friends, keep that to the last moment. I am not an advocate of irremediable measures."

"I did not speak for ourselves," said Glenarvan. "Be it as it may, we can face death! Had we been alone, I should ere now have cried, 'My friends, let us make an effort. Let us attack these wretches!' But with these poor girls--"

At this moment John raised the mat, and counted twenty-five natives keeping guard on the Ware-Atoua. A great fire had been lighted, and its lurid glow threw into strong relief the irregular outlines of the "pah." Some of the savages were sitting round the brazier; the others standing motionless, their black outlines relieved against the clear background of flame. But they all kept watchful guard on the hut confided to their care.

It has been said that between a vigilant jailer and a prisoner who wishes to escape, the chances are in favor of the prisoner; the fact is, the interest of the one is keener than that of the other. The jailer may forget that he is on guard; the prisoner never forgets that he is guarded. The captive thinks oftener of escaping than the jailer of preventing his flight, and hence we hear of frequent and wonderful escapes.

But in the present instance hatred and revenge were the jailers-- not an indifferent warder; the prisoners were not bound, but it was because bonds were useless when five-and-twenty men were watching the only egress from the Ware-Atoua.

This house, with its back to the rock which closed the fortress, was only accessible by a long, narrow promontory which joined it in front to the plateau on which the "pah" was erected.

On its two other sides rose pointed rocks, which jutted out over an abyss a hundred feet deep. On that side descent was impossible, and had it been possible, the bottom was shut in by the enormous rock. The only outlet was the regular door of the Ware-Atoua, and the Maories guarded the promontory which united it to the "pah" like a drawbridge. All escape was thus hopeless, and Glenarvan having tried the walls for the twentieth time, was compelled to acknowledge that it was so.

The hours of this night, wretched as they were, slipped away. Thick darkness had settled on the mountain. Neither moon nor stars pierced the gloom. Some gusts of wind whistled by the sides of the "pah," and the posts of the house creaked: the fire outside revived with the puffs of wind, and the flames sent fitful gleams into the interior of Ware-Atoua. The group of prisoners was lit up for a moment; they were absorbed in their last thoughts, and a deathlike silence reigned in the hut.

It might have been about four o'clock in the morning when the Major's attention was called to a slight noise which seemed to come from the foundation of the posts in the wall of the hut which abutted on the rock. McNabbs was at first indifferent, but finding the noise continue,

he listened; then his curiosity was aroused, and he put his ear to the ground; it sounded as if someone was scraping or hollowing out the ground outside.

As soon as he was sure of it, he crept over to Glenarvan and John Mangles, and startling them from their melancholy thoughts, led them to the end of the hut.

"Listen," said he, motioning them to stoop.

The scratching became more and more audible; they could hear the little stones grate on a hard body and roll away.

"Some animal in his burrow," said John Mangles.

Glenarvan struck his forehead.

"Who knows?" said he, "it might be a man."

"Animal or man," answered the Major, "I will soon find out!"

Wilson and Olbinett joined their companions, and all united to dig through the wall--John with his dagger, the others with stones taken from the ground, or with their nails, while Mulrady, stretched along the ground, watched the native guard through a crevice of the matting.

These savages sitting motionless around the fire, suspected nothing of what was going on twenty feet off.

The soil was light and friable, and below lay a bed of silicious tufa; therefore, even without tools, the aperture deepened quickly.

It soon became evident that a man, or men, clinging to the sides of the "pah," were cutting a passage into its exterior wall.

What could be the object? Did they know of the existence of the prisoners, or was it some private enterprise that led to the undertaking?

The prisoners redoubled their efforts. Their fingers bled, but still they worked on; after half an hour they had gone three feet deep; they perceived by the increased sharpness of the sounds that only a thin layer of earth prevented immediate communication.

Some minutes more passed, and the Major withdrew his hand from the stroke of a sharp blade. He suppressed a cry.

John Mangles, inserting the blade of his poniard, avoided the knife which now protruded above the soil, but seized the hand that wielded it.

It was the hand of a woman or child, a European! On neither side had a word been uttered.

It was evidently the cue of both sides to be silent.

"Is it Robert?" whispered Glenarvan.

But softly as the name was breathed, Mary Grant, already awakened by the sounds in the hut, slipped over toward Glenarvan, and seizing the hand, all stained with earth, she covered it with kisses.

"My darling Robert," said she, never doubting, "it is you! it is you!"

"Yes, little sister," said he, "it is I am here to save you all; but be very silent."

"Brave lad!" repeated Glenarvan.

"Watch the savages outside," said Robert.

Mulrady, whose attention was distracted for a moment by the appearance of the boy, resumed his post.

"It is all right," said he. "There are only four awake; the rest are asleep."

A minute after, the hole was enlarged, and Robert passed from the arms of his sister to those of Lady Helena. Round his body was rolled a long coil of flax rope.

"My child, my child," murmured Lady Helena, "the savages did not kill you!"

"No, madam," said he; "I do not know how it happened, but in the scuffle I got away; I jumped the barrier; for two days I hid in the bushes, to try and see you; while the tribe were busy with the chief's funeral, I came and reconnoitered this side of the path, and I saw that I could get to you. I stole this knife and rope out of the desert hut. The tufts of bush and the branches made me a ladder, and I found a kind of grotto already hollowed out in the rock under this hut; I had only to bore some feet in soft earth, and here I am."

Twenty noiseless kisses were his reward.

"Let us be off!" said he, in a decided tone.

"Is Paganel below?" asked Glenarvan.

"Monsieur Paganel?" replied the boy, amazed.

"Yes; is he waiting for us?"

"No, my Lord; but is he not here?" inquired Robert.

"No, Robert!" answered Mary Grant.

"Why! have you not seen him?" asked Glenarvan. "Did you lose each other in the confusion? Did you not get away together?"

"No, my Lord!" said Robert, taken aback by the disappearance of his friend Paganel.

"Well, lose no more time," said the Major. "Wherever Paganel is, he cannot be in worse plight than ourselves. Let us go."

Truly, the moments were precious. They had to fly.

The escape was not very difficult, except the twenty feet of perpendicular fall outside the grotto.

After that the slope was practicable to the foot of the mountain. From this point the prisoners could soon gain the lower valleys; while the Maories, if they perceived the flight of the prisoners, would have to make a long round to catch them, being unaware of the gallery between the Ware-Atoua and the outer rock.

The escape was commenced, and every precaution was taken. The captives passed one by one through the narrow passage into the grotto. John Mangles, before leaving the hut, disposed of all the evidences of their work, and in his turn slipped through the opening and let down over it the mats of the house, so that the entrance to the gallery was quite concealed.

The next thing was to descend the vertical wall to the slope below, and this would have been impracticable, but that Robert had brought the flax rope, which was now unrolled and fixed to a projecting point of rock, the end hanging over.

John Mangles, before his friends trusted themselves to this flax rope, tried it; he did not think it very strong; and it was of importance not to risk themselves imprudently, as a fall would be fatal.

"This rope," said he, "will only bear the weight of two persons; therefore let us go in rotation. Lord and Lady Glenarvan first; when they arrive at the bottom, three pulls at the rope will be a signal to us to follow."

"I will go first," said Robert. "I discovered a deep hollow at the foot of the slope where those who come down can conceal themselves and wait for the rest."

"Go, my boy," said Glenarvan, pressing Robert's hand.

Robert disappeared through the opening out of the grotto. A minute after, the three pulls at the cord informed them the boy had alighted safely.

Glenarvan and Lady Helena immediately ventured out of the grotto.

The darkness was still very great, though some grayish streaks were already visible on the eastern summits.

The biting cold of the morning revived the poor young lady. She felt stronger and commenced her perilous descent.

Glenarvan first, then Lady Helena, let themselves down along the rope, till they came to the spot where the perpendicular wall met the top of the slope. Then Glenarvan going first and supporting his wife, began to descend backward.

He felt for the tufts and grass and shrubs able to afford a foothold; tried them and then placed Lady Helena's foot on them. Some birds, suddenly awakened, flew away, uttering feeble cries, and the fugitives trembled when a stone loosened from its bed rolled to the foot of the mountain.

They had reached half-way down the slope, when a voice was heard from the opening of the grotto.

"Stop!" whispered John Mangles.

Glenarvan, holding with one hand to a tuft of tetragonia, with the other holding his wife, waited with breathless anxiety.

Wilson had had an alarm. Having heard some unusual noise outside

the Ware-Atoua, he went back into the hut and watched the Maories from behind the mat. At a sign from him, John stopped Glenarvan.

One of the warriors on guard, startled by an unusual sound, rose and drew nearer to the Ware-Atoua. He stood still about two paces from the hut and listened with his head bent forward.

He remained in that attitude for a minute that seemed an hour, his ear intent, his eye peering into the darkness.

Then shaking his head like one who sees he is mistaken, he went back to his companions, took an armful of dead wood, and threw it into the smouldering fire, which immediately revived. His face was lighted up by the flame, and was free from any look of doubt, and after having glanced to where the first light of dawn whitened the eastern sky, stretched himself near the fire to warm his stiffened limbs.

"All's well!" whispered Wilson.

John signaled to Glenarvan to resume his descent.

Glenarvan let himself gently down the slope; soon Lady Helena and he landed on the narrow track where Robert waited for them.

The rope was shaken three times, and in his turn John Mangles, preceding Mary Grant, followed in the dangerous route.

He arrived safely; he rejoined Lord and Lady Glenarvan in the hollow mentioned by Robert.

Five minutes after, all the fugitives had safely escaped from the Ware-Atoua, left their retreat, and keeping away from the inhabited shores of the lakes, they plunged by narrow paths into the recesses of the mountains.

They walked quickly, trying to avoid the points where they might be seen from the pah. They were quite silent, and glided among the bushes like shadows. Whither? Where chance led them, but at any rate they were free.

Toward five o'clock, the day began to dawn, bluish clouds marbled the upper stratum of clouds. The misty summits began to pierce the morning mists. The orb of day was soon to appear, and instead of giving the signal for their execution, would, on the contrary, announce their flight.

It was of vital importance that before the decisive moment arrived they should put themselves beyond the reach of the savages, so as to put them off their track. But their progress was slow, for the paths were steep. Lady Glenarvan climbed the slopes, supported, not to say carried, by Glenarvan, and Mary Grant leaned on the arm of John Mangles; Robert, radiant with joy, triumphant at his success, led the march, and the two sailors

brought up the rear.

Another half an hour and the glorious sun would rise out of the mists of the horizon. For half an hour the fugitives walked on as chance led them. Paganel was not there to take the lead.

He was now the object of their anxiety, and whose absence was a black shadow between them and their happiness. But they bore steadily eastward,

as much as possible, and faced the gorgeous morning light.

Soon they had reached a height of 500 feet above Lake Taupo, and the cold of the morning, increased by the altitude, was very keen.

Dim outlines of hills and mountains rose behind one another;

but Glenarvan only thought how best to get lost among them.

Time enough by and by to see about escaping from the labyrinth.

At last the sun appeared and sent his first rays on their path.

Suddenly a terrific yell from a hundred throats rent the air.

It came from the pah, whose direction Glenarvan did not know.

Besides, a thick veil of fog, which, spread at his feet,

prevented any distinct view of the valleys below.

But the fugitives could not doubt that their escape had been discovered;

and now the question was, would they be able to elude pursuit?

Had they been seen? Would not their track betray them?

At this moment the fog in the valley lifted, and enveloped them for a moment in a damp mist, and at three hundred feet below they perceived the swarming mass of frantic natives.

While they looked they were seen. Renewed howls broke forth, mingled with the barking of dogs, and the whole tribe, after vainly trying to scale the rock of Ware-Atoua, rushed out of the pah, and hastened by the shortest paths in pursuit of the prisoners who were flying from their vengeance.