

## CHAPTER XIV A BOLD STRATAGEM

NEXT day, February 17th, the sun's first rays awoke the sleepers of the Maunganamu. The Maories had long since been astir, coming and going at the foot of the mountain, without leaving their line of observation. Furious clamor broke out when they saw the Europeans leave the sacred place they had profaned.

Each of the party glanced first at the neighboring mountains, and at the deep valleys still drowned in mist, and over Lake Taupo, which the morning breeze ruffled slightly. And then all clustered round Paganel eager to hear his project.

Paganel soon satisfied their curiosity. "My friends," said he, "my plan has one great recommendation; if it does not accomplish all that I anticipate, we shall be no worse off than we are at present. But it must, it will succeed."

"And what is it?" asked McNabbs.

"It is this," replied Paganel, "the superstition of the natives has made this mountain a refuge for us, and we must take advantage of their superstition to escape. If I can persuade Kai-Koumou that we have expiated our profanation, that the wrath of the Deity has fallen on us: in a word, that we have died a terrible death, do you think he will leave

the plateau of Maunganamu to return to his village?"

"Not a doubt of it," said Glenarvan.

"And what is the horrible death you refer to?" asked Lady Helena.

"The death of the sacrilegious, my friends,"  
replied Paganel. "The avenging flames are under our feet.  
Let us open a way for them!"

"What! make a volcano!" cried John Mangles.

"Yes, an impromptu volcano, whose fury we can regulate. There are plenty  
of vapors ready to hand, and subterranean fires ready to issue forth.  
We can have an eruption ready to order."

"An excellent idea, Paganel; well conceived," said the Major.

"You understand," replied the geographer, "we are to pretend to fall  
victims to the flames of the Maori Pluto, and to disappear spiritually  
into the tomb of Kara-Tete. And stay there three, four, even five days  
if necessary--that is to say, till the savages are convinced that we  
have perished, and abandon their watch."

"But," said Miss Grant, "suppose they wish to be sure of our punishment,  
and climb up here to see?"

"No, my dear Mary," returned Paganel. "They will not do that. The mountain is tabooed, and if it devoured its sacrilegious intruders, it would only be more inviolably tabooed."

"It is really a very clever plan," said Glenarvan. "There is only one chance against it; that is, if the savages prolong their watch at the foot of Maunganamu, we may run short of provisions. But if we play our game well there is not much fear of that."

"And when shall we try this last chance?" asked Lady Helena.

"To-night," rejoined Paganel, "when the darkness is the deepest."

"Agreed," said McNabbs; "Paganel, you are a genius! and I, who seldom get up an enthusiasm, I answer for the success of your plan. Oh! those villains! They shall have a little miracle that will put off their conversion for another century. I hope the missionaries will forgive us."

The project of Paganel was therefore adopted, and certainly with the superstitious ideas of the Maories there seemed good ground for hope. But brilliant as the idea might be, the difficulty was in the modus operandi. The volcano might devour the bold schemers, who offered it a crater. Could they control and direct the eruption when they had succeeded

in letting loose its vapor and flames, and lava streams?

The entire cone might be engulfed. It was meddling with phenomena of which nature herself has the absolute monopoly.

Paganel had thought of all this; but he intended to act prudently and without pushing things to extremes.

An appearance would be enough to dupe the Maories, and there was no need for the terrible realities of an eruption.

How long that day seemed. Each one of the party inwardly counted the hours. All was made ready for flight. The oudoupa provisions were divided and formed very portable packets.

Some mats and firearms completed their light equipment, all of which they took from the tomb of the chief.

It is needless to say that their preparations were made within the inclosure, and that they were unseen by the savages.

At six o'clock the steward served up a refreshing meal. Where or when they would eat in the valleys of the Ranges no one could foretell.

So that they had to take in supplies for the future. The principal dish was composed of half a dozen rats, caught by Wilson and stewed.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant obstinately refused to taste this game, which is highly esteemed by the natives; but the men enjoyed it like the real Maories. The meat was excellent and savory, and the six devourers were devoured down to the bones.

The evening twilight came on. The sun went down in a stormy-looking bank of clouds. A few flashes of lightning glanced across the horizon and distant thunder pealed through the darkened sky.

Paganel welcomed the storm, which was a valuable aid to his plans, and completed his program. The savages are superstitiously affected by the great phenomena of nature. The New Zealanders think that thunder is the angry voice of Noui-Atoua, and lightning the fierce gleam of his eyes. Thus their deity was coming personally to chastise the violators of the taboo.

At eight o'clock, the summit of the Maunganamu was lost in portentous darkness. The sky would supply a black background for the blaze which Paganel was about to throw on it. The Maories could no longer see their prisoners; and this was the moment for action. Speed was necessary. Glenarvan, Paganel, McNabbs, Robert, the steward, and the two sailors, all lent a hand.

The spot for the crater was chosen thirty paces from Kara-Tete's tomb. It was important to keep the oudoupa intact, for if it disappeared, the taboo of the mountain would be nullified. At the spot mentioned Paganel had noticed an enormous block of stone, round which the vapors played with a certain degree of intensity. This block covered a small natural crater hollowed in the cone, and by its own weight prevented the egress of the subterranean fire.

If they could move it from its socket, the vapors and the lava would issue by the disencumbered opening.

The workers used as levers some posts taken from the interior of the oudoupa, and they plied their tools vigorously against the rocky mass. Under their united efforts the stone soon moved. They made a little trench so that it might roll down the inclined plane. As they gradually raised it, the vibrations under foot became more distinct. Dull roarings of flame and the whistling sound of a furnace ran along under the thin crust. The intrepid laborers, veritable Cyclops handling Earth's fires, worked in silence; soon some fissures and jets of steam warned them that their place was growing dangerous. But a crowning effort moved the mass which rolled down and disappeared. Immediately the thin crust gave way. A column of fire rushed to the sky with loud detonations, while streams of boiling water and lava flowed toward the native camp and the lower valleys.

All the cone trembled as if it was about to plunge into a fathomless gulf.

Glenarvan and his companions had barely time to get out of the way; they fled to the enclosure of the oudoupa, not without having been sprinkled with water at 220 degrees. This water at first spread a smell like soup, which soon changed into a strong odor of sulphur.

Then the mud, the lava, the volcanic stones, all spouted

forth in a torrent. Streams of fire furrowed the sides of Maunganamu. The neighboring mountains were lit up by the glare; the dark valleys were also filled with dazzling light.

All the savages had risen, howling under the pain inflicted by the burning lava, which was bubbling and foaming in the midst of their camp.

Those whom the liquid fire had not touched fled to the surrounding hills; then turned, and gazed in terror at this fearful phenomenon, this volcano in which the anger of their deity would swallow up the profane intruders on the sacred mountain.

Now and then, when the roar of the eruption became less violent, their cry was heard:

"Taboo! taboo! taboo!"

An enormous quantity of vapors, heated stones and lava was escaping by this crater of Maunganamu. It was not a mere geyser like those that girdle round Mount Hecla, in Iceland, it was itself a Hecla. All this volcanic commotion was confined till then in the envelope of the cone, because the safety valve of Tangariro was enough for its expansion; but when this new issue was afforded, it rushed forth fiercely, and by the laws of equilibrium, the other eruptions in the island must on that night have lost their usual intensity.

An hour after this volcano burst upon the world, broad streams of lava were running down its sides. Legions of rats came out of their holes, and fled from the scene.

All night long, and fanned by the tempest in the upper sky, the crater never ceased to pour forth its torrents with a violence that alarmed Glenarvan. The eruption was breaking away the edges of the opening. The prisoners, hidden behind the inclosure of stakes, watched the fearful progress of the phenomenon.

Morning came. The fury of the volcano had not slackened. Thick yellowish fumes were mixed with the flames; the lava torrents wound their serpentine course in every direction.

Glenarvan watched with a beating heart, looking from all the interstices of the palisaded enclosure, and observed the movements in the native camp.

The Maories had fled to the neighboring ledges, out of the reach of the volcano. Some corpses which lay at the foot of the cone, were charred by the fire. Further off toward the "pah," the lava had reached a group of twenty huts, which were still smoking. The Maories, forming here and there groups, contemplated the canopied summit of Maunganamu with religious awe.

Kai-Koumou approached in the midst of his warriors, and Glenarvan recognized him. The chief advanced to the foot of the hill,



on the side untouched by the lava, but he did not ascend the first ledge.

Standing there, with his arms stretched out like an exerciser, he made some grimaces, whose meaning was obvious to the prisoners. As Paganel had foreseen, Kai-Koumou launched on the avenging mountain a more rigorous taboo.

Soon after the natives left their positions and followed the winding paths that led toward the pah.

"They are going!" exclaimed Glenarvan. "They have left their posts! God be praised! Our stratagem has succeeded! My dear Lady Helena, my brave friends, we are all dead and buried! But this evening when night comes, we shall rise and leave our tomb, and fly these barbarous tribes!"

It would be difficult to conceive of the joy that pervaded the oudoupa. Hope had regained the mastery in all hearts. The intrepid travelers forgot the past, forgot the future, to enjoy the present delight! And yet the task before them was not an easy one--to gain some European outpost in the midst of this unknown country. But Kai-Koumou once off their track, they thought themselves safe from all the savages in New Zealand.

A whole day had to elapse before they could make a start,

and they employed it in arranging a plan of flight.

Paganel had treasured up his map of New Zealand, and on it could trace out the best roads.

After discussion, the fugitives resolved to make for the Bay of Plenty, towards the east. The region was unknown, but apparently desert. The travelers, who from their past experience, had learned to make light of physical difficulties, feared nothing but meeting Maories. At any cost they wanted to avoid them and gain the east coast, where the missionaries had several stations. That part of the country had hitherto escaped the horrors of war, and the natives were not in the habit of scouring the country.

As to the distance that separated Lake Taupo from the Bay of Plenty, they calculated it about a hundred miles. Ten days' march at ten miles a day, could be done, not without fatigue, but none of the party gave that a thought. If they could only reach the mission stations they could rest there while waiting for a favorable opportunity to get to Auckland, for that was the point they desired to reach.

This question settled, they resumed their watch of the native proceedings, and continued so doing till evening fell. Not a solitary native remained at the foot of the mountain, and when darkness set in over the Taupo valleys, not a fire indicated the presence of the Maories at the base.

The road was free.

At nine o'clock, the night being unusually dark, Glenarvan gave the order to start. His companions and he, armed and equipped at the expense of Kara-Tete, began cautiously to descend the slopes of Maunganamu, John Mangles and Wilson leading the way, eyes and ears on the alert. They stopped at the slightest sound, they started at every passing cloud. They slid rather than walked down the spur, that their figures might be lost in the dark mass of the mountain. At two hundred feet below the summit, John Mangles and his sailors reached the dangerous ridge that had been so obstinately defended by the natives. If by ill luck the Maories, more cunning than the fugitives, had only pretended to retreat; if they were not really duped by the volcanic phenomenon, this was the spot where their presence would be betrayed. Glenarvan could not but shudder, in spite of his confidence, and in spite of the jokes of Paganel. The fate of the whole party would hang in the balance for the ten minutes required to pass along that ridge. He felt the beating of Lady Helena's heart, as she clung to his arm.

He had no thought of turning back. Neither had John. The young captain, followed closely by the whole party, and protected by the intense darkness, crept along the ridge, stopping when some loose stone rolled to the bottom.

If the savages were still in the ambush below, these unusual sounds might provoke from both sides a dangerous fusillade.

But speed was impossible in their serpent-like progress down this sloping crest. When John Mangles had reached the lowest point, he was scarcely twenty-five feet from the plateau, where the natives were encamped the night before, and then the ridge rose again pretty steeply toward a wood for about a quarter of a mile.

All this lower part was crossed without molestation, and they commenced the ascent in silence. The clump of bush was invisible, though they knew it was there, and but for the possibility of an ambush, Glenarvan counted on being safe when the party arrived at that point. But he observed that after this point, they were no longer protected by the taboo. The ascending ridge belonged not to Maunganamu, but to the mountain system of the eastern side of Lake Taupo, so that they had not only pistol shots, but hand-to-hand fighting to fear. For ten minutes, the little band ascended by insensible degrees toward the higher table-land. John could not discern the dark wood, but he knew it ought to be within two hundred feet. Suddenly he stopped; almost retreated. He fancied he heard something in the darkness; his stoppage interrupted the march of those behind.

He remained motionless long enough to alarm his companions. They waited with unspeakable anxiety, wondering if they were doomed to retrace their steps, and return to the summit of Maunganamu.

But John, finding that the noise was not repeated, resumed the ascent of the narrow path of the ridge. Soon they perceived the shadowy outline of the wood showing faintly through the darkness. A few steps more and they were hid from sight in the thick foliage of the trees.