

CHAPTER XV FROM PERIL TO SAFETY

THE night favored their escape, and prudence urged them to lose no time in getting away from the fatal neighborhood of Lake Taupo. Paganel took the post of leader, and his wonderful instinct shone out anew in this difficult mountain journey. His nyctalopia was a great advantage, his cat-like sight enabling him to distinguish the smallest object in the deepest gloom.

For three hours they walked on without halting along the far-reaching slope of the eastern side. Paganel kept a little to the southeast, in order to make use of a narrow passage between the Kaimanawa and the Wahiti Ranges, through which the road from Hawkes' Bay to Auckland passes. Once through that gorge, his plan was to keep off the road, and, under the shelter of the high ranges, march to the coast across the inhabited regions of the province.

At nine o'clock in the morning, they had made twelve miles in twelve hours. The courageous women could not be pressed further, and, besides, the locality was suitable for camping. The fugitives had reached the pass that separates the two chains. Paganel, map in hand, made a loop toward the northeast, and at ten o'clock the little party reached a sort of redan, formed by a projecting rock.

The provisions were brought out, and justice was done to their meal. Mary Grant and the Major, who had not thought highly of the edible fern till then, now ate of it heartily.

The halt lasted till two o'clock in the afternoon, then they resumed their journey; and in the evening they stopped eight miles from the mountains, and required no persuasion to sleep in the open air.

Next day was one of serious difficulties. Their route lay across this wondrous region of volcanic lakes, geysers, and solfataras, which extended to the east of the Wahiti Ranges. It is a country more pleasant for the eye to ramble over, than for the limbs. Every quarter of a mile they had to turn aside or go around for some obstacle, and thus incurred great fatigue; but what a strange sight met their eyes! What infinite variety nature lavishes on her great panoramas!

On this vast extent of twenty miles square, the subterranean forces had a field for the display of all their varied effects. Salt springs, of singular transparency, peopled by myriads of insects, sprang up from thickets of tea-tree scrub. They diffused a powerful odor of burnt powder, and scattered on the ground a white sediment like dazzling snow. The limpid waters were nearly at boiling point, while some neighboring springs spread out like sheets of glass.

Gigantic tree-ferns grew beside them, in conditions analogous to those of the Silurian vegetation.

On every side jets of water rose like park fountains, out of a sea of vapor; some of them continuous, others intermittent, as if a capricious Pluto controlled their movements.

They rose like an amphitheater on natural terraces; their waters gradually flowed together under folds of white smoke, and corroding the edges of the semi-transparent steps of this gigantic staircase. They fed whole lakes with their boiling torrents.

Farther still, beyond the hot springs and tumultuous geysers, came the solfataras. The ground looked as if covered with large pustules. These were slumbering craters full of cracks and fissures from which rose various gases. The air was saturated with the acrid and unpleasant odor of sulphurous acid. The ground was encrusted with sulphur and crystalline concretions. All this incalculable wealth had been accumulating for centuries, and if the sulphur beds of Sicily should ever be exhausted, it is here, in this little known district of New Zealand, that supplies must be sought.

The fatigue in traveling in such a country as this will be best understood. Camping was very difficult, and the sportsmen of the party shot nothing worthy of Olbinett's skill; so that they had generally to content themselves with fern and sweet potato--

a poor diet which was scarcely sufficient to recruit the exhausted strength of the little party, who were all anxious to escape from this barren region.

But four days at least must elapse before they could hope to leave it. On February 23, at a distance of fifty miles from Maunganamu, Glenarvan called a halt, and camped at the foot of a nameless mountain, marked on Paganel's map. The wooded plains stretched away from sight, and great forests appeared on the horizon.

That day McNabbs and Robert killed three kiwis, which filled the chief place on their table, not for long, however, for in a few moments they were all consumed from the beaks to the claws.

At dessert, between the potatoes and sweet potatoes, Paganel moved a resolution which was carried with enthusiasm. He proposed to give the name of Glenarvan to this unnamed mountain, which rose 3,000 feet high, and then was lost in the clouds, and he printed carefully on his map the name of the Scottish nobleman.

It would be idle to narrate all the monotonous and uninteresting details of the rest of the journey. Only two or three occurrences of any importance took place on the way from the lakes to the Pacific Ocean. The march was all day long across forests and plains. John took observations of the sun and stars. Neither heat nor rain increased the discomfort of the journey,

but the travelers were so reduced by the trials they had undergone, that they made very slow progress; and they longed to arrive at the mission station.

They still chatted, but the conversation had ceased to be general. The little party broke up into groups, attracted to each other, not by narrow sympathies, but by a more personal communion of ideas.

Glenarvan generally walked alone; his mind seemed to recur to his unfortunate crew, as he drew nearer to the sea. He apparently lost sight of the dangers which lay before them on their way to Auckland, in the thought of his massacred men; the horrible picture haunted him.

Harry Grant was never spoken of; they were no longer in a position to make any effort on his behalf. If his name was uttered at all, it was between his daughter and John Mangles.

John had never reminded Mary of what she had said to him on that last night at Ware-Atoua. He was too wise to take advantage of a word spoken in a moment of despair.

When he mentioned Captain Grant, John always spoke of further search. He assured Mary that Lord Glenarvan would re-embark in the enterprise. He persistently returned to the fact that the authenticity of the document was indisputable, and that therefore Harry Grant was somewhere to be found, and that they would find him, if they

had to try all over the world. Mary drank in his words, and she and John, united by the same thought, cherished the same hope. Often Lady Helena joined in the conversation; but she did not participate in their illusions, though she refrained from chilling their enthusiasm.

McNabbs, Robert, Wilson, and Mulrady kept up their hunting parties, without going far from the rest, and each one furnished his QUOTA of game.

Paganel, arrayed in his flax mat, kept himself aloof, in a silent and pensive mood.

And yet, it is only justice to say, in spite of the general rule that, in the midst of trials, dangers, fatigues, and privations, the most amiable dispositions become ruffled and embittered, all our travelers were united, devoted, ready to die for one another.

On the 25th of February, their progress was stopped by a river which answered to the Wakari on Paganel's map, and was easily forded. For two days plains of low scrub succeeded each other without interruption. Half the distance from Lake Taupo to the coast had been traversed without accident, though not without fatigue.

Then the scene changed to immense and interminable forests, which reminded them of Australia, but here the kauri took the place of the eucalyptus.

Although their enthusiasm had been incessantly called forth during their four months' journey, Glenarvan and his companions were compelled to admire and wonder at those gigantic pines, worthy rivals of the Cedars of Lebanon, and the "Mammoth trees" of California. The kauris measured a hundred feet high, before the ramification of the branches.

They grew in isolated clumps, and the forest was not composed of trees, but of innumerable groups of trees, which spread their green canopies in the air two hundred feet from the ground.

Some of these pines, still young, about a hundred years old, resembled the red pine of Europe. They had a dark crown surmounted by a dark conical shoot. Their older brethren, five or six hundred years of age, formed great green pavilions supported on the inextricable network of their branches.

These patriarchs of the New Zealand forest measured fifty yards in circumference, and the united arms of all the travelers could not embrace the giant trunk.

For three days the little party made their way under these vast arches, over a clayey soil which the foot of man had never trod.

They knew this by the quantity of resinous gum that lay in heaps at the foot of the trees, and which would have lasted for native exportation many years.

The sportsmen found whole coveys of the kiwi, which are scarce in districts frequented by the Maories; the native dogs drive

them away to the shelter of these inaccessible forests.

They were an abundant source of nourishing food to our travelers.

Paganel also had the good fortune to espy, in a thicket, a pair of gigantic birds; his instinct as a naturalist was awakened.

He called his companions, and in spite of their fatigue, the Major, Robert, and he set off on the track of these animals.

His curiosity was excusable, for he had recognized, or thought he had recognized, these birds as "moas" belonging to the species of "dinornis," which many naturalists class with the extinct birds. This, if Paganel was right, would confirm the opinion of Dr. Hochstetter and other travelers on the present existence of the wingless giants of New Zealand.

These moas which Paganel was chasing, the contemporaries of the Megatherium and the Pterodactyles, must have been eighteen feet high. They were huge ostriches, timid too, for they fled with extreme rapidity. But no shot could stay their course. After a few minutes of chase, these fleet-footed moas disappeared among the tall trees, and the sportsmen lost their powder and their pains.

That evening, March 1, Glenarvan and his companions, emerging at last from the immense kauri-forest, camped at the foot of Mount Ikirangi, whose summit rose five thousand five hundred feet into the air.

At this point they had traveled a hundred miles from Maunganamu,

and the shore was still thirty miles away. John Mangles had calculated on accomplishing the whole journey in ten days, but he did not foresee the physical difficulties of the country.

On the whole, owing to the circuits, the obstacles, and the imperfect observations, the journey had been extended by fully one-fifth, and now that they had reached Mount Ikirangi, they were quite worn out.

Two long days of walking were still to be accomplished, during which time all their activity and vigilance would be required, for their way was through a district often frequented by the natives. The little party conquered their weariness, and set out next morning at daybreak.

Between Mount Ikirangi which was left to the right, and Mount Hardy whose summit rose on the left to a height of 3,700 feet, the journey was very trying; for about ten miles the bush was a tangle of "supple-jack," a kind of flexible rope, appropriately called "stifling-creeper," that caught the feet at every step.

For two days, they had to cut their way with an ax through this thousand-headed hydra. Hunting became impossible, and the sportsmen failed in their accustomed tribute.

The provisions were almost exhausted, and there was no means of renewing them; their thirst was increasing by fatigue, and there was no water wherewith to quench it.

The sufferings of Glenarvan and his party became terrible, and for the first time their moral energy threatened to give way. They no longer walked, they dragged themselves along, soulless bodies, animated only by the instinct of self-preservation which survives every other feeling, and in this melancholy plight they reached Point Lottin on the shores of the Pacific.

Here they saw several deserted huts, the ruins of a village lately destroyed by the war, abandoned fields, and everywhere signs of pillage and incendiary fires.

They were toiling painfully along the shore, when they saw, at a distance of about a mile, a band of natives, who rushed toward them brandishing their weapons. Glenarvan, hemmed in by the sea, could not fly, and summoning all his remaining strength he was about to meet the attack, when John Mangles cried:

"A boat! a boat!"

And there, twenty paces off, a canoe with six oars lay on the beach. To launch it, jump in and fly from the dangerous shore, was only a minute's work. John Mangles, McNabbs, Wilson and Mulrady took the oars; Glenarvan the helm; the two women, Robert and Olbinett stretched themselves beside him. In ten minutes the canoe was a quarter of a mile from the shore.

The sea was calm. The fugitives were silent. But John, who did not want to get too far from land, was about to give the order to go up the coast, when he suddenly stopped rowing.

He saw three canoes coming out from behind Point Lottin and evidently about to give chase.

"Out to sea! Out to sea!" he exclaimed. "Better to drown if we must!"

The canoe went fast under her four rowers. For half an hour she kept her distance; but the poor exhausted fellows grew weaker, and the three pursuing boats began to gain sensibly on them. At this moment, scarcely two miles lay between them. It was impossible to avoid the attack of the natives, who were already preparing to fire their long guns.

What was Glenarvan about?--standing up in the stern he was looking toward the horizon for some chimerical help. What did he hope for? What did he wish? Had he a presentiment?

In a moment his eyes gleamed, his hand pointed out into the distance.

"A ship! a ship!" he cried. "My friends, row! row hard!"

Not one of the rowers turned his head--not an oar-stroke must be lost.

Paganel alone rose, and turned his telescope to the point indicated.

"Yes," said he, "a ship! a steamer! they are under full steam! they are coming to us! Found now, brave comrades!"

The fugitives summoned new energy, and for another half hour, keeping their distance, they rowed with hasty strokes.

The steamer came nearer and nearer. They made out her two masts, bare of sails, and the great volumes of black smoke.

Glenarvan, handing the tiller to Robert, seized Paganel's glass, and watched the movements of the steamer.

John Mangles and his companions were lost in wonder when they saw Glenarvan's features contract and grow pale, and the glass drop from his hands. One word explained it.

"The DUNCAN!" exclaimed Glenarvan. "The DUNCAN, and the convicts!"

"The DUNCAN!" cried John, letting go his oar and rising.

"Yes, death on all sides!" murmured Glenarvan, crushed by despair.

It was indeed the yacht, they could not mistake her--the yacht and her bandit crew!

The major could scarcely restrain himself from cursing their destiny.

The canoe was meantime standing still. Where should they go?
Whither fly? What choice was there between the convicts
and the savages?

A shot was fired from the nearest of the native boats, and the ball
struck Wilson's oar.

A few strokes then carried the canoe nearer to the DUNCAN.

The yacht was coming down at full speed, and was not more than half
a mile off.

John Mangles, between two enemies, did not know what to advise,
whither to fly! The two poor ladies on their knees,
prayed in their agony.

The savages kept up a running fire, and shots were raining
round the canoe, when suddenly a loud report was heard,
and a ball from the yacht's cannon passed over their heads,
and now the boat remained motionless between the DUNCAN and
the native canoes.

John Mangles, frenzied with despair, seized his ax. He was about
to scuttle the boat and sink it with his unfortunate companions,
when a cry from Robert arrested his arm.

"Tom Austin! Tom Austin!" the lad shouted. "He is on board!
I see him! He knows us! He is waving his hat."

The ax hung useless in John's hand.

A second ball whistled over his head, and cut in two the nearest
of the three native boats, while a loud hurrah burst forth
on board the DUNCAN.

The savages took flight, fled and regained the shore.

"Come on, Tom, come on!" cried John Mangles in a joyous voice.

And a few minutes after, the ten fugitives, how, they knew not,
were all safe on board the DUNCAN.