

CHAPTER IV A WAGER AND HOW DECIDED

ON the 7th of December, at three A. M., the DUNCAN lay puffing out her smoke in the little harbor ready to start, and a few minutes afterward the anchor was lifted, and the screw set in motion.

By eight o'clock, when the passengers came on deck, the Amsterdam Island had almost disappeared from view behind the mists of the horizon.

This was the last halting-place on the route, and nothing now was between them and the Australian coast but three thousand miles' distance.

Should the west wind continue but a dozen days longer, and the sea remain favorable, the yacht would have reached the end of her voyage.

Mary Grant and her brother could not gaze without emotion at the waves through which the DUNCAN was speeding her course, when they thought that these very same waves must have dashed against the prow of the BRITANNIA but a few days before her shipwreck.

Here, perhaps, Captain Grant, with a disabled ship and diminished crew, had struggled against the tremendous hurricanes of the Indian Ocean, and felt himself driven toward the coast with irresistible force.

The Captain pointed out to Mary the different currents on the ship's chart, and explained to her their constant direction.

Among others there was one running straight to the Australian continent, and its action is equally felt in the Atlantic and Pacific. It was doubtless against this that the BRITANNIA, dismasted and rudderless, had been unable to contend, and consequently been dashed against

the coast, and broken in pieces.

A difficulty about this, however, presented itself.

The last intelligence of Captain Grant was from Callao on the 30th of May, 1862, as appeared in the Mercantile and Shipping Gazette. "How then was it possible that on the 7th of June, only eight days after leaving the shores of Peru, that the BRITANNIA could have found herself in the Indian Ocean? But to this, Paganel, who was consulted on the subject, found a very plausible solution.

It was one evening, about six days after their leaving Amsterdam Island, when they were all chatting together on the poop, that the above-named difficulty was stated by Glenarvan. Paganel made no reply, but went and fetched the document. After perusing it, he still remained silent, simply shrugging his shoulders, as if ashamed of troubling himself about such a trifle.

"Come, my good friend," said Glenarvan, "at least give us an answer."

"No," replied Paganel, "I'll merely ask a question for Captain John to answer."

"And what is it, Monsieur Paganel?" said John Mangles.

"Could a quick ship make the distance in a month over that part

of the Pacific Ocean which lies between America and Australia?"

"Yes, by making two hundred miles in twenty-four hours."

"Would that be an extraordinary rate of speed?"

"Not at all; sailing clippers often go faster."

"Well, then, instead of '7 June' on this document, suppose that one figure has been destroyed by the sea-water, and read '17 June' or '27 June,' and all is explained."

"That's to say," replied Lady Helena, "that between the 31st of May and the 27th of June--"

"Captain Grant could have crossed the Pacific and found himself in the Indian Ocean."

Paganel's theory met with universal acceptance.

"That's one more point cleared up," said Glenarvan. "Thanks to our friend, all that remains to be done now is to get to Australia, and look out for traces of the wreck on the western coast."

"Or the eastern?" said John Mangles.

"Indeed, John, you may be right, for there is nothing in the document to indicate which shore was the scene of the catastrophe, and both points of the continent crossed by the 37th parallel, must, therefore, be explored."

"Then, my Lord, it is doubtful, after all," said Mary.

"Oh no, Miss Mary," John Mangles hastened to reply, seeing the young girl's apprehension. "His Lordship will please to consider that if Captain Grant had gained the shore on the east of Australia, he would almost immediately have found refuge and assistance. The whole of that coast is English, we might say, peopled with colonists. The crew of the BRITANNIA could not have gone ten miles without meeting a fellow-countryman."

"I am quite of your opinion, Captain John," said Paganel. "On the eastern coast Harry Grant would not only have found an English colony easily, but he would certainly have met with some means of transport back to Europe."

"And he would not have found the same resources on the side we are making for?" asked Lady Helena.

"No, madam," replied Paganel; "it is a desert coast, with no communication between it and Melbourne or Adelaide. If the BRITANNIA was wrecked on those rocky shores, she was as much cut off from all chance of help

as if she had been lost on the inhospitable shores of Africa."

"But what has become of my father there, then, all these two years?"
asked Mary Grant.

"My dear Mary," replied Paganel, "you have not the least doubt, have you, that Captain Grant reached the Australian continent after his shipwreck?"

"No, Monsieur Paganel."

"Well, granting that, what became of him? The suppositions we might make are not numerous. They are confined to three. Either Harry Grant and his companions have found their way to the English colonies, or they have fallen into the hands of the natives, or they are lost in the immense wilds of Australia."

"Go on, Paganel," said Lord Glenarvan, as the learned Frenchman made a pause.

"The first hypothesis I reject, then, to begin with, for Harry Grant could not have reached the English colonies, or long ago he would have been back with his children in the good town of Dundee."

"Poor father," murmured Mary, "away from us for two whole years."

"Hush, Mary," said Robert, "Monsieur Paganel will tell us."

"Alas! my boy, I cannot. All that I affirm is, that Captain Grant is in the hands of the natives."

"But these natives," said Lady Helena, hastily, "are they--"

"Reassure yourself, madam," said Paganel, divining her thoughts.

"The aborigines of Australia are low enough in the scale of human intelligence, and most degraded and uncivilized, but they are mild and gentle in disposition, and not sanguinary like their New Zealand neighbors. Though they may be prisoners, their lives have never been threatened, you may be sure.

All travelers are unanimous in declaring that the Australian natives abhor shedding blood, and many a time they have found in them faithful allies in repelling the attacks of evil-disposed convicts far more cruelly inclined."

"You hear what Monsieur Paganel tells us, Mary," said Lady Helena turning to the young girl. "If your father is in the hands of the natives, which seems probable from the document, we shall find him."

"And what if he is lost in that immense country?" asked Mary.

"Well, we'll find him still," exclaimed Paganel, in a confident tone.

"Won't we, friends?"

"Most certainly," replied Glenarvan; and anxious to give a less gloomy turn to the conversation, he added--

"But I won't admit the supposition of his being lost, not for an instant."

"Neither will I," said Paganel.

"Is Australia a big place?" inquired Robert.

"Australia, my boy, is about as large as four-fifths of Europe. It has somewhere about 775,000 HECTARES."

"So much as that?" said the Major.

"Yes, McNabbs, almost to a yard's breadth. Don't you think now it has a right to be called a continent?"

"I do, certainly."

"I may add," continued the SAVANT, "that there are but few accounts of travelers being lost in this immense country. Indeed, I believe Leichardt is the only one of whose fate we are ignorant, and some time before my departure I learned from the Geographical Society that McIntyre had strong hopes

of having discovered traces of him."

"The whole of Australia, then, is not yet explored?"

asked Lady Helena.

"No, madam, but very little of it. This continent is not much better known than the interior of Africa, and yet it is from no lack of enterprising travelers. From 1606 to 1862, more than fifty have been engaged in exploring along the coast and in the interior."

"Oh, fifty!" exclaimed McNabbs incredulously.

"No, no," objected the Major; "that is going too far."

"And I might go farther, McNabbs," replied the geographer, impatient of contradiction.

"Yes, McNabbs, quite that number."

"Farther still, Paganel."

"If you doubt me, I can give you the names."

"Oh, oh," said the Major, coolly. "That's just like you SAVANTS. You stick at nothing."

"Major, will you bet your Purdy-Moore rifle against my telescope?"

"Why not, Paganel, if it would give you any pleasure."

"Done, Major!" exclaimed Paganel. "You may say good-by to your rifle, for it will never shoot another chamois or fox unless I lend it to you, which I shall always be happy to do, by the by."

"And whenever you require the use of your telescope, Paganel, I shall be equally obliging," replied the Major, gravely.

"Let us begin, then; and ladies and gentlemen, you shall be our jury. Robert, you must keep count."

This was agreed upon, and Paganel forthwith commenced.

"Mnemosyne! Goddess of Memory, chaste mother of the Muses!" he exclaimed, "inspire thy faithful servant and fervent worshiper! Two hundred and fifty-eight years ago, my friends, Australia was unknown. Strong suspicions were entertained of the existence of a great southern continent. In the library of your British Museum, Glenarvan, there are two charts, the date of which is 1550, which mention a country south of Asia, called by the Portuguese Great Java. But these charts are not sufficiently authentic. In the seventeenth century, in 1606, Quiros, a Spanish navigator, discovered a country which

he named Australia de Espiritu Santo. Some authors imagine that this was the New Hebrides group, and not Australia. I am not going to discuss the question, however. Count Quiros, Robert, and let us pass on to another."

"ONE," said Robert.

"In that same year, Louis Vas de Torres, the second in command of the fleet of Quiros, pushed further south. But it is to Theodore Hertoge, a Dutchman, that the honor of the great discovery belongs. He touched the western coast of Australia in 25 degrees latitude, and called it Eendracht, after his vessel. From this time navigators increased.

In 1618, Zeachen discovered the northern parts of the coast, and called them Arnheim and Diemen. In 1618, Jan Edels went along the western coast, and christened it by his own name. In 1622, Leuwin went down as far as the cape which became his namesake." And so Paganel continued with name after name until his hearers cried for mercy.

"Stop, Paganel," said Glenarvan, laughing heartily, "don't quite crush poor McNabbs. Be generous; he owns he is vanquished."

"And what about the rifle?" asked the geographer, triumphantly.

"It is yours, Paganel," replied the Major, "and I am very sorry for it;

but your memory might gain an armory by such feats."

"It is certainly impossible to be better acquainted with Australia; not the least name, not even the most trifling fact--"

"As to the most trifling fact, I don't know about that," said the Major, shaking his head.

"What do you mean, McNabbs?" exclaimed Paganel.

"Simply that perhaps all the incidents connected with the discovery of Australia may not be known to you."

"Just fancy," retorted Paganel, throwing back his head proudly.

"Come now. If I name one fact you don't know, will you give me back my rifle?" said McNabbs.

"On the spot, Major."

"Very well, it's a bargain, then."

"Yes, a bargain; that's settled."

"All right. Well now, Paganel, do you know how it is that Australia does not belong to France?"

"But it seems to me--"

"Or, at any rate, do you know what's the reason the English give?"
asked the Major.

"No," replied Paganel, with an air of vexation.

"Just because Captain Baudin, who was by no means a timid man, was so afraid in 1802, of the croaking of the Australian frogs, that he raised his anchor with all possible speed, and quitted the coast, never to return."

"What!" exclaimed Paganel. "Do they actually give that version of it in England? But it is just a bad joke."

"Bad enough, certainly, but still it is history in the United Kingdom."

"It's an insult!" exclaimed the patriotic geographer;
"and they relate that gravely?"

"I must own it is the case," replied Glenarvan, amidst a general outburst of laughter. "Do you mean to say you have never heard of it before?"

"Never! But I protest against it. Besides, the English call

us 'frog-eaters.' Now, in general, people are not afraid of what they eat."

"It is said, though, for all that," replied McNabbs. So the Major kept his famous rifle after all.