

CHAPTER VII THE QUARTERMASTER OF THE "BRITANNIA"

THE surprise caused by these words cannot be described.

Glenarvan sprang to his feet, and pushing back his seat, exclaimed:

"Who spoke?"

"I did," said one of the servants, at the far end of the table.

"You, Ayrton!" replied his master, not less bewildered than Glenarvan.

"Yes, it was I," rejoined Ayrton in a firm tone, though somewhat agitated voice. "A Scotchman like yourself, my Lord, and one of the shipwrecked crew of the BRITANNIA."

The effect of such a declaration may be imagined.

Mary Grant fell back, half-fainting, in Lady Helena's arms, overcome by joyful emotion, and Robert, and Mangles, and Paganel started up and toward the man that Paddy O'Moore had addressed as AYRTON. He was a coarse-looking fellow, about forty-five years of age, with very bright eyes, though half-hidden beneath thick, overhanging brows.

In spite of extreme leanness there was an air of unusual strength about him. He seemed all bone and nerves, or, to use a Scotch expression, as if he had not wasted time in making fat. He was broad-shouldered and of middle height, and though his

features were coarse, his face was so full of intelligence and energy and decision, that he gave one a favorable impression. The interest he excited was still further heightened by the marks of recent suffering imprinted on his countenance. It was evident that he had endured long and severe hardships, and that he had borne them bravely and come off victor.

"You are one of the shipwrecked sailors of the BRITANNIA?"
was Glenarvan's first question.

"Yes, my Lord; Captain Grant's quartermaster."

"And saved with him after the shipwreck?"

"No, my Lord, no. I was separated from him at that terrible moment, for I was swept off the deck as the ship struck."

"Then you are not one of the two sailors mentioned in the document?"

"No; I was not aware of the existence of the document.

The captain must have thrown it into the sea when I was no longer on board."

"But the captain? What about the captain?"

"I believed he had perished; gone down with all his crew.

I imagined myself the sole survivor."

"But you said just now, Captain Grant was living."

"No, I said, 'if the captain is living.'"

"And you added, 'he is on the Australian continent.'"

"And, indeed, he cannot be anywhere else."

"Then you don't know where he is?"

"No, my Lord. I say again, I supposed he was buried beneath the waves, or dashed to pieces against the rocks. It was from you I learned that he was still alive."

"What then do you know?"

"Simply this--if Captain Grant is alive, he is in Australia."

"Where did the shipwreck occur?" asked Major McNabbs.

This should have been the first question, but in the excitement caused by the unexpected incident, Glenarvan cared more to know where the captain was, than where the BRITANNIA had been lost. After the Major's inquiry, however, Glenarvan's examination proceeded

more logically, and before long all the details of the event stood out clearly before the minds of the company.

To the question put by the Major, Ayrton replied:

"When I was swept off the forecastle, when I was hauling in the jib-boom, the BRITANNIA was running right on the Australian coast. She was not more than two cables' length from it and consequently she must have struck just there."

"In latitude 37 degrees?" asked John Mangles.

"Yes, in latitude 37 degrees."

"On the west coast?"

"No, on the east coast," was the prompt reply.

"And at what date?"

"It was on the night of the 27th of June, 1862."

"Exactly, just exactly," exclaimed Glenarvan.

"You see, then, my Lord," continued Ayrton, "I might justly say, If Captain Grant is alive, he is on the Australian continent,

and it is useless looking for him anywhere else."

"And we will look for him there, and find him too, and save him," exclaimed Paganel. "Ah, precious document," he added, with perfect NAIVETE, "you must own you have fallen into the hands of uncommonly shrewd people."

But, doubtless, nobody heard his flattering words, for Glenarvan and Lady Helena, and Mary Grant, and Robert, were too much engrossed with Ayrton to listen to anyone else. They pressed round him and grasped his hands.

It seemed as if this man's presence was the sure pledge of Harry Grant's deliverance. If this sailor had escaped the perils of the shipwreck, why should not the captain?

Ayrton was quite sanguine as to his existence; but on what part of the continent he was to be found, that he could not say.

The replies the man gave to the thousand questions that assailed him on all sides were remarkably intelligent and exact.

All the while he spake, Mary held one of his hands in hers.

This sailor was a companion of her father's, one of the crew of the BRITANNIA. He had lived with Harry Grant, crossed the seas with him and shared his dangers. Mary could not keep her eyes off his face, rough and homely though it was, and she wept for joy.

Up to this time no one had ever thought of doubting either

the veracity or identity of the quartermaster; but the Major, and perhaps John Mangles, now began to ask themselves if this Ayrton's word was to be absolutely believed.

There was something suspicious about this unexpected meeting.

Certainly the man had mentioned facts and dates which corresponded, and the minuteness of his details was most striking.

Still exactness of details was no positive proof.

Indeed, it has been noticed that a falsehood has sometimes gained ground by being exceedingly particular in minutiae.

McNabbs, therefore, prudently refrained from committing himself by expressing any opinion.

John Mangles, however, was soon convinced when he heard Ayrton speak to the young girl about her father. He knew Mary and Robert quite well. He had seen them in Glasgow when the ship sailed.

He remembered them at the farewell breakfast given on board the BRITANNIA

to the captain's friends, at which Sheriff McIntyre was present.

Robert, then a boy of ten years old, had been given into his charge, and he ran away and tried to climb the rigging.

"Yes, that I did, it is quite right," said Robert.

He went on to mention several other trifling incidents, without attaching the importance to them that John Mangles did, and when he stopped Mary Grant said, in her soft voice:

"Oh, go on, Mr. Ayrton, tell us more about our father."

The quartermaster did his best to satisfy the poor girl, and Glenarvan did not interrupt him, though a score of questions far more important crowded into his mind.

Lady Helena made him look at Mary's beaming face, and the words he was about to utter remained unspoken.

Ayrton gave an account of the BRITANNIA'S voyage across the Pacific. Mary knew most of it before, as news of the ship had come regularly up to the month of May, 1862. In the course of the year Harry Grant had touched at all the principal ports. He had been to the Hebrides, to New Guinea, New Zealand, and New Caledonia, and had succeeded in finding an important point on the western coast of Papua, where the establishment of a Scotch colony seemed to him easy, and its prosperity certain. A good port on the Molucca and Philippine route must attract ships, especially when the opening of the Suez Canal would have supplanted the Cape route. Harry Grant was one of those who appreciated the great work of M. De Lesseps, and would not allow political rivalries to interfere with international interests.

After reconnoitering Papua, the BRITANNIA went to provision herself at Callao, and left that port on the 30th of May, 1862, to return to Europe by the Indian Ocean and the Cape. Three weeks afterward, his vessel was disabled by a fearful storm in which they were caught, and obliged to cut

away the masts. A leak sprang in the hold, and could not be stopped. The crew were too exhausted to work the pumps, and for eight days the BRITANNIA was tossed about in the hurricane like a shuttlecock. She had six feet of water in her hold, and was gradually sinking. The boats had been all carried away by the tempest; death stared them in the face, when, on the night of the 22d of June, as Paganel had rightly supposed, they came in sight of the eastern coast of Australia.

The ship soon neared the shore, and presently dashed violently against it. Ayrton was swept off by a wave, and thrown among the breakers, where he lost consciousness. When he recovered, he found himself in the hands of natives, who dragged him away into the interior of the country. Since that time he had never heard the BRITANNIA's name mentioned, and reasonably enough came to the conclusion that she had gone down with all hands off the dangerous reefs of Twofold Bay.

This ended Ayrton's recital, and more than once sorrowful exclamations were evoked by the story. The Major could not, in common justice, doubt its authenticity. The sailor was then asked to narrate his own personal history, which was short and simple enough. He had been carried by a tribe of natives four hundred miles north of the 37th parallel. He spent a miserable existence there--not that he was ill-treated, but the natives themselves lived miserably. He passed two long years of painful slavery among them, but always cherished in his heart the hope of one day regaining his freedom,

and watching for the slightest opportunity that might turn up, though he knew that his flight would be attended with innumerable dangers.

At length one night in October, 1864, he managed to escape the vigilance of the natives, and took refuge in the depths of immense forests.

For a whole month he subsisted on roots, edible ferns and mimosa gums, wandering through vast solitudes, guiding himself by the sun during the day and by the stars at night. He went on, though often almost despairingly, through bogs and rivers, and across mountains, till he had traversed the whole of the uninhabited part of the continent, where only a few bold travelers have ventured; and at last, in an exhausted and all but dying condition, he reached the hospitable dwelling of Paddy O'Moore, where he said he had found a happy home in exchange for his labor.

"And if Ayrton speaks well of me," said the Irish settler, when the narrative ended, "I have nothing but good to say of him. He is an honest, intelligent fellow and a good worker; and as long as he pleases, Paddy O'Moore's house shall be his."

Ayrton thanked him by a gesture, and waited silently for any fresh question that might be put to him, though he thought to himself that he surely must have satisfied all legitimate curiosity.

What could remain to be said that he had not said a hundred

times already. Glenarvan was just about to open a discussion about their future plan of action, profiting by this rencontre with Ayrton, and by the information he had given them, when Major McNabbs, addressing the sailor said, "You were quartermaster, you say, on the BRITANNIA?"

"Yes," replied Ayrton, without the least hesitation.

But as if conscious that a certain feeling of mistrust, however slight, had prompted the inquiry, he added, "I have my shipping papers with me; I saved them from the wreck."

He left the room immediately to fetch his official document, and, though hardly absent a minute, Paddy O'Moore managed to say, "My Lord, you may trust Ayrton; I vouch for his being an honest man. He has been two months now in my service, and I have never had once to find fault with him.

I knew all this story of his shipwreck and his captivity.

He is a true man, worthy of your entire confidence."

Glenarvan was on the point of replying that he had never doubted his good faith, when the man came in and brought his engagement written out in due form. It was a paper signed by the shipowners and Captain Grant. Mary recognized her father's writing at once.

It was to certify that "Tom Ayrton, able-bodied seaman, was engaged as quartermaster on board the three-mast vessel,

the BRITANNIA, Glasgow."

There could not possibly be the least doubt now of Ayrton's identity, for it would have been difficult to account for his possession of the document if he were not the man named in it.

"Now then," said Glenarvan, "I wish to ask everyone's opinion as to what is best to be done. Your advice, Ayrton, will be particularly valuable, and I shall be much obliged if you would let us have it."

After a few minutes' thought, Ayrton replied--"I thank you, my Lord, for the confidence you show towards me, and I hope to prove worthy of it. I have some knowledge of the country, and the habits of the natives, and if I can be of any service to you--"

"Most certainly you can," interrupted Glenarvan.

"I think with you," resumed Ayrton, "that the captain and his two sailors have escaped alive from the wreck, but since they have not found their way to the English settlement, nor been seen any where, I have no doubt that their fate has been similar to my own, and that they are prisoners in the hands of some of the native tribes."

"That's exactly what I have always argued," said Paganel.

"The shipwrecked men were taken prisoners, as they feared.

But must we conclude without question that, like yourself,

they have been dragged away north of the 37th parallel?"

"I should suppose so, sir; for hostile tribes would hardly remain anywhere near the districts under the British rule."

"That will complicate our search," said Glenarvan, somewhat disconcerted.

"How can we possibly find traces of the captives in the heart of so vast a continent?"

No one replied, though Lady Helena's questioning glances at her companions seemed to press for an answer. Paganel even was silent. His ingenuity for once was at fault. John Mangles paced the cabin with great strides, as if he fancied himself on the deck of his ship, evidently quite nonplussed.

"And you, Mr. Ayrton," said Lady Helena at last, "what would you do?"

"Madam," replied Ayrton, readily enough, "I should re-embark in the DUNCAN, and go right to the scene of the catastrophe. There I should be guided by circumstances, and by any chance indications we might discover."

"Very good," returned Glenarvan; "but we must wait till the DUNCAN is repaired."

"Ah, she has been injured then?" said Ayrton.

"Yes," replied Mangles.

"To any serious extent?"

"No; but such injuries as require more skilful workmanship than we have on board. One of the branches of the screw is twisted, and we cannot get it repaired nearer than Melbourne."

"Well, let the ship go to Melbourne then," said Paganel, "and we will go without her to Twofold Bay."

"And how?" asked Mangles.

"By crossing Australia as we crossed America, keeping along the 37th parallel."

"But the DUNCAN?" repeated Ayrton, as if particularly anxious on that score.

"The DUNCAN can rejoin us, or we can rejoin her, as the case may be. Should we discover Captain Grant in the course of our journey, we can all return together to Melbourne. If we have to go on to the coast, on the contrary, then the DUNCAN can come to us there. Who has any objection to make? Have you, Major?"

"No, not if there is a practicable route across Australia."

"So practicable, that I propose Lady Helena and Miss Grant should accompany us."

"Are you speaking seriously?" asked Glenarvan.

"Perfectly so, my Lord. It is a journey of 350 miles, not more. If we go twelve miles a day it will barely take us a month, just long enough to put the vessel in trim. If we had to cross the continent in a lower latitude, at its wildest part, and traverse immense deserts, where there is no water and where the heat is tropical, and go where the most adventurous travelers have never yet ventured, that would be a different matter. But the 37th parallel cuts only through the province of Victoria, quite an English country, with roads and railways, and well populated almost everywhere. It is a journey you might make, almost, in a chaise, though a wagon would be better. It is a mere trip from London to Edinburgh, nothing more."

"What about wild beasts, though?" asked Glenarvan, anxious to go into all the difficulties of the proposal.

"There are no wild beasts in Australia."

"And how about the savages?"

"There are no savages in this latitude, and if there were, they are not cruel, like the New Zealanders."

"And the convicts?"

"There are no convicts in the southern provinces, only in the eastern colonies. The province of Victoria not only refused to admit them, but passed a law to prevent any ticket-of-leave men from other provinces from entering her territories.

This very year the Government threatened to withdraw its subsidy from the Peninsular Company if their vessels continued to take in coal in those western parts of Australia where convicts are admitted. What! Don't you know that, and you an Englishman?"

"In the first place, I beg leave to say I am not an Englishman," replied Glenarvan.

"What M. Paganel says is perfectly correct," said Paddy O'Moore. "Not only the province of Victoria, but also Southern Australia, Queensland, and even Tasmania, have agreed to expel convicts from their territories. Ever since I have been on this farm, I have never heard of one in this Province."

"And I can speak for myself. I have never come across one."

"You see then, friends," went on Jacques Paganel, "there are few if any savages, no ferocious animals, no convicts, and there are not many countries of Europe for which you can say as much. Well, will you go?"

"What do you think, Helena?" asked Glenarvan.

"What we all think, dear Edward," replied Lady Helena, turning toward her companions; "let us be off at once."