

CHAPTER VIII PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY

GLENARVAN never lost much time between adopting an idea and carrying it out. As soon as he consented to Paganel's proposition, he gave immediate orders to make arrangements for the journey with as little delay as possible. The time of starting was fixed for the 22d of December, the next day but one.

What results might not come out of this journey. The presence of Harry Grant had become an indisputable fact, and the chances of finding him had increased. Not that anyone expected to discover the captain exactly on the 37th parallel, which they intended strictly to follow, but they might come upon his track, and at all events, they were going to the actual spot where the wreck had occurred. That was the principal point.

Besides, if Ayrton consented to join them and act as their guide through the forests of the province of Victoria and right to the eastern coast, they would have a fresh chance of success. Glenarvan was sensible of this, and asked his host whether he would have any great objection to his asking Ayrton to accompany them, for he felt particularly desirous of securing the assistance of Harry Grant's old companion.

Paddy O'Moore consented, though he would regret the loss

of his excellent servant.

"Well, then, Ayrton, will you come with us in our search expedition?"

Ayrton did not reply immediately. He even showed signs of hesitation; but at last, after due reflection, said, "Yes, my Lord, I will go with you, and if I can not take you to Captain Grant, I can at least take you to the very place where his ship struck."

"Thanks, Ayrton."

"One question, my Lord."

"Well?"

"Where will you meet the DUNCAN again?"

"At Melbourne, unless we traverse the whole continent from coast to coast."

"But the captain?"

"The captain will await my instructions in the port of Melbourne."

"You may depend on me then, my Lord."

"I will, Ayrton."

The quartermaster was warmly thanked by the passengers of the DUNCAN, and the children loaded him with caresses.

Everyone rejoiced in his decision except the Irishman, who lost in him an intelligent and faithful helper.

But Paddy understood the importance Glenarvan attached to the presence of the man, and submitted. The whole party then returned to the ship, after arranging a rendezvous with Ayrton, and ordering him to procure the necessary means of conveyance across the country.

When John Mangles supported the proposition of Paganel, he took for granted that he should accompany the expedition. He began to speak to Glenarvan at once about it, and adduced all sorts of arguments to advance his cause--his devotion to Lady Helena and his Lordship, how useful could he be in organizing the party, and how useless on board the DUNCAN; everything, in fact, but the main reason, and that he had no need to bring forward.

"I'll only ask you one question, John," said Glenarvan. "Have you entire confidence in your chief officer?"

"Absolute," replied Mangles, "Tom Austin is a good sailor.

He will take the ship to her destination, see that the repairs are skilfully executed, and bring her back on the appointed day.

Tom is a slave to duty and discipline. Never would he take it upon himself to alter or retard the execution of an order. Your Lordship may rely on him as on myself."

"Very well then, John," replied Glenarvan. "You shall go with us, for it would be advisable," he added, smiling, "that you should be there when we find Mary Grant's father."

"Oh! your Lordship," murmured John, turning pale. He could say no more, but grasped Lord Glenarvan's hand.

Next day, John Mangles and the ship's carpenter, accompanied by sailors carrying provisions, went back to Paddy O'Moore's house to consult the Irishman about the best method of transport.

All the family met him, ready to give their best help.

Ayrton was there, and gave the benefit of his experience.

On one point both he and Paddy agreed, that the journey should be made in a bullock-wagon by the ladies, and that the gentlemen should ride on horseback. Paddy could furnish both bullocks and vehicle.

The vehicle was a cart twenty feet long, covered over by a tilt, and resting on four large wheels without spokes or felloes, or iron tires-- in a word, plain wooden discs. The front and hinder part were connected by means of a rude mechanical contrivance, which did not allow of the vehicle turning quickly. There was a pole in front thirty-five feet long, to which the bullocks were to be yoked in couples.

These animals were able to draw both with head and neck, as their yoke was fastened on the nape of the neck, and to this a collar was attached by an iron peg. It required great skill to drive such a long, narrow, shaky concern, and to guide such a team by a goad; but Ayrton had served his apprenticeship to it on the Irishman's farm, and Paddy could answer for his competency. The role of conductor was therefore assigned to him.

There were no springs to the wagon, and, consequently, it was not likely to be very comfortable; but, such as it was, they had to take it.

But if the rough construction could not be altered, John Mangles resolved that the interior should be made as easy as possible.

His first care was to divide it into two compartments by a wooden partition. The back one was intended for the provisions and luggage, and M. Olbinett's portable kitchen. The front was set apart especially for the ladies, and, under the carpenter's hands, was to be speedily converted into a comfortable room, covered with a thick carpet, and fitted up with a toilet table and two couches. Thick leather curtains shut in this apartment, and protected the occupants from the chilliness of the nights.

In case of necessity, the gentlemen might shelter themselves here, when the violent rains came on, but a tent was to be their usual resting-place when the caravan camped for the night.

John Mangles exercised all his ingenuity in furnishing the small space with everything that the two ladies could possibly require, and he succeeded so well, that neither Lady Helena nor Mary had much

reason to regret leaving their cosy cabins on board the DUNCAN.

For the rest of the party, the preparations were soon made, for they needed much less. Strong horses were provided for Lord Glenarvan, Paganel, Robert Grant, McNabbs, and John Mangles; also for the two sailors, Wilson and Mulrady, who were to accompany their captain. Ayrton's place was, of course, to be in front of the wagon, and M. Olbinett, who did not much care for equitation, was to make room for himself among the baggage. Horses and bullocks were grazing in the Irishman's meadows, ready to fetch at a moment's notice.

After all arrangements were made, and the carpenter set to work, John Mangles escorted the Irishman and his family back to the vessel, for Paddy wished to return the visit of Lord Glenarvan. Ayrton thought proper to go too, and about four o'clock the party came over the side of the DUNCAN.

They were received with open arms. Glenarvan would not be outstripped in politeness, and invited his visitors to stop and dine.

His hospitality was willingly accepted. Paddy was quite amazed at the splendor of the saloon, and was loud in admiration of the fitting up of the cabins, and the carpets and hangings, as well as of the polished maple-wood of the upper deck.

Ayrton's approbation was much less hearty, for he considered it mere costly superfluity.

But when he examined the yacht with a sailor's eye, the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA was as enthusiastic about it as Paddy. He went down into the hold, inspected the screw department and the engine-room, examining the engine thoroughly, and inquired about its power and consumption. He explored the coal-bunkers, the store-room, the powder-store, and armory, in which last he seemed to be particularly attracted by a cannon mounted on the forecastle. Glenarvan saw he had to do with a man who understood such matters, as was evident from his questions. Ayrton concluded his investigations by a survey of the masts and rigging.

"You have a fine vessel, my Lord," he said after his curiosity was satisfied.

"A good one, and that is best," replied Glenarvan.

"And what is her tonnage?"

"Two hundred and ten tons."

"I don't think I am far out," continued Ayrton, "in judging her speed at fifteen knots. I should say she could do that easily."

"Say seventeen," put in John Mangles, "and you've hit the mark."

"Seventeen!" exclaimed the quartermaster. "Why, not a man-of-war--"

not the best among them, I mean--could chase her!"

"Not one," replied Mangles. "The DUNCAN is a regular racing yacht, and would never let herself be beaten."

"Even at sailing?" asked Ayrton.

"Even at sailing."

"Well, my Lord, and you too, captain," returned Ayrton, "allow a sailor who knows what a ship is worth, to compliment you on yours."

"Stay on board of her, then, Ayrton," said Glenarvan; "it rests with yourself to call it yours."

"I will think of it, my Lord," was all Ayrton's reply.

Just then M. Olbinett came to announce dinner, and his Lordship repaired with his guests to the saloon.

"That Ayrton is an intelligent man," said Paganel to the Major.

"Too intelligent!" muttered McNabbs, who, without any apparent reason, had taken a great dislike to the face and manners of the quartermaster.

During the dinner, Ayrton gave some interesting details about the Australian continent, which he knew perfectly. He asked how many sailors were going to accompany the expedition, and seemed astonished to hear that only two were going. He advised Glenarvan to take all his best men, and even urged him to do it, which advice, by the way, ought to have removed the Major's suspicion.

"But," said Glenarvan, "our journey is not dangerous, is it?"

"Not at all," replied Ayrton, quickly.

"Well then, we'll have all the men we can on board. Hands will be wanted to work the ship, and to help in the repairs. Besides, it is of the utmost importance that she should meet us to the very day, at whatever place may be ultimately selected. Consequently, we must not lessen her crew."

Ayrton said nothing more, as if convinced his Lordship was right.

When evening came, Scotch and Irish separated. Ayrton and Paddy O'Moore and family returned home. Horses and wagons were to be ready the next day, and eight o'clock in the morning was fixed for starting.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant soon made their preparations.

They had less to do than Jacques Paganel, for he spent half the night in arranging, and wiping, and rubbing up the lenses of his telescope. Of course, next morning he slept on till the Major's stentorian voice roused him.

The luggage was already conveyed to the farm, thanks to John Mangles, and a boat was waiting to take the passengers. They were soon seated, and the young captain gave his final orders to Tom Austin, his chief officer. He impressed upon him that he was to wait at Melbourne for Lord Glenarvan's commands, and to obey them scrupulously, whatever they might be.

The old sailor told John he might rely on him, and, in the name of the men, begged to offer his Lordship their best wishes for the success of this new expedition.

A storm of hurrahs burst forth from the yacht as the boat rowed off. In ten minutes the shore was reached, and a quarter of an hour afterward the Irishman's farm. All was ready. Lady Helena was enchanted with her installation. The huge chariot, with its primitive wheels and massive planks, pleased her particularly. The six bullocks, yoked in pairs, had a patriarchal air about them which took her fancy. Ayerton, goad in hand, stood waiting the orders of this new master.

"My word," said Paganel, "this is a famous vehicle;

it beats all the mail-coaches in the world. I don't know a better fashion of traveling than in a mountebank's caravan-- a movable house, which goes or stops wherever you please. What can one wish better? The Samaritians understood that, and never traveled in any other way."

"Monsieur Paganel," said Lady Helena, "I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in my SALONS."

"Assuredly, madam, I should count it an honor. Have you fixed the day?"

"I shall be at home every day to my friends," replied Lady Helena; "and you are--"

"The most devoted among them all," interrupted Paganel, gaily.

These mutual compliments were interrupted by the arrival of the seven horses, saddled and ready. They were brought by Paddy's sons, and Lord Glenarvan paid the sum stipulated for his various purchases, adding his cordial thanks, which the worthy Irishman valued at least as much as his golden guineas.

The signal was given to start, and Lady Helena and Mary took their places in the reserved compartment. Ayrton seated himself in front, and Olbinett scrambled in among the luggage. The rest of the party, well armed with carbines and revolvers, mounted their horses.

Ayrton gave a peculiar cry, and his team set off. The wagon shook and the planks creaked, and the axles grated in the naves of the wheels; and before long the hospitable farm of the Irishman was out of sight.