

## CHAPTER XVI WHY THE "DUNCAN" WENT TO NEW ZEALAND

IT would be vain to attempt to depict the feelings of Glenarvan and his friends when the songs of old Scotia fell on their ears. The moment they set foot on the deck of the DUNCAN, the piper blew his bagpipes, and commenced the national pibroch of the Malcolm clan, while loud hurrahs rent the air.

Glenarvan and his whole party, even the Major himself, were crying and embracing each other. They were delirious with joy. The geographer was absolutely mad. He frisked about, telescope in hand, pointing it at the last canoe approaching the shore.

But at the sight of Glenarvan and his companions, with their clothing in rags, and thin, haggard faces, bearing marks of horrible sufferings, the crew ceased their noisy demonstrations. These were specters who had returned--not the bright, adventurous travelers who had left the yacht three months before, so full of hope! Chance, and chance only, had brought them back to the deck of the yacht they never thought to see again. And in what a state of exhaustion and feebleness. But before thinking of fatigue, or attending to the imperious demands of hunger and thirst, Glenarvan questioned Tom Austin about his being on this coast.

Why had the DUNCAN come to the eastern coast of New Zealand? How was it not in the hands of Ben Joyce? By what providential fatality had God brought them in the track of the fugitives?

Why? how? and for what purpose? Tom was stormed with questions on all sides. The old sailor did not know which to listen to first, and at last resolved to hear nobody but Glenarvan, and to answer nobody but him.

"But the convicts?" inquired Glenarvan. "What did you do with them?"

"The convicts?" replied Tom, with the air of a man who does not in the least understand what he is being asked.

"Yes, the wretches who attacked the yacht."

"What yacht? Your Honor's?"

"Why, of course, Tom. The DUNCAN, and Ben Joyce, who came on board."

"I don't know this Ben Joyce, and have never seen him."

"Never seen him!" exclaimed Paganel, stupefied at the old sailor's replies. "Then pray tell me, Tom, how it is that the DUNCAN is cruising at this moment on the coast of New Zealand?"

But if Glenarvan and his friends were totally at a loss to understand the bewilderment of the old sailor, what was their amazement when he replied in a calm voice:

"The DUNCAN is cruising here by your Honor's orders."

"By my orders?" cried Glenarvan.

"Yes, my Lord. I only acted in obedience to the instructions sent in your letter of January fourteenth."

"My letter! my letter!" exclaimed Glenarvan.

The ten travelers pressed closer round Tom Austin, devouring him with their eyes. The letter dated from Snowy River had reached the DUNCAN, then.

"Let us come to explanations, pray, for it seems to me I am dreaming. You received a letter, Tom?"

"Yes, a letter from your Honor."

"At Melbourne?"

"At Melbourne, just as our repairs were completed."

"And this letter?"

"It was not written by you, but bore your signature, my Lord."

"Just so; my letter was brought by a convict called Ben Joyce."

"No, by a sailor called Ayrton, a quartermaster on the BRITANNIA."

"Yes, Ayrton or Ben Joyce, one and the same individual.

Well, and what were the contents of this letter?"

"It contained orders to leave Melbourne without delay, and go and cruise on the eastern coast of--"

"Australia!" said Glenarvan with such vehemence that the old sailor was somewhat disconcerted.

"Of Australia?" repeated Tom, opening his eyes. "No, but New Zealand."

"Australia, Tom! Australia!" they all cried with one voice.

Austin's head began to feel in a whirl. Glenarvan spoke with such assurance that he thought after all he must have made a mistake in reading the letter. Could a faithful, exact old servant like himself have been guilty of such a thing!

He turned red and looked quite disturbed.

"Never mind, Tom," said Lady Helena. "God so willed it."

"But, no, madam, pardon me," replied old Tom. "No, it is impossible, I was not mistaken. Ayrton read the letter as I did, and it was he, on the contrary, who wished to bring me to the Australian coast."

"Ayrton!" cried Glenarvan.

"Yes, Ayrton himself. He insisted it was a mistake: that you meant to order me to Twofold Bay."

"Have you the letter still, Tom?" asked the Major, extremely interested in this mystery.

"Yes, Mr. McNabbs," replied Austin. "I'll go and fetch it."

He ran at once to his cabin in the fore-castle. During his momentary absence they gazed at each other in silence, all but the Major, who crossed his arms and said:

"Well, now, Paganel, you must own this would be going a little too far."

"What?" growled Paganel, looking like a gigantic note of interrogation, with his spectacles on his forehead and his stooping back.

Austin returned directly with the letter written by Paganel and signed by Glenarvan.

"Will your Honor read it?" he said, handing it to him.

Glenarvan took the letter and read as follows:

"Order to Tom Austin to put out to sea without delay, and to take the Duncan, by latitude 37 degrees to the eastern coast of New Zealand!"

"New Zealand!" cried Paganel, leaping up.

And he seized the letter from Glenarvan, rubbed his eyes, pushed down his spectacles on his nose, and read it for himself.

"New Zealand!" he repeated in an indescribable tone, letting the order slip between his fingers.

That same moment he felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and turning round found himself face to face with the Major, who said in a grave tone:

"Well, my good Paganel, after all, it is a lucky thing you did not send the DUNCAN to Cochin China!"

This pleasantry finished the poor geographer. The crew burst out into loud Homeric laughter. Paganel ran about like a madman, seized his head with both hands and tore his hair. He neither knew what he was doing nor what he wanted to do. He rushed down the poop stairs mechanically and paced the deck, nodding to himself and going straight before without aim or object till he reached the forecastle. There his feet got entangled in a coil of rope. He stumbled and fell, accidentally catching hold of a rope with both hands in his fall.

Suddenly a tremendous explosion was heard. The forecastle gun had gone off, riddling the quiet calm of the waves with a volley of small shot. The unfortunate Paganel had caught hold of the cord of the loaded gun. The geographer was thrown down the forecastle ladder and disappeared below.

A cry of terror succeeded the surprise produced by the explosion. Everybody thought something terrible must have happened. The sailors rushed between decks and lifted up Paganel, almost bent double. The geographer uttered no sound.

They carried his long body onto the poop. His companions were in despair. The Major, who was always the surgeon on great occasions, began to strip the unfortunate that he might dress his wounds; but he had scarcely put his hands on the dying man when he started

up as if touched by an electrical machine.

"Never! never!" he exclaimed, and pulling his ragged coat tightly round him, he began buttoning it up in a strangely excited manner.

"But, Paganel," began the Major.

"No, I tell you!"

"I must examine--"

"You shall not examine."

"You may perhaps have broken--" continued McNabbs.

"Yes," continued Paganel, getting up on his long legs, "but what I have broken the carpenter can mend."

"What is it, then?"

"There."

Bursts of laughter from the crew greeted this speech.

Paganel's friends were quite reassured about him now.

They were satisfied that he had come off safe and sound from his adventure with the forecastle gun.

"At any rate," thought the Major, "the geographer is wonderfully bashful."

But now Paganel was recovered a little, he had to reply to a question he could not escape.

"Now, Paganel," said Glenarvan, "tell us frankly all about it.

I own that your blunder was providential. It is sure and certain that but for you the DUNCAN would have fallen into the hands of the convicts; but for you we should have been recaptured by the Maories. But for my sake tell me by what supernatural aberration of mind you were induced to write New Zealand instead of Australia?"

"Well, upon my oath," said Paganel, "it is--"

But the same instant his eyes fell on Mary and Robert Grant, and he stopped short and then went on:

"What would you have me say, my dear Glenarvan? I am mad, I am an idiot, an incorrigible fellow, and I shall live and die the most terrible absent man. I can't change my skin."

"Unless you get flayed alive."

"Get flayed alive!" cried the geographer, with a furious look.

"Is that a personal allusion?"

"An allusion to what?" asked McNabbs, quietly. This was all that passed. The mystery of the DUNCAN'S presence on the coast was explained, and all that the travelers thought about now was to get back to their comfortable cabins, and to have breakfast.

However, Glenarvan and John Mangles stayed behind with Tom Austin after the others had retired. They wished to put some further questions to him.

"Now, then, old Austin," said Glenarvan, "tell me, didn't it strike you as strange to be ordered to go and cruise on the coast of New Zealand?"

"Yes, your Honor," replied Tom. "I was very much surprised, but it is not my custom to discuss any orders I receive, and I obeyed. Could I do otherwise? If some catastrophe had occurred through not carrying out your injunctions to the letter, should not I have been to blame? Would you have acted differently, captain?"

"No, Tom," replied John Mangles.

"But what did you think?" asked Glenarvan.

"I thought, your Honor, that in the interest of Harry Grant, it was necessary to go where I was told to go. I thought that in

consequence of fresh arrangements, you were to sail over to New Zealand, and that I was to wait for you on the east coast of the island. Moreover, on leaving Melbourne, I kept our destination a secret, and the crew only knew it when we were right out at sea, and the Australian continent was finally out of sight. But one circumstance occurred which greatly perplexed me."

"What was it, Tom?" asked Glenarvan.

"Just this, that when the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA heard our destination--"

"Ayrton!" cried Glenarvan. "Then he is on board?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"Ayrton here?" repeated Glenarvan, looking at John Mangles.

"God has so willed!" said the young captain.

In an instant, like lightning, Ayrton's conduct, his long-planned treachery, Glenarvan's wound, Mulrady's assassination, the sufferings of the expedition in the marshes of the Snowy River, the whole past life of the miscreant, flashed before the eyes of the two men. And now, by the strangest concourse of events, the convict was in their power.

"Where is he?" asked Glenarvan eagerly.

"In a cabin in the forecastle, and under guard."

"Why was he imprisoned?"

"Because when Ayrton heard the vessel was going to New Zealand, he was in a fury; because he tried to force me to alter the course of the ship; because he threatened me; and, last of all, because he incited my men to mutiny. I saw clearly he was a dangerous individual, and I must take precautions against him."

"And since then?"

"Since then he has remained in his cabin without attempting to go out."

"That's well, Tom."

Just at this moment Glenarvan and John Mangles were summoned to the saloon

where breakfast, which they so sorely needed, was awaiting them.

They seated themselves at the table and spoke no more of Ayrton.

But after the meal was over, and the guests were refreshed

and invigorated, and they all went upon deck, Glenarvan acquainted them with the fact of the quartermaster's presence on board, and at the same time announced his intention of having him brought before them.

"May I beg to be excused from being present at his examination?" said Lady Helena. "I confess, dear Edward, it would be extremely painful for me to see the wretched man."

"He must be confronted with us, Helena," replied Lord Glenarvan; "I beg you will stay. Ben Joyce must see all his victims face to face."

Lady Helena yielded to his wish. Mary Grant sat beside her, near Glenarvan. All the others formed a group round them, the whole party that had been compromised so seriously by the treachery of the convict. The crew of the yacht, without understanding the gravity of the situation, kept profound silence.

"Bring Ayrton here," said Glenarvan.