

CHAPTER XVII AYRTON'S OBSTINACY

AYRTON came. He crossed the deck with a confident tread, and mounted the steps to the poop. His eyes were gloomy, his teeth set, his fists clenched convulsively.

His appearance betrayed neither effrontery nor timidity.

When he found himself in the presence of Lord Glenarvan he folded his arms and awaited the questions calmly and silently.

"Ayrton," said Glenarvan, "here we are then, you and us, on this very DUNCAN that you wished to deliver into the hands of the convicts of Ben Joyce."

The lips of the quartermaster trembled slightly and a quick flush suffused his impassive features. Not the flush of remorse, but of shame at failure. On this yacht which he thought he was to command as master, he was a prisoner, and his fate was about to be decided in a few seconds.

However, he made no reply. Glenarvan waited patiently.

But Ayrton persisted in keeping absolute silence.

"Speak, Ayrton, what have you to say?" resumed Glenarvan.

Ayrton hesitated, the wrinkles in his forehead deepened,

and at length he said in calm voice:

"I have nothing to say, my Lord. I have been fool enough to allow myself to be caught. Act as you please."

Then he turned his eyes away toward the coast which lay on the west, and affected profound indifference to what was passing around him.

One would have thought him a stranger to the whole affair.

But Glenarvan was determined to be patient. Powerful motives urged him to find out certain details concerning the mysterious life of Ayrton, especially those which related to Harry Grant and the BRITANNIA. He therefore resumed his interrogations, speaking with extreme gentleness and firmly restraining his violent irritation against him.

"I think, Ayrton," he went on, "that you will not refuse to reply to certain questions that I wish to put to you; and, first of all, ought I to call you Ayrton or Ben Joyce? Are you, or are you not, the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA?"

Ayrton remained impassive, gazing at the coast, deaf to every question.

Glenarvan's eyes kindled, as he said again:

"Will you tell me how you left the BRITANNIA, and why you are in Australia?"

The same silence, the same impassibility.

"Listen to me, Ayrton," continued Glenarvan; "it is to your interest to speak. Frankness is the only resource left to you, and it may stand you in good stead. For the last time, I ask you, will you reply to my questions?"

Ayrton turned his head toward Glenarvan, and looked into his eyes.

"My Lord," he said, "it is not for me to answer. Justice may witness against me, but I am not going to witness against myself."

"Proof will be easy," said Glenarvan.

"Easy, my Lord," repeated Ayrton, in a mocking tone.

"Your honor makes rather a bold assertion there, it seems to me.

For my own part, I venture to affirm that the best judge in the Temple would be puzzled what to make of me. Who will say why I came to Australia, when Captain Grant is not here to tell?

Who will prove that I am the Ben Joyce placarded by the police, when the police have never had me in their hands, and my companions are at liberty? Who can damage me except yourself, by bringing forward a single crime against me, or even a blameable action?

Who will affirm that I intended to take possession of this ship and deliver it into the hands of the convicts?

No one, I tell you, no one. You have your suspicions, but you need certainties to condemn a man, and certainties you have none. Until there is a proof to the contrary, I am Ayrton, quartermaster of the BRITANNIA."

Ayrton had become animated while he was speaking, but soon relapsed into his former indifference.

He, no doubt, expected that his reply would close the examination, but Glenarvan commenced again, and said:

"Ayrton, I am not a Crown prosecutor charged with your indictment. That is no business of mine. It is important that our respective situations should be clearly defined. I am not asking you anything that could compromise you. That is for justice to do. But you know what I am searching for, and a single word may put me on the track I have lost. Will you speak?"

Ayrton shook his head like a man determined to be silent.

"Will you tell me where Captain Grant is?" asked Glenarvan.

"No, my Lord," replied Ayrton.

"Will you tell me where the BRITANNIA was wrecked?"

"No, neither the one nor the other."

"Ayrton," said Glenarvan, in almost beseeching tones, "if you know where Harry Grant is, will you, at least, tell his poor children, who are waiting for you to speak the word?"

Ayrton hesitated. His features contracted, and he muttered in a low voice, "I cannot, my Lord."

Then he added with vehemence, as if reproaching himself for a momentary weakness:

"No, I will not speak. Have me hanged, if you choose."

"Hanged!" exclaimed Glenarvan, overcome by a sudden feeling of anger.

But immediately mastering himself, he added in a grave voice:

"Ayrton, there is neither judge nor executioner here.

At the first port we touch at, you will be given up into the hands of the English authorities."

"That is what I demand," was the quartermaster's reply.

Then he turned away and quietly walked back to his cabin,

which served as his prison. Two sailors kept guard at the door, with orders to watch his slightest movement. The witnesses of this examination retired from the scene indignant and despairing.

As Glenarvan could make no way against Ayrton's obstinacy, what was to be done now? Plainly no course remained but to carry out the plan formed at Eden, of returning to Europe and giving up for the time this unsuccessful enterprise, for the traces of the BRITANNIA seemed irrevocably lost, and the document did not appear to allow any fresh interpretation. On the 37th parallel there was not even another country, and the DUNCAN had only to turn and go back.

After Glenarvan had consulted his friends, he talked over the question of returning, more particularly with the captain. John examined the coal bunkers, and found there was only enough to last fifteen days longer at the outside. It was necessary, therefore, to put in at the nearest port for a fresh supply.

John proposed that he should steer for the Bay of Talcahuano, where the DUNCAN had once before been revictualed before she commenced her voyage of circumnavigation. It was a direct route across, and lay exactly along the 37th parallel. From thence the yacht, being amply provisioned, might go south,

double Cape Horn, and get back to Scotland by the Atlantic route.

This plan was adopted, and orders were given to the engineer to get up the steam. Half an hour afterward the beak-head of the yacht was turned toward Talcahuano, over a sea worthy of being called the Pacific, and at six P. M. the last mountains of New Zealand had disappeared in warm, hazy mist on the horizon.

The return voyage was fairly commenced. A sad voyage, for the courageous searching party to come back to the port without bringing home Harry Grant with them! The crew, so joyous at departure and so hopeful, were coming back to Europe defeated and discouraged. There was not one among the brave fellows whose heart did not swell at the thought of seeing his own country once more; and yet there was not one among them either who would not have been willing to brave the perils of the sea for a long time still if they could but find Captain Grant.

Consequently, the hurrahs which greeted the return of Lord Glenarvan to the yacht soon gave place to dejection. Instead of the close intercourse which had formerly existed among the passengers, and the lively conversations which had cheered the voyage, each one kept apart from the others in the solitude of his own cabin, and it was seldom that anyone appeared on the deck of the DUNCAN.

Paganel, who generally shared in an exaggerated form

the feelings of those about him, whether painful or joyous-- a man who could have invented hope if necessary--even Paganel was gloomy and taciturn. He was seldom visible; his natural loquacity and French vivacity gave place to silence and dejection. He seemed even more downhearted than his companions. If Glenarvan spoke at all of renewing the search, he shook his head like a man who has given up all hope, and whose convictions concerning the fate of the shipwrecked men appeared settled. It was quite evident he believed them irrevocably lost.

And yet there was a man on board who could have spoken the decisive word, and refused to break his silence. This was Ayrton. There was no doubt the fellow knew, if not the present whereabouts of the captain, at least the place of shipwreck. But it was evident that were Grant found, he would be a witness against him. Hence his persistent silence, which gave rise to great indignation on board, especially among the crew, who would have liked to deal summarily with him.

Glenarvan repeatedly renewed his attempts with the quartermaster, but promises and threats were alike useless.

Ayrton's obstinacy was so great, and so inexplicable, that the Major began to believe he had nothing to reveal.

His opinion was shared, moreover, by the geographer, as it corroborated his own notion about Harry Grant.

But if Ayrton knew nothing, why did he not confess his ignorance? It could not be turned against him. His silence increased the difficulty of forming any new plan. Was the presence of the quartermaster on the Australian continent a proof of Harry Grant's being there? It was settled that they must get this information out of Ayrton.

Lady Helena, seeing her husband's ill-success, asked his permission to try her powers against the obstinacy of the quartermaster. When a man had failed, a woman perhaps, with her gentler influence, might succeed. Is there not a constant repetition going on of the story of the fable where the storm, blow as it will, cannot tear the cloak from the shoulders of the traveler, while the first warm rays of sunshine make him throw it off immediately?

Glenarvan, knowing his young wife's good sense, allowed her to act as she pleased.

The same day (the 5th of March), Ayrton was conducted to Lady Helena's saloon. Mary Grant was to be present at the interview, for the influence of the young girl might be considerable, and Lady Helena would not lose any chance of success.

For a whole hour the two ladies were closeted with the quartermaster, but nothing transpired about their interview. What had been said, what arguments they used to win the secret from the convict, or what questions were asked, remained unknown;

but when they left Ayrton, they did not seem to have succeeded, as the expression on their faces denoted discouragement.

In consequence of this, when the quartermaster was being taken back to his cabin, the sailors met him with violent menaces. He took no notice except by shrugging his shoulders, which so increased their rage, that John Mangles and Glenarvan had to interfere, and could only repress it with difficulty.

But Lady Helena would not own herself vanquished. She resolved to struggle to the last with this pitiless man, and went next day herself to his cabin to avoid exposing him again to the vindictiveness of the crew.

The good and gentle Scotchwoman stayed alone with the convict leader for two long hours. Glenarvan in a state of extreme nervous anxiety, remained outside the cabin, alternately resolved to exhaust completely this last chance of success, alternately resolved to rush in and snatch his wife from so painful a situation.

But this time when Lady Helena reappeared, her look was full of hope. Had she succeeded in extracting the secret, and awakening in that adamant heart a last faint touch of pity?

McNabbs, who first saw her, could not restrain a gesture of incredulity.

However the report soon spread among the sailors that the quartermaster had yielded to the persuasions of Lady Helena. The effect was electrical. The entire crew assembled on deck far quicker than Tom Austin's whistle could have brought them together.

Glenarvan had hastened up to his wife and eagerly asked:

"Has he spoken?"

"No," replied Lady Helena, "but he has yielded to my entreaties, and wishes to see you."

"Ah, dear Helena, you have succeeded!"

"I hope so, Edward."

"Have you made him any promise that I must ratify?"

"Only one; that you will do all in your power to mitigate his punishment."

"Very well, dear Helena. Let Ayrton come immediately."

Lady Helena retired to her cabin with Mary Grant, and the quartermaster was brought into the saloon where Lord Glenarvan was expecting him.