

CHAPTER XVIII A DISCOURAGING CONFESSION

As soon as the quartermaster was brought into the presence of Lord Glenarvan, his keepers withdrew.

"You wanted to speak to me, Ayrton?" said Glenarvan.

"Yes, my Lord," replied the quartermaster.

"Did you wish for a private interview?"

"Yes, but I think if Major McNabbs and Mr. Paganel were present it would be better."

"For whom?"

"For myself."

Ayrton spoke quite calmly and firmly. Glenarvan looked at him for an instant, and then sent to summon McNabbs and Paganel, who came at once.

"We are all ready to listen to you," said Glenarvan, when his two friends had taken their place at the saloon table.

Ayrton collected himself, for an instant, and then said:

"My Lord, it is usual for witnesses to be present at every contract or transaction between two parties. That is why I desire the presence of Messrs. Paganel and McNabbs, for it is, properly speaking, a bargain which I propose to make."

Glenarvan, accustomed to Ayrton's ways, exhibited no surprise, though any bargaining between this man and himself seemed strange.

"What is the bargain?" he said.

"This," replied Ayrton. "You wish to obtain from me certain facts which may be useful to you. I wish to obtain from you certain advantages which would be valuable to me. It is giving for giving, my Lord. Do you agree to this or not?"

"What are the facts?" asked Paganel eagerly.

"No," said Glenarvan. "What are the advantages?"

Ayrton bowed in token that he understood Glenarvan's distinction.

"These," he said, "are the advantages I ask. It is still your intention, I suppose, to deliver me up to the English authorities?"

"Yes, Ayrton, it is only justice."

"I don't say it is not," replied the quartermaster quietly.

"Then of course you would never consent to set me at liberty."

Glenarvan hesitated before replying to a question so plainly put.

On the answer he gave, perhaps the fate of Harry Grant might depend!

However, a feeling of duty toward human justice compelled him to say:

"No, Ayrton, I cannot set you at liberty."

"I do not ask it," said the quartermaster proudly.

"Then, what is it you want?"

"A middle place, my Lord, between the gibbet that awaits me and the liberty which you cannot grant me."

"And that is--"

"To allow me to be left on one of the uninhabited islands of the Pacific, with such things as are absolute necessities. I will manage as best I can, and will repent if I have time."

Glenarvan, quite unprepared for such a proposal, looked at his two

friends in silence. But after a brief reflection, he replied:

"Ayrton, if I agree to your request, you will tell me all I have an interest in knowing."

"Yes, my Lord, that is to say, all I know about Captain Grant and the BRITANNIA."

"The whole truth?"

"The whole."

"But what guarantee have I?"

"Oh, I see what you are uneasy about. You need a guarantee for me, for the truth of a criminal. That's natural. But what can you have under the circumstances. There is no help for it, you must either take my offer or leave it."

"I will trust to you, Ayrton," said Glenarvan, simply.

"And you do right, my Lord. Besides, if I deceive you, vengeance is in your own power."

"How?"

"You can come and take me again from where you left me, as I shall have no means of getting away from the island."

Ayrton had an answer for everything. He anticipated the difficulties and furnished unanswerable arguments against himself. It was evident he intended to affect perfect good faith in the business. It was impossible to show more complete confidence. And yet he was prepared to go still further in disinterestedness.

"My Lord and gentlemen," he added, "I wish to convince you of the fact that I am playing cards on the table. I have no wish to deceive you, and I am going to give you a fresh proof of my sincerity in this matter. I deal frankly with you, because I reckon on your honor."

"Speak, Ayrton," said Glenarvan.

"My Lord, I have not your promise yet to accede to my proposal, and yet I do not scruple to tell you that I know very little about Harry Grant."

"Very little," exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes, my Lord, the details I am in a position to give you relate to myself. They are entirely personal, and will not do much to help you to recover the lost traces of Captain Grant."

Keen disappointment was depicted on the faces of Glenarvan and the Major. They thought the quartermaster in the possession of an important secret, and he declared that his communications would be very nearly barren. Paganel's countenance remained unmoved.

Somehow or other, this avowal of Ayrton, and surrender of himself, so to speak, unconditionally, singularly touched his auditors, especially when the quartermaster added:

"So I tell you beforehand, the bargain will be more to my profit than yours."

"It does not signify," replied Glenarvan. "I accept your proposal, Ayrton. I give you my word to land you on one of the islands of the Pacific Ocean."

"All right, my Lord," replied the quartermaster.

Was this strange man glad of this decision? One might have doubted it, for his impassive countenance betokened no emotion whatever. It seemed as if he were acting for someone else rather than himself.

"I am ready to answer," he said.

"We have no questions to put to you," said Glenarvan. "Tell us all you know, Ayrton, and begin by declaring who you are."

"Gentlemen," replied Ayrton, "I am really Tom Ayrton, the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA. I left Glasgow on Harry Grant's ship on the 12th of March, 1861. For fourteen months I cruised with him in the Pacific in search of an advantageous spot for founding a Scotch colony.

Harry Grant was the man to carry out grand projects, but serious disputes often arose between us. His temper and mine could not agree. I cannot bend, and with Harry Grant, when once his resolution is taken, any resistance is impossible, my Lord. He has an iron will both for himself and others.

"But in spite of that, I dared to rebel, and I tried to get the crew to join me, and to take possession of the vessel.

Whether I was to blame or not is of no consequence.

Be that as it may, Harry Grant had no scruples, and on the 8th of April, 1862, he left me behind on the west coast of Australia."

"Of Australia!" said the Major, interrupting Ayrton in his narrative.

"Then of course you had quitted the BRITANNIA before she touched at Callao, which was her last date?"

"Yes," replied the quartermaster, "for the BRITANNIA did not touch there while I was on board. And how I came to speak of Callao at Paddy O'Moore's farm was that I learned the circumstances from your recital."

"Go on, Ayrton," said Glenarvan.

"I found myself abandoned on a nearly desert coast, but only forty miles from the penal settlement at Perth, the capital of Western Australia. As I was wandering there along the shore, I met a band of convicts who had just escaped, and I joined myself to them. You will dispense, my Lord, with any account of my life for two years and a half.

This much, however, I must tell you, that I became the leader of the gang, under the name of Ben Joyce. In September, 1864, I introduced myself at the Irish farm, where I engaged myself as a servant in my real name, Ayrton. I waited there till I should get some chance of seizing a ship.

This was my one idea. Two months afterward the DUNCAN arrived.

During your visit to the farm you related Captain Grant's history, and I learned then facts of which I was not previously aware-- that the BRITANNIA had touched at Callao, and that her latest news was dated June, 1862, two months after my disembarkation, and also about the document and the loss of the ship somewhere along the 37th parallel; and, lastly, the strong reasons you had for supposing Harry Grant was on the Australian continent.

Without the least hesitation I determined to appropriate the DUNCAN, a matchless vessel, able to outdistance the swiftest ships in the British Navy. But serious injuries had to be repaired.

I therefore let it go to Melbourne, and joined myself to you in my true character as quartermaster, offering to guide

you to the scene of the shipwreck, fictitiously placed by me on the east coast of Australia. It was in this way, followed or sometimes preceded by my gang of convicts, I directed your expedition toward the province of Victoria. My men committed a bootless crime at Camden Bridge; since the DUNCAN, if brought to the coast, could not escape me, and with the yacht once mine, I was master of the ocean. I led you in this way unsuspectingly as far as the Snowy River. The horses and bullocks dropped dead one by one, poisoned by the gastrolobium. I dragged the wagon into the marshes, where it got half buried. At my instance--but you know the rest, my Lord, and you may be sure that but for the blunder of Mr. Paganel, I should now command the DUNCAN. Such is my history, gentlemen. My disclosures, unfortunately, cannot put you on the track of Harry Grant, and you perceive that you have made but a poor bargain by coming to my terms."

The quartermaster said no more, but crossed his arms in his usual fashion and waited. Glenarvan and his friends kept silence. They felt that this strange criminal had spoken the whole truth. He had only missed his coveted prize, the DUNCAN, through a cause independent of his will. His accomplices had gone to Twofold Bay, as was proved by the convict blouse found by Glenarvan. Faithful to the orders of their chief, they had kept watch on the yacht, and at length, weary of waiting, had returned to the old haunt of robbers and incendiaries in the country parts of New South Wales.

The Major put the first question, his object being to verify the dates of the BRITANNIA.

"You are sure then," he said, "that it was on the 8th of April you were left on the west coast of Australia?"

"On that very day," replied Ayrton.

"And do you know what projects Harry Grant had in view at the time?"

"In an indefinite way I do."

"Say all you can, Ayrton," said Glenarvan, "the least indication may set us in the right course."

"I only know this much, my Lord," replied the quartermaster, "that Captain Grant intended to visit New Zealand. Now, as this part of the programme was not carried out while I was on board, it is not impossible that on leaving Callao the BRITANNIA went to reconnoiter New Zealand. This would agree with the date assigned by the document to the shipwreck--the 27th of June, 1862."

"Clearly," said Paganel.

"But," objected Glenarvan, "there is nothing in the fragmentary

words in the document that could apply to New Zealand."

"That I cannot answer," said the quartermaster.

"Well, Ayrton," said Glenarvan, "you have kept your word, and I will keep mine. We have to decide now on what island of the Pacific Ocean you are to be left?"

"It matters little, my Lord," replied Ayrton.

"Return to your cabin," said Glenarvan, "and wait our decision."

The quartermaster withdrew, guarded by the two sailors.

"That villain might have been a man," said the Major.

"Yes," returned Glenarvan; "he is a strong, clear-headed fellow.

Why was it that he must needs turn his powers to such evil account?"

"But Harry Grant?"

"I must fear he is irrevocably lost. Poor children!

Who can tell them where their father is?"

"I can!" replied Paganel. "Yes; I can!" One could not help remarking that the geographer, so loquacious and impatient usually,

had scarcely spoken during Ayrton's examination. He listened without opening his mouth. But this speech of his now was worth many others, and it made Glenarvan spring to his feet, crying out: "You, Paganel! you know where Captain Grant is?"

"Yes, as far as can be known."

"How do you know?"

"From that infernal document."

"Ah!" said the Major, in a tone of the most profound incredulity.

"Hear me first, and shrug your shoulders afterward," said Paganel. "I did not speak sooner, because you would not have believed me. Besides, it was useless; and I only speak to-day because Ayrton's opinion just supports my own."

"Then it is New Zealand?" asked Glenarvan.

"Listen and judge," replied Paganel. "It is not without reason, or, rather, I had a reason for making the blunder which has saved our lives. When I was in the very act of writing the letter to Glenarvan's dictation, the word ZEALAND was swimming in my brain. This is why. You remember we were in the wagon. McNabbs had just apprised Lady Helena about the convicts;

he had given her the number of the Australian and New Zealand Gazette which contained the account of the catastrophe at Camden Bridge. Now, just as I was writing, the newspaper was lying on the ground, folded in such a manner that only two syllables of the title were visible; these two syllables were ALAND. What a sudden light flashed on my mind. ALAND was one of the words in the English document, one that hitherto we had translated a terre, and which must have been the termination of the proper noun, ZEALAND."

"Indeed!" said Glenarvan.

"Yes," continued Paganel, with profound conviction; "this meaning had escaped me, and do you know why? Because my wits were exercised naturally on the French document, as it was most complete, and in that this important word was wanting."

"Oh, oh!" said the Major; "your imagination goes too far, Paganel; and you forget your former deductions."

"Go on, Major; I am ready to answer you."

"Well, then, what do you make of your word AUSTRALIA?"

"What it was at first. It merely means southern countries."

"Well, and this syllable, INDI, which was first the root of the INDIANS, and second the root of the word indigenes?"

"Well, the third and last time," replied Paganel, "it will be the first syllable of the word INDIGENCE."

"And CONTIN?" cried McNabbs. "Does that still mean CONTINENT?"

"No; since New Zealand is only an island."

"What then?" asked Glenarvan.

"My dear lord," replied Paganel, "I am going to translate the document according to my third interpretation, and you shall judge.

I only make two observations beforehand. First, forget as much as possible preceding interpretations, and divest your mind of all preconceived notions. Second, certain parts may appear to you strained, and it is possible that I translate them badly; but they are of no importance; among others, the word AGONIE, which chokes me; but I cannot find any other explanation.

Besides, my interpretation was founded on the French document; and don't forget it was written by an Englishman, who could not be familiar with the idioms of the French language.

Now then, having said this much, I will begin."

And slowly articulating each syllable, he repeated

the following sentences:

"LE 27th JUIN, 1862, le trois-mats Britannia, de Glasgow, a sombre apres une longue AGONIE dans les mers AUSTRALES sur les cotes de la Nouvelle ZELANDE--in English Zealand. Deux matelots et le Capitaine Grant ont pu y ABORDER. La CONTINUellement en PROie a une CRUELle INDIGENCE, ils ont jete ce document par--de longitude ET 37 degrees 11' de LATitude. Venex a leur secours, ou ils sont PERDUS!" (On the 27th of June, 1865, the three-mast vessel BRITANNIA, of Glasgow, has foundered after a long AGONie in the Southern Seas, on the coast of New Zealand. Two sailors and Captain Grant have succeeded in landing. Continually a prey to cruel indigence, they have thrown this document into the sea in--longitude and 37 degrees 11' latitude. Come to their help, or they are lost.)

Paganel stopped. His interpretation was admissible.

But precisely because it appeared as likely as the preceding, it might be as false. Glenarvan and the Major did not then try and discuss it. However, since no traces of the BRITANNIA had yet been met with, either on the Patagonian or Australian coasts, at the points where these countries are crossed by the 37th parallel, the chances were in favor of New Zealand.

"Now, Paganel," said Glenarvan, "will you tell me why you have kept this interpretation secret for nearly two months?"

"Because I did not wish to buoy you up again with vain hopes. Besides, we were going to Auckland, to the very spot indicated by the latitude of the document."

"But since then, when we were dragged out of the route, why did you not speak?"

"Because, however just the interpretation, it could do nothing for the deliverance of the captain."

"Why not, Paganel?"

"Because, admitting that the captain was wrecked on the New Zealand coast, now that two years have passed and he has not reappeared, he must have perished by shipwreck or by the New Zealanders."

"Then you are of the opinion," said Glenarvan, "that--"

"That vestiges of the wreck might be found; but that the survivors of the BRITANNIA have, beyond doubt, perished."

"Keep all this silent, friends," said Glenarvan, "and let me choose a fitting moment to communicate these sad tidings to Captain Grant's children."