

CHAPTER XX CAPTAIN GRANT'S STORY

JOY does not kill, for both father and children recovered before they had reached the yacht. The scene which followed, who can describe? Language fails. The whole crew wept aloud at the sight of these three clasped together in a close, silent embrace.

The moment Harry Grant came on deck, he knelt down reverently. The pious Scotchman's first act on touching the yacht, which to him was the soil of his native land, was to return thanks to the God of his deliverance. Then, turning to Lady Helena and Lord Glenarvan, and his companions, he thanked them in broken words, for his heart was too full to speak. During the short passage from the isle to the yacht, his children had given him a brief sketch of the DUNCAN'S history.

What an immense debt he owed to this noble lady and her friends! From Lord Glenarvan, down to the lowest sailor on board, how all had struggled and suffered for him! Harry Grant expressed his gratitude with such simplicity and nobleness, his manly face suffused with pure and sweet emotion, that the whole crew felt amply recompensed for the trials they had undergone. Even the impassable Major himself felt a tear steal down his cheek in spite of all his self-command; while the good, simple Paganel cried like a child who does not care who sees his tears.

Harry Grant could not take his eyes off his daughter.

He thought her beautiful, charming; and he not only said so to himself, but repeated it aloud, and appealed to Lady Helena for confirmation of his opinion, as if to convince himself that he was not blinded by his paternal affection. His boy, too, came in for admiration.

"How he has grown! he is a man!" was his delighted exclamation.

And he covered the two children so dear to him with the kisses he had been heaping up for them during his two years of absence.

Robert then presented all his friends successively, and found means always to vary the formula of introduction, though he had to say the same thing about each. The fact was, each and all had been perfect in the children's eyes.

John Mangles blushed like a child when his turn came, and his voice trembled as he spoke to Mary's father.

Lady Helena gave Captain Grant a narrative of the voyage, and made him proud of his son and daughter. She told him of the young hero's exploits, and how the lad had already paid back part of the paternal debt to Lord Glenarvan. John Mangles sang Mary's praises in such terms, that Harry Grant, acting on a hint from Lady Helena, put his daughter's hand into that of the brave young captain, and turning to Lord and Lady Glenarvan, said:

"My Lord, and you, Madam, also give your blessing to our children."

When everything had been said and re-said over and over again, Glenarvan informed Harry Grant about Ayrton. Grant confirmed the quartermaster's confession as far as his disembarkation on the coast of Australia was concerned.

"He is an intelligent, intrepid man," he added, "whose passions have led him astray. May reflection and repentance bring him to a better mind!"

But before Ayrton was transferred, Harry Grant wished to do the honors of his rock to his friends. He invited them to visit his wooden house, and dine with him in Robinson Crusoe fashion.

Glenarvan and his friends accepted the invitation most willingly. Robert and Mary were eagerly longing to see the solitary house where their father had so often wept at the thought of them. A boat was manned, and the Captain and his two children, Lord and Lady Glenarvan, the Major, John Mangles, and Paganel, landed on the shores of the island.

A few hours sufficed to explore the whole domain of Harry Grant. It was in fact the summit of a submarine mountain, a plateau composed of basaltic rocks and volcanic DEBRIS. During the geological epochs of the earth, this mountain had gradually emerged from the depths of the Pacific, through the action of the subterranean fires, but for ages back

the volcano had been a peaceful mountain, and the filled-up crater, an island rising out of the liquid plain. Then soil formed.

The vegetable kingdom took possession of this new land.

Several whalers landed domestic animals there in passing; goats and pigs, which multiplied and ran wild, and the three kingdoms of nature were now displayed on this island, sunk in mid ocean.

When the survivors of the shipwrecked BRITANNIA took refuge there, the hand of man began to organize the efforts of nature. In two years and a half, Harry Grant and his two sailors had metamorphosed the island. Several acres of well-cultivated land were stocked with vegetables of excellent quality.

The house was shaded by luxuriant gum-trees. The magnificent ocean stretched before the windows, sparkling in the sunlight. Harry Grant had the table placed beneath the grand trees, and all the guests seated themselves. A hind quarter of a goat, nardou bread, several bowls of milk, two or three roots of wild endive, and pure fresh water, composed the simple repast, worthy of the shepherds of Arcadia.

Paganel was enchanted. His old fancies about Robinson Crusoe revived in full force. "He is not at all to be pitied, that scoundrel, Ayrton!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically. "This little isle is just a paradise!"

"Yes," replied Harry Grant, "a paradise to these poor, shipwrecked fellows that Heaven had pity on, but I am sorry that Maria Theresa was not an extensive and fertile island, with a river instead of a stream, and a port instead of a tiny bay exposed to the open sea."

"And why, captain?" asked Glenarvan.

"Because I should have made it the foundation of the colony with which I mean to dower Scotland."

"Ah, Captain Grant, you have not given up the project, then, which made you so popular in our old country?"

"No, my Lord, and God has only saved me through your efforts that I might accomplish my task. My poor brothers in old Caledonia, all who are needy must have a refuge provided for them in another land against their misery, and my dear country must have a colony of her own, for herself alone, somewhere in these seas, where she may find that independence and comfort she so lacks in Europe."

"Ah, that is very true, Captain Grant," said Lady Helena. "This is a grand project of yours, and worthy of a noble heart. But this little isle--"

"No, madam, it is a rock only fit at most to support a few settlers;

while what we need is a vast country, whose virgin soil abounds in untouched stores of wealth," replied the captain.

"Well, captain," exclaimed Glenarvan, "the future is ours, and this country we will seek for together."

And the two brave Scotchmen joined hands in a hearty grip and so sealed the compact.

A general wish was expressed to hear, while they were on the island, the account of the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA, and of the two years spent by the survivors in this very place. Harry Grant was delighted to gratify their curiosity, and commenced his narration forthwith.

"My story," he said, "is that of all the Robinson Cru-soes cast upon an island, with only God and themselves to rely on, and feeling it a duty to struggle for life with the elements.

"It was during the night of the 26th or 27th of June, 1862, that the BRITANNIA, disabled by a six days' storm, struck against the rocks of Maria Theresa. The sea was mountains high, and lifeboats were useless. My unfortunate crew all perished, except Bob Learce and Joe Bell, who with myself managed to reach shore after twenty unsuccessful attempts.

"The land which received us was only an uninhabited island, two miles broad and five long, with about thirty trees in the interior, a few meadows, and a brook of fresh water, which fortunately never dried up. Alone with my sailors, in this corner of the globe, I did not despair. I put my trust in God, and accustomed myself to struggle resolutely for existence. Bob and Joe, my brave companions in misfortune, my friends, seconded me energetically.

"We began like the fictitious Robinson Crusoe of Defoe, our model, by collecting the planks of the ship, the tools, a little powder, and firearms, and a bag of precious seeds. The first few days were painful enough, but hunting and fishing soon afforded us a sure supply of food, for wild goats were in abundance in the interior of the island, and marine animals abounded on the coast. By degrees we fell into regular ways and habits of life.

"I had saved my instruments from the wreck, and knew exactly the position of the island. I found we were out of the route of vessels, and could not be rescued unless by some providential chance. I accepted our trying lot composedly, always thinking, however, of my dear ones, remembering them every day in my prayers, though never hoping to see them again.

"However, we toiled on resolutely, and before long several acres of land

were sown with the seed off the BRITANNIA; potatoes, endive, sorrel, and other vegetables besides, gave wholesome variety to our daily fare. We caught some young kids, which soon grew quite tame. We had milk and butter. The nardou, which grew abundantly in dried up creeks, supplied us with tolerably substantial bread, and we had no longer any fears for our material life.

"We had built a log hut with the DEBRIS of the BRITANNIA, and this was covered over with sail cloth, carefully tarred over, and beneath this secure shelter the rainy season passed comfortably. Many a plan was discussed here, and many a dream indulged in, the brightest of which is this day realized.

"I had at first the idea of trying to brave the perils of the ocean in a canoe made out of the spars of the ship, but 1,500 miles lay between us and the nearest coast, that is to say the islands of the Archipelago of Pomotou. No boat could have stood so long a voyage. I therefore relinquished my scheme, and looked for no deliverance except from a divine hand.

"Ah, my poor children! how often we have stood on the top of the rocks and watched the few vessels passing in the distance far out at sea. During the whole period of our exile only two or three vessels appeared on the horizon, and those only to disappear again immediately. Two years and a half were spent in this manner. We gave up hoping, but yet did not despair. At last, early yesterday morning, when I

was standing on the highest peak of the island, I noticed a light smoke rising in the west. It increased, and soon a ship appeared in sight. It seemed to be coming toward us. But would it not rather steer clear of an island where there was no harbor.

"Ah, what a day of agony that was! My heart was almost bursting. My comrades kindled a fire on one of the peaks. Night came on, but no signal came from the yacht. Deliverance was there, however. Were we to see it vanish from our eyes?

"I hesitated no longer. The darkness was growing deeper. The ship might double the island during the night. I jumped into the sea, and attempted to make my way toward it. Hope trebled my strength, I cleft the waves with superhuman vigor, and had got so near the yacht that I was scarcely thirty fathoms off, when it tacked about.

"This provoked me to the despairing cry, which only my two children heard. It was no illusion.

"Then I came back to the shore, exhausted and overcome with emotion and fatigue. My two sailors received me half dead. It was a horrible night this last we spent on the island, and we believed ourselves abandoned forever, when day dawned, and there was the yacht sailing nearly alongside, under easy steam. Your boat was lowered--we were saved--and, oh, wonder of

Divine goodness, my children, my beloved children, were there holding out their arms to me!"

Robert and Mary almost smothered their father with kisses and caresses as he ended his narrative.

It was now for the first time that the captain heard that he owed his deliverance to the somewhat hieroglyphical document which he had placed in a bottle and confined to the mercy of the ocean.

But what were Jacques Paganel's thoughts during Captain Grant's recital? The worthy geographer was turning over in his brain for the thousandth time the words of the document. He pondered his three successive interpretations, all of which had proved false. How had this island, called Maria Theresa, been indicated in the papers originally?

At last Paganel could contain himself no longer, and seizing Harry Grant's hand, he exclaimed:

"Captain! will you tell me at last what really was in your indecipherable document?"

A general curiosity was excited by this question of the geographer, for the enigma which had been for nine months a mystery was about to be explained.

"Well, captain," repeated Paganel, "do you remember the precise words of the document?"

"Exactly," replied Harry Grant; "and not a day has passed without my recalling to memory words with which our last hopes were linked."

"And what are they, captain?" asked Glenarvan. "Speak, for our amour propre is wounded to the quick!"

"I am ready to satisfy you," replied Harry Grant; "but, you know, to multiply the chances of safety, I had inclosed three documents in the bottle, in three different languages. Which is it you wish to hear?"

"They are not identical, then?" cried Paganel.

"Yes, they are, almost to a word."

"Well, then, let us have the French document," replied Glenarvan.

"That is the one that is most respected by the waves, and the one on which our interpretations have been mostly founded."

"My Lord, I will give it you word for word," replied Harry Grant.

"LE 27 JUIN, 1862, le trois-mats Britannia, de Glasgow, s'est perdu

a quinze cents lieues de la Patagonie, dans l'hémisphère austral.
Partes a terre, deux matelots et le Capitaine Grant ont
atteint l'île Tabor--"

"Oh!" exclaimed Paganel.

"LA," continued Harry Grant, "continuellement en proie
à une cruelle indigence, ils ont jeté ce document par 153
degrés de longitude et 37 degrés 11' de latitude.
Venez à leur secours, ou ils sont perdus."

At the name of Tabor, Paganel had started up hastily, and now being
unable to restrain himself longer, he called out:

"How can it be Isle Tabor? Why, this is Maria Theresa!"

"Undoubtedly, Monsieur Paganel," replied Harry Grant. "It is
Maria Theresa on the English and German charts, but is named
Tabor on the French ones!"

At this moment a vigorous thump on Paganel's shoulder almost bent
him double. Truth obliges us to say it was the Major that dealt the blow,
though strangely contrary to his usual strict politeness.

"Geographer!" said McNabbs, in a tone of the most supreme contempt.

But Paganel had not even felt the Major's hand. What was that compared to the geographical blow which had stunned him?

He had been gradually getting nearer the truth, however, as he learned from Captain Grant. He had almost entirely deciphered the indecipherable document.

The names Patagonia, Australia, New Zealand, had appeared to him in turn with absolute certainty. CONTIN, at first CONTINENT, had gradually reached its true meaning, continuelle.

Indi had successively signified indiens, indigenes, and at last the right word was found--INDIGENCE. But one mutilated word, ABOR, had baffled the geographer's sagacity. Paganel had persisted in making it the root of the verb ABORDER, and it turned out to be a proper name, the French name of the Isle Tabor, the isle which had been a refuge for the shipwrecked sailors of the BRITANNIA. It was difficult to avoid falling into the error, however, for on the English planispheres on the DUNCAN, the little isle was marked Maria Theresa.

"No matter?" cried Paganel, tearing his hair; "I ought not to have forgotten its double appellation. It is an unpardonable mistake, one unworthy of a secretary of the Geographical Society. I am disgraced!"

"Come, come, Monsieur Paganel," said Lady Helena; "moderate your grief."

"No, madam, no; I am a mere ass!"

"And not even a learned one!" added the Major, by way of consolation.

When the meal was over, Harry Grant put everything in order in his house. He took nothing away, wishing the guilty to inherit the riches of the innocent. Then they returned to the vessel, and, as Glenarvan had determined to start the same day, he gave immediate orders for the disembarkation of the quartermaster. Ayrton was brought up on the poop, and found himself face to face with Harry Grant.

"It is I, Ayrton!" said Grant

"Yes, it is you, captain," replied Ayrton, without the least sign of surprise at Harry Grant's recovery. "Well, I am not sorry to see you again in good health."

"It seems, Ayrton, that I made a mistake in landing you on an inhabited coast."

"It seems so, captain."

"You are going to take my place on this uninhabited island. May Heaven give you repentance!"

"Amen," said Ayrton, calmly.

Glenarvan then addressed the quartermaster.

"It is still your wish, then, Ayrton, to be left behind?"

"Yes, my Lord!"

"And Isle Tabor meets your wishes?"

"Perfectly."

"Now then, listen to my last words, Ayrton. You will be cut off here from all the world, and no communication with your fellows is possible. Miracles are rare, and you will not be able to quit this isle. You will be alone, with no eye upon you but that of God, who reads the deepest secrets of the heart; but you will be neither lost nor forsaken, as Captain Grant was. Unworthy as you are of anyone's remembrance, you will not be dropped out of recollection. I know where you are, Ayrton; I know where to find you-- I shall never forget."

"God keep your Honor," was all Ayrton's reply.

These were the final words exchanged between Glenarvan and the quartermaster. The boat was ready and Ayrton got into it.

John Mangles had previously conveyed to the island several cases of preserved food, besides clothing, and tools and firearms, and a supply of powder and shot. The quartermaster could commence a new life of honest labor. Nothing was lacking, not even books; among others, the Bible, so dear to English hearts.

The parting hour had come. The crew and all the passengers were assembled on deck. More than one felt his heart swell with emotion. Mary Grant and Lady Helena could not restrain their feelings.

"Must it be done?" said the young wife to her husband.

"Must the poor man be left there?"

"He must, Helena," replied Lord Glenarvan. "It is in expiation of his crimes."

At that moment the boat, in charge of John Mangles, turned away. Ayrton, who remained standing, and still unmoved, took off his cap and bowed gravely.

Glenarvan uncovered, and all the crew followed his example, as if in presence of a man who was about to die, and the boat went off in profound silence.

On reaching land, Ayrton jumped on the sandy shore, and the boat

returned to the yacht. It was then four o'clock in the afternoon, and from the poop the passengers could see the quartermaster gazing at the ship, standing with folded arms on a rock, motionless as a statue.

"Shall we set sail, my Lord?" asked John Mangles.

"Yes, John," replied Glenarvan, hastily, more moved than he cared to show.

"Go on!" shouted John to the engineer.

The steam hissed and puffed out, the screw began to stir the waves, and by eight o'clock the last peaks of Isle Tabor disappeared in the shadows of the night.