CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH THE QUESTION OF LODGING IS SOLVED AS WELL AS IT COULD BE.

The day was already far advanced. Godfrey resolved to defer till the morrow the task of proceeding to a new abode. But to the pressing questions which the professor propounded on the results of his exploration he ended by replying that it was an island, Phina Island, on which they both had been cast, and that they must think of the means of living before dreaming of the means of departing.

"An island!" exclaimed Tartlet.

"Yes! It is an island!"

"Which the sea surrounds?"

"Naturally."

"But what is it?"

"I have told you, Phina Island, and you understand why I gave it that name."

"No, I do not understand!" answered Tartlet, making a grimace; "and I

don't see the resemblance! Miss Phina is surrounded by land, not water!"

After this melancholy reflection, he prepared to pass the night with as little discomfort as possible. Godfrey went off to the reef to get a new stock of eggs and mollusks, with which he had to be contented, and then, tired out, he came back to the tree and soon fell asleep, while Tartlet, whose philosophy would not allow him to accept such a state of affairs, gave himself over to the bitterest meditations. On the morrow, the 28th of June, they were both afoot before the cock had interrupted their slumbers.

To begin with, a hasty breakfast, the same as the day before. Only water from a little brook was advantageously replaced by a little milk given by one of the goats.

Ah! worthy Tartlet! Where were the "mint julep," the "port wine sangaree," the "sherry cobbler," the "sherry cocktail," which he hardly drank, but which were served him at all hours in the bars and taverns of San Francisco? How he envied the poultry, the agouties, and the sheep, who cheerfully quenched their thirst without the addition of such saccharine or alcoholic mixtures to their water from the stream! To these animals no fire was necessary to cook their food; roots and herbs and seeds sufficed, and their breakfast was always served to the minute on their tablecloth of green.

"Let us make a start," said Godfrey.

And behold the two on their way, followed by a procession of domestic animals, who refused to be left behind. Godfrey's idea was to explore, in the north of the island, that portion of the coast on which he had noticed the group of gigantic trees in his view from the cone. But to get there he resolved to keep along the shore. The surf might perhaps have cast up some fragment of the wreck. Perhaps they might find on the beach some of their companions in the Dream to which they could give Christian burial. As for finding any one of them living, it was hardly to be hoped for, after a lapse of six-and-thirty hours.

The first line of hills was surmounted, and Godfrey and his companion reached the beginning of the reef, which looked as deserted as it had when they had left it. There they renewed their stock of eggs and mollusks, in case they should fail to find even such meagre resources away to the north. Then, following the fringe of sea-weed left by the last tide, they again ascended the dunes, and took a good look round.

Nothing! always nothing!

We must certainly say that if misfortune had made Crusoes of these survivors of the Dream, it had shown itself much more rigorous towards them than towards their predecessors, who always had some portion of the vessel left to them, and who, after bringing away crowds of objects of necessity had been able to utilize the timbers of the wreck. Victuals for a considerable period, clothes, tools, weapons, had always been left them with which to satisfy the elementary exigencies of existence. But here there was nothing of all this! In the middle of that dark night the

ship had disappeared in the depths of the sea, without leaving on the reefs the slightest traces of its wreck! It had not been possible to save a thing from her--not even a lucifer-match--and to tell the truth, the want of that match was the most serious of all wants.

I know well, good people comfortably installed in your easy-chairs before a comfortable hearth at which is blazing brightly a fire of wood or coals, that you will be apt to say,--

"But nothing was more easy than for them to get a fire! There are a thousand ways of doing that! Two pebbles! A little dry moss! A little burnt rag,"--and how do you burn the rag? "The blade of a knife would do for a steel, or two bits of wood rubbed briskly together in Polynesian fashion!"

Well, try it!

It was about this that Godfrey was thinking as he walked, and this it was that occupied his thoughts more than anything else. Perhaps he too, poking his coke fire and reading his travellers' tales, had thought the same as you good people! But now he had to put matters to the test, and he saw with considerable disquietude the want of a fire, that indispensable element which nothing could replace.

He kept on ahead, then, lost in thought, followed by Tartlet, who by his shouts and gestures, kept together the flock of sheep, agouties, goats, and poultry.

Suddenly his look was attracted by the bright colours of a cluster of small apples which hung from the branches of certain shrubs, growing in hundreds at the foot of the dunes. He immediately recognized them as "manzanillas," which serve as food to the Indians in certain parts of California.

"At last," he exclaimed, "there is something which will be a change from our eggs and mussels."

"What? Do you eat those things?" said Tartlet with his customary grimace.

"You shall soon see!" answered Godfrey.

And he set to work to gather the manzanillas, and eat them greedily.

They were only wild apples, but even their acidity did not prevent them from being agreeable. The professor made little delay in imitating his companion, and did not show himself particularly discontented at the work. Godfrey thought, and with reason, that from these fruits there could be made a fermented liquor which would be preferable to the water.

The march was resumed. Soon the end of the sand dunes died away in a prairie traversed by a small stream. This was the one Godfrey had seen from the top of the cone. The large trees appeared further on, and after a journey of about nine miles the two explorers, tired enough by their

four hours' walk, reached them a few minutes after noon.

The site was well worth the trouble of looking at, of visiting, and, doubtless, occupying.

On the edge of a vast prairie, dotted with manzanilla bushes and other shrubs, there rose a score of gigantic trees which could have even borne comparison with the same species in the forests of California. They were arranged in a semi-circle. The carpet of verdure, which stretched at their feet, after bordering the stream for some hundreds of feet, gave place to a long beach, covered with rocks, and shingle, and sea-weed, which ran out into the water in a narrowing point to the north.

These "big trees," as they are commonly called in Western America, belong to the genus Sequoia, and are conifers of the fir family. If you ask the English for their distinguishing name, you will be told "Wellingtonias," if you ask the Americans they will reply "Washingtonias." But whether they recall the memory of the phlegmatic victor of Waterloo, or of the illustrious founder of the American Republic, they are the hugest products known of the Californian and Nevadan floras. In certain districts in these states there are entire forests of these trees, such as the groups at Mariposa and Calaveras, some of the trees of which measure from sixty to eighty feet in circumference, and some 300 feet in height. One of them, at the entrance of the Yosemite Valley, is quite 100 feet round. When living--for it is now prostrate--its first branches could have overtopped Strasburg Cathedral, or, in other words, were above eighty feet from the ground.

Besides this tree there are "The Mother of the Forest," "The Beauty of the Forest," "The Hut of the Pioneer," "The Two Sentinels," "General Grant," "Miss Emma," "Miss Mary," "Brigham Young and his Wife," "The Three Graces," "The Bear," &c., &c.; all of them veritable vegetable phenomena. One of the trees has been sawn across at its base, and on it there has been built a ball-room, in which a quadrille of eight or ten couples can be danced with ease.

But the giant of giants, in a forest which is the property of the state, about fifteen miles from Murphy, is "The Father of the Forest," an old sequoia, 4000 years old, which rises 452 feet from the ground, higher than the cross of St. Peter's, at Rome, higher than the great pyramid of Ghizeh, higher than the iron bell-turret which now caps one of the towers of Rouen Cathedral, and which ought to be looked upon as the highest monument in the world.

It was a group of some twenty of these colossi that nature had planted on this point of the island, at the epoch, probably, when Solomon was building that temple at Jerusalem which has never risen from its ruins. The largest was, perhaps, 300 feet high, the smallest nearly 200.

Some of them, hollowed out by age, had enormous arches through their bases, beneath which a troop of horsemen could have ridden with ease.

Godfrey was struck with admiration in the presence of these natural phenomena, as they are not generally found at altitudes of less than

from 5000 to 6000 feet above the level of the sea. He even thought that the view alone was worth the journey. Nothing he had seen was comparable to these columns of clear brown, which outlined themselves almost without sensible diminution of their diameters to their lowest fork. The cylindrical trunks rising from 80 to 100 feet above the earth, ramified into such thick branches that they themselves looked like tree-stems of huge dimensions bearing quite a forest in the air.

One of these specimens of Sequoia gigantea--one of the biggest in the group--more particularly attracted Godfrey's attention.

Gazing at its base it displayed an opening of from four to five feet in width, and ten feet high, which gave entrance to its interior. The giant's heart had disappeared, the alburnum had been dissipated into soft whitish dust; but if the tree did not depend so much on its powerful roots as on its solid bark, it could still keep its position for centuries.

"In default of a cavern or a grotto," said Godfrey, "here is a ready-made dwelling. A wooden house, a tower, such as there is in no inhabited land. Here we can be sheltered and shut in. Come along, Tartlet! come!"

And the young man, catching hold of his companion, dragged him inside the sequoia.

The base was covered with a bed of vegetable dust, and in diameter could

not be less than twenty feet.

As for the height to which its vault extended, the gloom prevented even an estimate. For not a ray of light found its way through the bark wall. Neither cleft nor fault was there through which the wind or rain could come. Our two Crusoes would therein find themselves in a position to brave with impunity the inclemency of the weather. No cave could be firmer, or drier, or compacter. In truth it would have been difficult to have anywhere found a better.

"Eh, Tartlet, what do you think of our natural house?" asked Godfrey.

"Yes, but the chimney?" answered Tartlet.

"Before we talk about the chimney," replied Godfrey, "let us wait till we have got the fire!"

This was only logical.

Godfrey went to reconnoitre the neighbourhood. As we have said, the prairie extended to this enormous mass of sequoias which formed its edge. The small stream meandering through the grassy carpet gave a healthy freshness to its borders, and thereon grew shrubs of different kinds; myrtles, mastic bushes, and among others a quantity of manzanillas, which gave promise of a large crop of their wild apples.

Farther off, on ground that grew gradually higher, were scattered

several clumps of trees, made up of oaks and beeches, sycamores and nettle-trees, but trees of great stature as they were, they seemed but simple underwood by the side of the "mammoths," whose huge shadows the sun was throwing even into the sea. Across the prairie lay minor lines of bushes, and vegetable clumps and verdant thickets, which Godfrey resolved to investigate on the following day.

If the site pleased him, it did not displease the domestic animals. Agouties, goats, and sheep had soon taken possession of this domain, which offered them roots to nibble at, and grass to browse on far beyond their needs. As for the fowls they were greedily pecking away at the seeds and worms in the banks of the rivulet. Animal life was already manifesting itself in such goings and comings, such flights and gambols, such bleatings and gruntings and cluckings as had doubtless never been heard of in these parts before.

Then Godfrey returned to the clump of sequoias, and made a more attentive examination of the tree in which he had chosen to take up his abode. It appeared to him that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to climb into the first branches, at least by the exterior; for the trunk presented no protuberances. Inside it the ascent might be easier, if the tree were hollow up to the fork.

In case of danger it would be advisable to seek refuge among the thick boughs borne by the enormous trunk. But this matter could be looked into later on.

When he had finished his inquiries the sun was low on horizon, and it seemed best to put off till to-morrow the preparations for their definitely taking up their abode.

But, after a meal with dessert composed of wild apples, what could they do better than pass the night on a bed of the vegetable dust which covered the ground inside the sequoia?

And this, under the keeping of Providence, was what was done, but not until after Godfrey, in remembrance of his uncle, William W. Kolderup, had given to the giant the name of "Will Tree," just as its prototypes in the forests of California and the neighbouring states bear the names of the great citizens of the American Republic.