

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH ENDS WITH A THUNDER-BOLT.

It must be acknowledged that Godfrey was in a fair way to become a new man in this completely novel position to one so frivolous, so light-minded, and so thoughtless. He had hitherto only had to allow himself to live. Never had care for the morrow disquieted his rest. In the opulent mansion in Montgomery Street, where he slept his ten hours without a break, not the fall of a rose leaf had ever troubled his slumbers.

It was so no longer. On this unknown land he found himself thoroughly shut off from the rest of the world, left entirely to his own resources, obliged to face the necessities of life under conditions in which a man even much more practical might have been in great difficulty. Doubtless when it was found that the Dream did not return, a search for him would be made. But what were these two? Less than a needle in a hayrick or a sand-grain on the sea-bottom! The incalculable fortune of Uncle Kolderup could not do everything.

When Godfrey had found his fairly acceptable shelter, his sleep in it was by no means undisturbed. His brain travelled as it had never done before. Ideas of all kinds were associated together: those of the past which he bitterly regretted, those of the present of which he sought the realization, those of the future which disquieted him more than all!

But in these rough trials, the reason and, in consequence, the reasoning which naturally flows from it, were little by little freed from the limbo in which they had hitherto slept. Godfrey was resolved to strive against his ill-luck, and to do all he could to get out of his difficulties. If he escaped, the lesson would certainly not be lost on him for the future.

At daybreak he was astir, with the intention of proceeding to a more complete installation. The question of food, above all that of fire, which was connected with it, occupied the first place; then there were tools or arms to make, clothes to procure, unless they were anxious of soon appearing attired in Polynesian costume.

Tartlet still slumbered. You could not see him in the shadow, but you could hear him. That poor man, spared from the wreck, remained as frivolous at forty-five as his pupil had formerly been. He was a gain in no sense. He even might be considered an incubus, for he had to be cared for in all ways. But he was a companion!

He was worth more in that than the most intelligent dog, although he was probably of less use! He was a creature able to talk--although only at random; to converse--if the matter were never serious; to complain--and this he did most frequently! As it was, Godfrey was able to hear a human voice. That was worth more than the parrot's in Robinson Crusoe! Even with a Tartlet he would not be alone, and nothing was so disheartening as the thought of absolute solitude.

"Crusoe before Friday, Crusoe after Friday; what a difference!" thought he.

However, on this morning, that of June 29th, Godfrey was not sorry to be alone, so as to put into execution his project of exploring the group of sequoias. Perhaps he would be fortunate enough to discover some fruit, some edible root, which he could bring back--to the extreme satisfaction of the professor. And so he left Tartlet to his dreams, and set out.

A light fog still shrouded the shore and the sea, but already it had commenced to lift in the north and east under the influence of the solar rays, which little by little were condensing it. The day promised to be fine. Godfrey, after having cut himself a substantial walking-stick, went for two miles along that part of the beach which he did not know, and whose return formed the outstretched point of Phina Island.

There he made a first meal of shell-fish, mussels, clams, and especially some capital little oysters which he found in great abundance.

"If it comes to the worst," he said to himself, "we need never die of hunger! Here are thousands of dozens of oysters to satisfy the calls of the most imperious stomach! If Tartlet complains, it is because he does not like mollusks! Well, he will have to like them!"

Decidedly, if the oyster did not absolutely replace bread and meat, it furnished an aliment in no whit less nutritive and in a condition

capable of being absorbed in large quantities. But as this mollusk is of very easy digestion, it is somewhat dangerous in its use, to say nothing of its abuse.

This breakfast ended, Godfrey again seized his stick, and struck off obliquely towards the south-east, so as to walk up the right bank of the stream. In this direction, he would cross the prairie up to the groups of trees observed the night before beyond the long lines of shrubs and underwood, which he wished to carefully examine.

Godfrey then advanced in this direction for about two miles. He followed the bank of the stream, carpeted with short herbage and smooth as velvet. Flocks of aquatic birds noisily flew round this being, who, new to them, had come to trouble their domain. Fish of many kinds were seen darting about in the limpid waters of the brook, hereabouts some four or five yards wide.

It was evident that there would be no difficulty in catching these fish, but how to cook them? Always this insoluble question!

Fortunately, when Godfrey reached the first line of shrubs he recognized two sorts of fruits or roots. One sort had to pass through the fiery trial before being eaten, the other was edible in its natural state. Of these two vegetables the American Indians make constant use.

The first was a shrub of the kind called "camas," which thrives even in lands unfit for culture. With these onion-like roots, should it not be

found preferable to treat them as potatoes, there is made a sort of flour very rich and glutinous. But either way, they have to be subjected to a certain cooking, or drying.

The other bush produces a species of bulb of oblong form, bearing the indigenous name of "yamph," and if it possesses less nutritive principles than the camas, it is much the better for one thing,--it can be eaten raw.

Godfrey, highly pleased at his discovery, at once satisfied his hunger on a few of these excellent roots, and not forgetting Tartlet's breakfast, collected a large bundle, and throwing it over his shoulder, retook the road to Will Tree.

That he was well received on his arrival with the crop of yamphs need not be insisted on. The professor greedily regaled himself, and his pupil had to caution him to be moderate.

"Ah!" he said. "We have got some roots to-day. Who knows whether we shall have any to-morrow?"

"Without any doubt," replied Godfrey, "to-morrow and the day after, and always. There is only the trouble of going and fetching them."

"Well, Godfrey, and the camas?"

"Of the camas we will make flour and bread when we have got a fire."

"Fire!" exclaimed the professor, shaking his head. "Fire! And how shall we make it?"

"I don't know yet, but somehow or other we will get at it."

"May Heaven hear you, my dear Godfrey! And when I think that there are so many fellows in this world who have only got to rub a bit of wood on the sole of their boot to get it, it annoys me! No! Never would I have believed that ill-luck would have reduced me to this state! You need not take three steps down Montgomery Street, before you will meet with a gentleman, cigar in mouth, who thinks it a pleasure to give you a light, and here--"

"Here we are not in San Francisco, Tartlet, nor in Montgomery Street, and I think it would be wiser for us not to reckon on the kindness of those we meet!"

"But, why is cooking necessary for bread and meat? Why did not nature make us so that we might live upon nothing?"

"That will come, perhaps!" answered Godfrey with a good-humoured smile.

"Do you think so?"

"I think that our scientists are probably working out the subject."

"Is it possible! And how do they start on their research as to this new mode of alimentation?"

"On this line of reasoning," answered Godfrey, "as the functions of digestion and respiration are connected, the endeavour is to substitute one for the other. Hence the day when chemistry has made the aliments necessary for the food of man capable of assimilation by respiration, the problem will be solved. There is nothing wanted beyond rendering the air nutritious. You will breathe your dinner instead of eating it, that is all!"

"Ah! Is it not a pity that this precious discovery is not yet made!" exclaimed the professor. "How cheerfully would I breathe half a dozen sandwiches and a silverside of beef, just to give me an appetite!"

And Tartlet plunged into a semi-sensuous reverie, in which he beheld succulent atmospheric dinners, and at them unconsciously opened his mouth and breathed his lungs full, oblivious that he had scarcely the wherewithal to feed upon in the ordinary way.

Godfrey roused him from his meditation, and brought him back to the present. He was anxious to proceed to a more complete installation in the interior of Will Tree.

The first thing to do was to clean up their future dwelling-place. It was at the outset necessary to bring out several bushels of that vegetable dust which covered the ground and in which they sank almost up

to their knees. Two hours' work hardly sufficed to complete this troublesome task, but at length the chamber was clear of the pulverulent bed, which rose in clouds at the slightest movement.

The ground was hard and firm, as if floored with joists, the large roots of the sequoia ramifying over its surface. It was uneven but solid. Two corners were selected for the beds and of these several bundles of herbage, thoroughly dried in the sun, were to form the materials. As for other furniture, benches, stools, or tables, it was not impossible to make the most indispensable things, for Godfrey had a capital knife, with its saw and gimlet. The companions would have to keep inside during rough weather, and they could eat and work there. Daylight did not fail them, for it streamed through the opening. Later on, if it became necessary to close this aperture for greater safety, Godfrey could try and pierce one or two embrasures in the bark of the sequoia to serve as windows.

As for discovering to what height the opening ran up into the trunk, Godfrey could not do so without a light. All that he could do was to find out with the aid of a pole ten or twelve feet long, held above his head, that he could not touch the top.

The question, however, was not an urgent one. It would be solved eventually.

The day passed in these labours, which were not ended at sunset. Godfrey and Tartlet, tired as they were, found their novel bed-clothes formed of

the dried herbage, of which they had an ample supply, most excellent; but they had to drive away the poultry who would willingly have roosted in the interior of Will Tree. Then occurred to Godfrey the idea of constructing a poultry-house in some other sequoia, as, to keep them out of the common room, he was building up a hurdle of brushwood. Fortunately neither the sheep nor the agouties, nor the goats experienced the like temptation. These animals remained quietly outside, and had no fancy to get through the insufficient barrier.

The following days were employed in different jobs, in fitting up the house or bringing in food; eggs and shell-fish were collected, yamph roots and manzanilla apples were brought in, and oysters, for which each morning they went to the bank or the shore. All this took time, and the hours passed away quickly.

The "dinner things" consisted now of large bivalve shells, which served for dishes or plates. It is true that for the kind of food to which the hosts of Will Tree were reduced, others were not needed.

There was also the washing of the linen in the clear water of the stream, which occupied the leisure of Tartlet. It was to him that this task fell; but he only had to see to the two shirts, two handkerchiefs, and two pairs of socks, which composed the entire wardrobe of both.

While this operation was in progress, Godfrey and Tartlet had to wear only waistcoat and trousers, but in the blazing sun of that latitude the clothes quickly dried. And so matters went on without either rain or

wind till July 3rd. Already they had begun to be fairly comfortable in their new home, considering the condition in which they had been cast on the island.

However, it was advisable not to neglect the chances of safety which might come from without. Each day Godfrey examined the whole sector of sea which extended from the east to the north-west beyond the promontory.

This part of the Pacific was always deserted. Not a vessel, not a fishing-boat, not a ribbon of smoke detaching itself from the horizon, proclaimed the passage of a steamer. It seemed that Phina Island was situated out of the way of all the itineraries of commerce. All they could do was to wait, trusting in the Almighty who never abandons the weak.

Meanwhile, when their immediate necessities allowed them leisure, Godfrey, incited by Tartlet, returned to that important and vexed question of the fire.

He tried at first to replace amadou, which he so unfortunately lacked, by another and analogous material. It was possible that some of the varieties of mushrooms which grew in the crevices of the old trees, after having been subjected to prolonged drying, might be transformed into a combustible substance.

Many of these mushrooms were collected and exposed to the direct action

of the sun, until they were reduced to powder. Then with the back of his knife, Godfrey endeavoured to strike some sparks off with a flint, so that they might fall on this substance. It was useless. The spongy stuff would not catch fire. Godfrey then tried to use that fine vegetable dust, dried during so many centuries, which he had found in the interior of Will Tree. The result was equally discouraging.

In desperation he then, by means of his knife and flint, strove to secure the ignition of a sort of sponge which grew under the rocks. He fared no better. The particle of steel, lighted by the impact of the silex, fell on to the substance, but went out immediately. Godfrey and Tartlet were in despair. To do without fire was impossible. Of their fruits and mollusks they were getting tired, and their stomachs began to revolt at such food. They eyed, the professor especially, the sheep, agouties, and fowls which went and came round Will Tree. The pangs of hunger seized them as they gazed. With their eyes they ate the living meat!

No! It could not go on like this!

But an unexpected circumstance, a providential one if you will, came to their aid.

In the night of the 3rd of July the weather, which had been on the change for a day or so, grew stormy, after an oppressive heat which the sea-breeze had been powerless to temper.

Godfrey and Tartlet at about one o'clock in the morning were awakened by heavy claps of thunder, and most vivid flashes of lightning. It did not rain as yet, but it soon promised to do so, and then regular cataracts would be precipitated from the cloudy zone, owing to the rapid condensation of the vapour.

Godfrey got up and went out so as to observe the state of the sky.

There seemed quite a conflagration above the domes of the giant trees and the foliage appeared on fire against the sky, like the fine network of a Chinese shadow.

Suddenly, in the midst of the general uproar, a vivid flash illuminated the atmosphere. The thunder-clap followed immediately, and Will Tree was permeated from top to bottom with the electric force.

Godfrey, staggered by the return shock, stood in the midst of a rain of fire which showered around him. The lightning had ignited the dry branches above him. They were incandescent particles of carbon which crackled at his feet.

Godfrey with a shout awoke his companion.

"Fire! Fire!"

"Fire!" answered Tartlet. "Blessed be Heaven which sends it to us!"

Instantly they possessed themselves of the flaming twigs, of which some still burned, while others had been consumed in the flames. Hurriedly, at the same time, did they heap together a quantity of dead wood such as was never wanting at the foot of the sequoia, whose trunk had not been touched by the lightning.

Then they returned into their gloomy habitation as the rain, pouring down in sheets, extinguished the fire which threatened to devour the upper branches of Will Tree.