

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH GODFREY AGAIN SEES A SLIGHT SMOKE OVER ANOTHER
PART OF THE
ISLAND.

That was a storm which came just when it was wanted! Godfrey and Tartlet had not, like Prometheus, to venture into space to bring down the celestial fire! "It was," said Tartlet, "as if the sky had been obliging enough to send it down to them on a lightning flash."

With them now remained the task of keeping it!

"No! we must not let it go out!" Godfrey had said.

"Not until the wood fails us to feed it!" had responded Tartlet, whose satisfaction showed itself in little cries of joy.

"Yes! but who will keep it in?"

"I! I will! I will watch it day and night, if necessary," replied Tartlet, brandishing a flaming bough.

And he did so till the sun rose.

Dry wood, as we have said, abounded beneath the sequoias. Until the dawn

Godfrey and the professor, after heaping up a considerable stock, did not spare to feed the fire. By the foot of one of the large trees in a narrow space between the roots the flames leapt up, crackling clearly and joyously. Tartlet exhausted his lungs blowing away at it, although his doing so was perfectly useless. In this performance he assumed the most characteristic attitudes in following the greyish smoke whose wreaths were lost in the foliage above.

But it was not that they might admire it that they had so longingly asked for this indispensable fire, not to warm themselves at it. It was destined for a much more interesting use. There was to be an end of their miserable meals of raw mollusks and yamph roots, whose nutritive elements boiling water and simple cooking in the ashes had never developed. It was in this way that Godfrey and Tartlet employed it during the morning.

"We could eat a fowl or two!" exclaimed Tartlet, whose jaws moved in anticipation. "Not to mention an agouti ham, a leg of mutton, a quarter of goat, some of the game on the prairie, without counting two or three freshwater fish and a sea fish or so."

"Not so fast," answered Godfrey, whom the declaration of this modest bill of fare had put in good humour. "We need not risk indigestion to satisfy a fast! We must look after our reserves, Tartlet! Take a couple of fowls--one apiece--and if we want bread, I hope that our camsa roots can be so prepared as to replace it with advantage!" This cost the lives of two innocent hens, who, plucked, trussed, and dressed by the

professor, were stuck on a stick, and soon roasted before the crackling flames.

Meanwhile, Godfrey was getting the camas roots in a state to figure creditably at the first genuine breakfast on Phina Island. To render them edible it was only necessary to follow the Indian method, which the Californians were well acquainted with.

This was what Godfrey did.

A few flat stones selected from the beach were thrown in the fire so as to get intensely hot. Tartlet seemed to think it a great shame to use such a good fire "to cook stones with," but as it did not hinder the preparation of his fowls in any way he had no other complaint to make.

While the stones were getting warm Godfrey selected a piece of ground about a yard square from which he tore up the grass; then with his hands armed with large scallop shells he dug the soil to the depth of about ten inches. That done he laid at the bottom of the cavity a fire of dry wood, which he so arranged as to communicate to the earth heaped up at its bottom some considerable heat.

When all the wood had been consumed and the cinders taken away, the camas roots, previously cleaned and scraped, were strewn in the hole, a thin layer of sods thrown over them and the glowing stones placed on the top, so as to serve as the basis of a new fire which was lighted on their surface.

In fact, it was a kind of oven which had been prepared; and in a very short time--about half an hour or so--the operation was at an end.

Beneath the double layer of stones and sods lay the roots cooked by this violent heating. On crushing them there was obtainable a flour well fitted for making into bread, but, even eaten as they were, they proved much like potatoes of highly nutritive quality.

It was thus that this time the roots were served and we leave our readers to imagine what a breakfast our two friends made on the chickens which they devoured to the very bones, and on the excellent camas roots, of which they had no need to be sparing. The field was not far off where they grew in abundance. They could be picked up in hundreds by simply stooping down for them.

The repast over, Godfrey set to work to prepare some of the flour, which keeps for any length of time, and which could be transformed into bread for their daily wants.

The day was passed in different occupations. The fire was kept up with great care. Particularly was the fuel heaped on for the night; and Tartlet, nevertheless, arose on many occasions to sweep the ashes together and provoke a more active combustion. Having done this, he would go to bed again, to get up as soon as the fire burnt low, and thus he occupied himself till the day broke. The night passed without incident, the cracklings of the fire and the crow of the cock awoke

Godfrey and his companion, who had ended his performances by falling off to sleep.

At first Godfrey was surprised at feeling a current of air coming down from above in the interior of Will Tree. He was thus led to think that the sequoia was hollow up to the junction of the lower branches where there was an opening which they would have to stop up if they wished to be snug and sheltered.

"But it is very singular!" said Godfrey to himself.

"How was it that during the preceding nights I did not feel this current of air? Could it have been the lightning?"

And to get an answer to this question, the idea occurred to him to examine the trunk of the sequoia from the out side.

When he had done so, he understood what had happened during the storm.

The track of the lightning was visible on the tree, which had had a long strip of its bark torn off from the fork down to the roots.

Had the electric spark found its way into the interior of the sequoia in place of keeping to the outside, Godfrey and his companion would have been struck. Most decidedly they had had a narrow escape.

"It is not a good thing to take refuge under trees during a storm," said

Godfrey. "That is all very well for people who can do otherwise. But what way have we to avoid the danger who live inside the tree? We must see!"

Then examining the sequoia from the point where the long lightning trace began--"It is evident," said he, "that where the flash struck the tree has been cracked. But since the air penetrates by this orifice the tree must be hollow along its whole length and only lives in its bark? Now that is what I ought to see about!"

And Godfrey went to look for a resinous piece of wood that might do for a torch.

A bundle of pine twigs furnished him with the torch he needed, as from them exuded a resin which, once inflamed, gave forth a brilliant light.

Godfrey then entered the cavity which served him for his house. To darkness immediately succeeded light, and it was easy to see the state of the interior of Will Tree. A sort of vault of irregular formation stretched across in a ceiling some fifteen feet above the ground. Lifting his torch Godfrey distinctly saw that into this there opened a narrow passage whose further development was lost in the shadow. The tree was evidently hollow throughout its length; but perhaps some portion of the alburnum still remained intact. In that case, by the help of the protuberances it would be possible if not easy to get up to the fork.

Godfrey, who was thinking of the future, resolved to know without delay if this were so.

He had two ends in view; one, to securely close the opening by which the rain and wind found admission, and so render Will Tree almost habitable; the other, to see if in case of danger, or an attack from animals or savages, the upper branches of the tree would not afford a convenient refuge.

He could but try. If he encountered any insurmountable obstacle in the narrow passage, Godfrey could be got down again.

After firmly sticking his torch between two of the roots below, behold him then commencing to raise himself on to the first interior knots of the bark. He was lithe, strong, and accustomed to gymnastics like all young Americans. It was only sport to him. Soon he had reached in this uneven tube a part much narrower, in which, with the aid of his back and knees, he could work his way upwards like a chimney-sweep. All he feared was that the hole would not continue large enough for him to get up.

However, he kept on, and each time he reached a projection he would stop and take breath.

Three minutes after leaving the ground, Godfrey had mounted about sixty feet, and consequently could only have about twenty feet further to go.

In fact, he already felt the air blowing more strongly on his face. He

inhaled it greedily, for the atmosphere inside the sequoia was not, strictly speaking, particularly fresh.

After resting for a minute, and shaking off the fine dust which he had rubbed on to him off the wall, Godfrey started again up the long tunnel, which gradually narrowed.

But at this moment his attention was attracted by a peculiar noise, which appeared to him somewhat suspicious. There was a sound as of scratching, up the tree. Almost immediately a sort of hissing was heard.

Godfrey stopped.

"What is that?" he asked. "Some animal taken refuge in the sequoia? Was it a snake? No! We have not yet seen one on the island! Perhaps it is a bird that wants to get out!"

Godfrey was not mistaken; and as he continued to mount, a cawing, followed by a rapid flapping of wings, showed him that it was some bird ensconced in the tree whose sleep he was doubtless disturbing.

Many a "frrr-frrr!" which he gave out with the whole power of his lungs, soon determined the intruder to clear off.

It proved to be a kind of jackdaw, of huge stature, which scuttled out of the opening, and disappeared into the summit of Will Tree.

A few seconds afterwards, Godfrey's head appeared through the same opening, and he soon found himself quite at his ease, installed on a fork of the tree where the lower branches gave off, at about eighty feet from the ground.

There, as has been said, the enormous stem of the sequoia supported quite a forest. The capricious network of its upper boughs presented the aspect of a wood crowded with trees, which no gap rendered passable.

However, Godfrey managed, not without difficulty, to get along from one branch to another, so as to gain little by little the upper story of this vegetable phenomenon.

A number of birds with many a cry flew off at his approach, and hastened to take refuge in the neighbouring members of the group, above which Will Tree towered by more than a head.

Godfrey continued to climb as well as he could, and did not stop until the ends of the higher branches began to bend beneath his weight.

A huge horizon of water surrounded Phina Island, which lay unrolled like a relief-map at his feet. Greedily his eyes examined that portion of the sea. It was still deserted. He had to conclude once more, that the island lay away from the trade routes of the Pacific.

Godfrey uttered a heavy sigh; then his look fell on the narrow domain on which fate had condemned him to live, doubtless for long, perhaps for

ever.

But what was his surprise when he saw, this time away to the north, a smoke similar to that which he had already thought he had seen in the south. He watched it with the keenest attention.

[Illustration: There was the column of smoke. page 152]

A very light vapour, calm and pure, greyish blue at its tip, rose straight in the air.

"No! I am not mistaken!" exclaimed Godfrey. "There is a smoke, and therefore a fire which produces it! And that fire could not have been lighted except by--By whom?"

Godfrey then with extreme precision took the bearings of the spot in question.

The smoke was rising in the north-east of the island, amid the high rocks which bordered the beach. There was no mistake about that. It was less than five miles from Will Tree. Striking straight to the north-east across the prairie, and then following the shore, he could not fail to find the rocks above which the vapour rose.

With beating heart Godfrey made his way down the scaffolding of branches until he reached the fork. There he stopped an instant to clear off the moss and leaves which clung to him, and that done he slid down the

opening, which he enlarged as much as possible, and rapidly gained the ground. A word to Tartlet not to be uneasy at his absence, and Godfrey hastened off in the north-easterly direction so as to reach the shore.

It was a two hours' walk across the verdant prairie, through clumps of scattered trees, or hedges of spiny shrubs, and then along the beach. At length the last chain of rocks was reached.

But the smoke which Godfrey had seen from the top of the tree he searched for in vain when he had reached the ground. As he had taken the bearings of the spot with great care, he came towards it without any mistake.

There Godfrey began his search. He carefully explored every nook and corner of this part of the shore. He called. No one answered to his shout. No human being appeared on the beach. Not a rock gave him a trace of a newly lighted fire--nor of a fire now extinct, which could have been fed by sea herbs and dry algæ thrown up by the tide.

"But it is impossible that I should have been mistaken!" repeated Godfrey to himself. "I am sure it was smoke that I saw! And besides!--"

As Godfrey could not admit that he had been the dupe of a delusion, he began to think that there must exist some well of heated water, or kind of intermittent geyser, which he could not exactly find, but which had given forth the vapour.

There was nothing to show that in the island there were not many of such natural wells, and the apparition of the column of smoke could be easily explained by so simple a geological phenomenon.

Godfrey left the shore and returned towards Will Tree, observing the country as he went along a little more carefully than he had done as he came. A few ruminants showed themselves, amongst others some wapiti, but they dashed past with such speed that it was impossible to get near them.

In about four hours Godfrey got back. Just before he reached the tree he heard the shrill "twang! squeak!" of the kit, and soon found himself face to face with Professor Tartlet, who, in the attitude of a vestal, was watching the sacred fire confided to his keeping.