

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH THERE HAPPENS WHAT HAPPENS AT LEAST ONCE IN THE
LIFE OF EVERY

CRUSOE, REAL OR IMAGINARY.

And now the future looked less gloomy. But if Tartlet saw in the possession of the instruments, the tools, and the weapons only the means of making their life of isolation a little more agreeable, Godfrey was already thinking of how to escape from Phina Island. Could he not now construct a vessel strong enough to enable them to reach if not some neighbouring land, at least some ship passing within sight of the island?

Meanwhile the weeks which followed were principally spent in carrying out not these ideas, but those of Tartlet. The wardrobe at Will Tree was now replenished, but it was decided to use it with all the discretion which the uncertainty of the future required. Never to wear any of the clothes unless necessity compelled him to do so, was the rule to which the professor was forced to submit.

"What is the good of that?" grumbled he. "It is a great deal too stingy, my dear Godfrey! Are we savages, that we should go about half naked?"

"I beg your pardon, Tartlet," replied Godfrey; "we are savages, and

nothing else."

"As you please; but you will see that we shall leave the island before we have worn the clothes!"

"I know nothing about it, Tartlet, and it is better to have than to want."

"But on Sunday now, surely on Sunday, we might dress up a little?"

"Very well, on Sundays then, and perhaps on public holidays," answered Godfrey, who did not wish to anger his frivolous companion; "but as to day is Monday we shall have to wait a whole week before we come out in our best."

We need hardly mention that from the moment he arrived on the island Godfrey had not omitted to mark each day as it passed. By the aid of the calendar he found in the box he was able to verify that the day was really Monday.

Each performed his daily task according to his ability. It was no longer necessary for them to keep watch by day and night over a fire which they had now the means of relighting.

Tartlet therefore abandoned, not without regret, a task which suited him so well. Henceforwards he took charge of the provisioning with yamph and camas roots--of that in short which formed the daily bread of the

establishment, so that the professor went every day and collected them, up to the lines of shrubs with which the prairie was bordered behind Will Tree. It was one or two miles to walk, but he accustomed himself to it. Between whiles he occupied his time in collecting oysters or other mollusks, of which they consumed a great quantity.

Godfrey reserved for himself the care of the domestic animals and the poultry. The butchering trade was hardly to his taste, but he soon overcame his repugnance. Thanks to him, boiled meats appeared frequently on the table, followed by an occasional joint of roast meat to afford a sufficiently varied bill of fare. Game abounded in the woods of Phina Island, and Godfrey proposed to begin his shooting when other more pressing cares allowed him time. He thought of making good use of the guns, powder, and bullets in his arsenal, but he in the first place wished to complete his preparations. His tools enabled him to make several benches inside and outside Will Tree. The stools were cut out roughly with the axe, the table made a little less roughly became more worthy of the dishes and dinner things with which Professor Tartlet adorned it. The beds were arranged in wooden boxes and their litter of dry grass assumed a more inviting aspect. If mattresses and palliasses were still wanting, counterpanes at least were not. The various cooking utensils stood no longer on the ground, but had their places on planks fixed along the walls. Stores, linen, and clothes were carefully put away in cavities hollowed out in the bark of the sequoia. From strong pegs were suspended the arms and instruments, forming quite a trophy on the walls.

Godfrey was also desirous of putting a door to the house, so that the other living creatures--the domestic animals--should not come during the night and trouble their sleep. As he could not cut out boards with his only saw, the handsaw, he used large and thick pieces of bark, which he got off very easily. With these he made a door sufficiently massive to close the opening into Will Tree, at the same time he made two little windows, one opposite to the other, so as to let light and air into the room. Shutters allowed him to close them at night, but from the morning to the evening it was no longer necessary to take refuge in flaring resinous torches which filled the dwelling with smoke. What Godfrey would think of to yield them light during the long nights of winter he had as yet no idea. He might take to making candles with the mutton fat, or he might be contented with resinous torches more carefully prepared. We shall see.

Another of his anxieties was how to construct a chimney in Will Tree. While the fine weather lasted, the fire outside among the roots of the sequoia sufficed for all the wants of the kitchen, but when the bad weather came and the rain fell in torrents, and they would have to battle with the cold, whose extreme rigour during a certain time they reasonably feared, they would have to have a fire inside their house, and the smoke from it must have some vent. This important question therefore had to be settled.

One very useful work which Godfrey undertook was to put both banks of the river in communication with each other on the skirt of the sequoia-trees.

He managed, after some difficulty, to drive a few stakes into the river-bed, and on them he fixed a staging of planks, which served for a bridge. They could thus get away to the northern shore without crossing the ford, which led them a couple of miles out of their road.

But if Godfrey took all these precautions so as to make existence a little more possible on this lone isle of the Pacific, in case he and his companion were destined to live on it for some time, or perhaps live on it for ever, he had no intention of neglecting in any way the chances of rescue.

Phina Island was not on the routes taken by the ships--that was only too evident. It offered no port of call, nor means of revictualling. There was nothing to encourage ships to take notice of it. At the same time it was not impossible that a war-ship or a merchant-vessel might come in sight. It was advisable therefore to find some way of attracting attention, and showing that the island was inhabited.

With this object Godfrey erected a flagstaff at the end of the cape which ran out to the north, and for a flag he sacrificed a piece of one of the cloths found in the trunk. As he thought that the white colour would only be visible in a strong light, he tried to stain his flag with the berries of a sort of shrub which grew at the foot of the dunes. He obtained a very vivid red, which he could not make indelible owing to his having no mordant, but he could easily re-dye the cloth when the wind or rain had faded it.

These varied employments occupied him up to the 15th of August. For many weeks the sky had been constantly clear, with the exception of two or three storms of extreme violence which had brought down a large quantity of water, to be greedily drunk in by the soil.

About this time Godfrey began his shooting expeditions. But if he was skilful enough in the use of the gun, he could not reckon on Tartlet, who had yet to fire his first shot.

Many days of the week did Godfrey devote to the pursuit of fur and feather, which, without being abundant, were yet plentiful enough for the requirements of Will Tree.

A few partridges, some of the red-legged variety, and a few snipes, came as a welcome variation of the bill of fare. Two or three antelopes fell to the prowess of the young stalker; and although he had had nothing to do with their capture, the professor gave them a no less welcome than he did when they appeared as haunches and cutlets.

But while he was out shooting, Godfrey did not forget to take a more complete survey of the island. He penetrated the depths of the dense forests which occupied the central districts. He ascended the river to its source. He again mounted the summit of the cone, and redescended by the talus on the eastern shore, which he had not, up to then, visited.

"After all these explorations," repeated Godfrey to himself, "there can

be no doubt that Phina Island has no dangerous animals, neither wild beasts, snakes, nor saurians! I have not caught sight of one! Assuredly if there had been any, the report of the gun would have woke them up! It is fortunate, indeed. If it were to become necessary to fortify Will Tree against their attacks, I do not know how we should get on!"

Then passing on to quite a natural deduction--

"It must also be concluded," continued he, "that the island is not inhabited at all. Either natives or people shipwrecked here would have appeared before now at the sound of the gun! There is, however, that inexplicable smoke which I twice thought I saw."

The fact is, that Godfrey had never been able to trace any fire. As for the hot water springs to which he attributed the origin of the vapour he had noticed, Phina Island being in no way volcanic did not appear to contain any, and he had to content himself with thinking that he had twice been the victim of an illusion.

Besides, this apparition of the smoke or the vapour was not repeated. When Godfrey the second time ascended the central cone, as also when he again climbed up into Will Tree, he saw nothing to attract his attention. He ended by forgetting the circumstance altogether.

Many weeks passed in different occupations about the tree, and many shooting excursions were undertaken. With every day their mode of life improved.

Every Sunday, as had been agreed, Tartlet donned his best clothes. On that day he did nothing but walk about under the big trees, and indulge in an occasional tune on the kit. Many were the glissades he performed, giving lessons to himself, as his pupil had positively refused to continue his course.

"What is the good of it?" was Godfrey's answer to the entreaties of the professor. "Can you imagine Robinson Crusoe taking lessons in dancing and deportment?"

"And why not?" asked Tartlet seriously. "Why should Robinson Crusoe dispense with deportment? Not for the good of others, but of himself, he should acquire refined manners."

To which Godfrey made no reply. And as he never came for his lesson, the professor became professor "emeritus."

The 13th of September was noted for one of the greatest and cruellest deceptions to which, on a desert island, the unfortunate survivors of a shipwreck could be subjected.

Godfrey had never again seen that inexplicable and undiscoverable smoke on the island; but on this day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, his attention was attracted by a long line of vapour, about the origin of which he could not be deceived.

He had gone for a walk to the end of Flag Point--the name which he had given to the cape on which he had erected his flagstaff. While he was looking through his glass he saw above the horizon a smoke driven by the west wind towards the island.

Godfrey's heart beat high.

"A ship!" he exclaimed.

But would this ship, this steamer, pass in sight of Phina Island? And if it passed, would it come near enough for the signal thereon to be seen on board?

Or would not rather the semi-visible smoke disappear with the vessel towards the north-west or south-west of the horizon?

For two hours Godfrey was a prey to alternating emotions more easy to indicate than to describe.

The smoke got bigger and bigger. It increased when the steamer re-stoked her fires, and diminished almost to vanishing-point as the fuel was consumed. Continually did the vessel visibly approach. About four o'clock her hull had come up on the line between the sky and the sea.

She was a large steamer, bearing north-east. Godfrey easily made that out. If that direction was maintained, she would inevitably approach Phina Island.

Godfrey had at first thought of running back to Will Tree to inform Tartlet. What was the use of doing so? The sight of one man making signals could do as much good as that of two. He remained there, his glass at his eye, losing not a single movement of the ship.

The steamer kept on her course towards the coast, her bow steered straight for the cape. By five o'clock the horizon-line was already above her hull, and her rig was visible. Godfrey could even recognize the colours at her gaff.

She carried the United States' ensign.

"But if I can see their flag, cannot they see mine? The wind keeps it out, so that they could easily see my flag with their glasses. Shall I make signals, by raising it and lowering it a few times, so as to show that I want to enter into communication with them? Yes! I have not an instant to lose."

It was a good idea. Godfrey ran to the end of Flag Point, and began to haul his flag up and down, as if he were saluting. Then he left it half-mast high, so as to show, in the way usual with seafaring people, that he required help and succour.

The steamer still approached to within three miles of the shore, but her flag remained immovable at the peak, and replied not to that on Flag Point. Godfrey felt his heart sink. He would not be noticed! It was

half-past six, and the sun was about to set!

The steamer was now about two miles from the cape, which she was rapidly nearing. At this moment the sun disappeared below the horizon. With the first shadows of night, all hope of being seen had to be given up.

Godfrey again, with no more success, began to raise and lower his flag. There was no reply.

He then fired his gun two or three times, but the distance was still great, and the wind did not set in that direction! No report would be heard on board!

The night gradually came on; soon the steamer's hull grew invisible. Doubtless in another hour she would have passed Phina Island.

Godfrey, not knowing what to do, thought of setting fire to a group of resinous trees which grew at the back of Flag Point. He lighted a heap of dry leaves with some gunpowder, and then set light to the group of pines, which flared up like an enormous torch.

But no fire on the ship answered to the one on the land, and Godfrey returned sadly to Will Tree, feeling perhaps more desolate than he had ever felt till then.