

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH PROFESSOR TARTLET'S GUN REALLY DOES MARVELS.

But Godfrey suddenly uttered an exclamation which made the professor jump. There could be no doubt that the savages knew the island was inhabited, for the flag hitherto hoisted at the extremity of the cape had been carried away by them and no longer floated on the mast at Flag Point. The moment had then come to put the project into execution, to reconnoitre if the savages were still in the island, and to see what they were doing.

"Let us go," said he to his companion.

"Go! But--" answered Tartlet.

"Would you rather stay here?"

"With you, Godfrey--yes!"

"No--alone!"

"Alone! Never!"

"Come along then!"

Tartlet, thoroughly understanding that Godfrey would not alter his decision, resolved to accompany him. He had not courage enough to stay behind at Will Tree.

Before starting, Godfrey assured himself that the fire-arms were ready for action. The two guns were loaded, and one passed into the hands of the professor, who seemed as much embarrassed with it as might have been a savage of Pomotou. He also hung one of the hunting-knives to his belt, to which he had already attached his cartridge-pouch. The thought had occurred to him to also take his fiddle, imagining perhaps that they would be sensible to the charm of its squeaking, of which all the talent of a virtuoso could not conceal the harshness.

Godfrey had some trouble in getting him to abandon this idea, which was as ridiculous as it was impracticable.

It was now six o'clock in the morning. The summits of the sequoias were glowing in the first rays of the sun.

Godfrey opened the door; he stepped outside; he scanned the group of trees.

Complete solitude.

The animals had returned to the prairie. There they were, tranquilly browsing, about a quarter of a mile away. Nothing about them denoted the least uneasiness.

Godfrey made a sign to Tartlet to join him. The professor, as clumsy as could be in his fighting harness, followed--not without some hesitation.

Then Godfrey shut the door, and saw that it was well hidden in the bark of the sequoia. Then, having thrown at the foot of the tree a bundle of twigs, which he weighted with a few large stones, he set out towards the river, whose banks he intended to descend, if necessary, to its mouth. Tartlet followed him not without giving before each of his steps an uneasy stare completely round him up to the very limits of the horizon; but the fear of being left alone impelled him to advance.

Arrived at the edge of the group of trees, Godfrey stopped.

Taking his glasses from their case, he scanned with extreme attention all that part of the coast between the Flag Point promontory and the north-east angle of the island.

Not a living being showed itself, not a single smoke wreath was rising in the air.

The end of the cape was equally deserted, but they would there doubtless find numberless footprints freshly made. As for the mast, Godfrey had not been deceived. If the staff still rose above the last rock on the cape, it was bereft of its flag. Evidently the savages after coming to the place had gone off with the red cloth which had excited their covetousness, and had regained their boat at the mouth of the river.

Godfrey then turned off so as to examine the western shore.

It was nothing but a vast desert from Flag Point right away beyond the curve of Dream Bay.

No boat of any kind appeared on the surface of the sea. If the savages had taken to their proa, it only could be concluded that they were hugging the coast sheltered by the rocks, and so closely that they could not be seen.

However, Godfrey could not and would not remain in doubt. He was determined to ascertain, yes or no, if the proa had definitely left the island.

To do this it was necessary to visit the spot where the savages had landed the night before, that is to say, the narrow creek at the mouth of the river.

This he immediately attempted.

The borders of the small watercourse were shaded by occasional clumps of trees encircled by shrubs, for a distance of about two miles. Beyond that for some five or six hundred yards down to the sea the river ran between naked banks. This state of affairs enabled him to approach close to the landing-place without being perceived. It might be, however, that the savages had ascended the stream, and to be prepared for this

eventuality the advance had to be made with extreme caution.

Godfrey, however thought, not without reason, that, at this early hour the savages, fatigued by their long voyage, would not have quitted their anchorage. Perhaps they were still sleeping either in their canoe or on land; in which case it would be seen if they could not be surprised.

This idea was acted upon at once. It was important that they should get on quickly. In such circumstances the advantage is generally gained at the outset. The fire-arms were again examined, the revolvers were carefully looked at, and then Godfrey and Tartlet commenced the descent of the left bank of the river in Indian file. All around was quiet.

Flocks of birds flew from one bank to the other, pursuing each other among the higher branches without showing any uneasiness.

Godfrey went first, but it can easily be believed that his companion found the attempt to cover step rather tiring. Moving from one tree to another they advanced towards the shore without risk of discovery. Here the clumps of bushes hid them from the opposite bank, there even their heads disappeared amid the luxurious vegetation. But no matter where they were, an arrow from a bow or a stone from a sling might at any moment reach them. And so they had to be constantly on their guard.

However, in spite of the recommendations which were addressed to him, Tartlet, tripping against an occasional stump, had two or three falls which might have complicated matters. Godfrey was beginning to regret having brought such a clumsy assistant. Indeed, the poor man could not

be much help to him. Doubtless he would have been worth more left behind at Will Tree; or, if he would not consent to that, hidden away in some nook in the forest. But it was too late. An hour after he had left the sequoia group, Godfrey and his companion had come a mile--only a mile--for the path was not easy beneath the high vegetation and between the luxuriant shrubs. Neither one nor the other of our friends had seen anything suspicious.

Hereabouts the trees thinned out for about a hundred yards or less, the river ran between naked banks, the country round was barer.

Godfrey stopped. He carefully observed the prairie to the right and left of the stream.

Still there was nothing to disquiet him, nothing to indicate the approach of savages. It is true that as they could not but believe the island inhabited, they would not advance without precaution, in fact they would be as careful in ascending the little river as Godfrey was in descending it. It was to be supposed therefore that if they were prowling about the neighbourhood, they would also profit by the shelter of the trees or the high bushes of mastics and myrtles which formed such an excellent screen.

It was a curious though very natural circumstance that, the farther they advanced, Tartlet, perceiving no enemy, little by little lost his terror, and began to speak with scorn of "those cannibal laughing-stocks." Godfrey, on the contrary, became more anxious, and it

was with greater precaution than ever that he crossed the open space and regained the shadow of the trees. Another hour led them to the place where the banks, beginning to feel the effects of the sea's vicinity, were only bordered with stunted shrubs, or sparse grasses.

Under these circumstances it was difficult to keep hidden or rather impossible to proceed without crawling along the ground.

This is what Godfrey did, and also what he advised Tartlet to do.

"There are not any savages! There are not any cannibals! They have all gone!" said the professor.

"There are!" answered Godfrey quickly, in a low voice, "They ought to be here! Down Tartlet, get down! Be ready to fire, but don't do so till I tell you."

Godfrey had said these words in such a tone of authority that the professor, feeling his limbs give way under him, had no difficulty in at once assuming the required position.

And he did well!

In fact, it was not without reason that Godfrey had spoken as he had.

From the spot which they then occupied, they could see neither the shore, nor the place where the river entered the sea. A small spur of

hills shut out the view about a hundred yards ahead, but above this near horizon a dense smoke was rising straight in the air.

Godfrey, stretched at full length in the grass, with his finger on the trigger of his musket, kept looking towards the coast.

"This smoke," he said, "is it not of the same kind that I have already seen twice before? Should I conclude that savages have previously landed on the north and south of the island, and that the smoke came from fires lighted by them? But no! That is not possible, for I found no cinders, nor traces of a fireplace, nor embers! Ah! this time I'll know the reason of it."

And by a clever reptilian movement, which Tartlet imitated as well as he could, he managed, without showing his head above the grass, to reach the bend of the river.

Thence he could command, at his ease, every part of the bank through which the river ran.

An exclamation could not but escape him! His hand touched the professor's shoulder to prevent any movement of his! Useless to go further! Godfrey saw what he had come to see!

A large fire of wood was lighted on the beach, among the lower rocks, and from it a canopy of smoke rose slowly to the sky. Around the fire, feeding it with fresh armfuls of wood, of which they had made a heap,

went and came the savages who had landed the evening before. Their canoe was moored to a large stone, and, lifted by the rising tide, oscillated on the ripples of the shore.

Godfrey could distinguish all that was passing on the sands without using his glasses. He was not more than two hundred yards from the fire, and he could even hear it crackling. He immediately perceived that he need fear no surprise from the rear, for all the blacks he had counted in the proa were in the group.

Ten out of the twelve were occupied in looking after the fire and sticking stakes in the ground with the evident intention of rigging up a spit in the Polynesian manner. An eleventh, who appeared to be the chief, was walking along the beach, and constantly turning his glances towards the interior of the island, as if he were afraid of an attack.

Godfrey recognized as a piece of finery on his shoulders the red stuff of his flag.

The twelfth savage was stretched on the ground, tied tightly to a post.

Godfrey recognized at once the fate in store for the wretched man. The spit was for him! The fire was to roast him at! Tartlet had not been mistaken, when, the previous evening, he had spoken of these folks as cannibals!

It must be admitted that neither was he mistaken in saying that the

adventures of Crusoes, real or imaginary, were all copied one from the other!

Most certainly Godfrey and he did then find themselves in the same position as the hero of Daniel Defoe when the savages landed on his island. They were to assist, without doubt, at the same scene of cannibalism.

Godfrey decided to act as this hero did! He would not permit the massacre of the prisoner for which the stomachs of the cannibals were waiting! He was well armed. His two muskets--four shots--his two revolvers--a dozen shots--could easily settle these eleven rascals, whom the mere report of one of the fire-arms might perhaps be sufficient to scatter. Having taken his decision he coolly waited for the moment to interfere like a thunder-clap.

He had not long to wait!

Twenty minutes had barely elapsed, when the chief approached the fire. Then by a gesture he pointed out the prisoner to the savages who were expecting his orders.

Godfrey rose. Tartlet, without knowing why, followed the example. He did not even comprehend where his companion was going, for he had said nothing to him of his plans.

Godfrey imagined, evidently, that at sight of him the savages would

make some movement, perhaps to rush to their boat, perhaps to rush at him.

They did nothing. It did not even seem as though they saw him; but at this moment the chief made a significant gesture. Three of his companions went towards the prisoner, unloosed him, and forced him near the fire.

He was still a young man, who, feeling that his last hour had come, resisted with all his might.

Assuredly, if he could, he would sell his life dearly. He began by throwing off the savages who held him, but he was soon knocked down, and the thief, seizing a sort of stone axe, jumped forward to beat in his head.

Godfrey uttered a cry, followed by a report. A bullet whistled through the air, and it seemed as though the chief were mortally wounded, for he fell on the ground.

At the report, the savages, surprised as though they had never heard the sound of fire-arms, stopped. At the sight of Godfrey those who held the prisoner instantly released him.

Immediately the poor fellow arose, and ran towards the place where he perceived his unexpected liberator.

At this moment a second report was heard.

It was Tartlet, who, without looking--for the excellent man kept his eyes shut--had just fired, and the stock of the musket on his right shoulder delivered the hardest knock which had ever been received by the professor of dancing and deportment.

But--what a chance it was!--a second savage fell close to his chief.

The rout at once began. Perhaps the savages thought they had to do with a numerous troop of natives whom they could not resist. Perhaps they were simply terrified at the sight of the two white men who seemed to keep the lightning in their pockets. There they were, seizing the two who were wounded, carrying them off, rushing to the proa, driving it by their paddles out of the little creek, hoisting their sail, steering before the wind, making for the Flag Point promontory, and doubling it in hot haste.

Godfrey had no thought of pursuing them. What was the good of killing them? They had saved the victim. They had put them to flight, that was the important point. This had been done in such a way that the cannibals would never dare to return to Phina Island.

All was then for the best. They had only to rejoice in their victory, in which Tartlet did not hesitate to claim the greatest share.

Meanwhile the prisoner had come to his rescuer. For an instant he

stopped, with the fear inspired in him by superior beings, but almost immediately he resumed his course. When he arrived before the two whites, he bowed to the ground; then catching hold of Godfrey's foot, he placed it on his head in sign of servitude.

One would almost have thought that this Polynesian savage had also read Robinson Crusoe!