

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH THE SITUATION ALREADY GRAVELY COMPROMISED
BECOMES MORE AND MORE
COMPLICATED.

The presence of a formidable wild beast in Phina Island was, it must be confessed, calculated to make our friends think the worst of the ill-fortune which had fallen on them.

Godfrey--perhaps he was wrong--did not consider that he ought to hide from Tartlet what had passed.

"A bear!" screamed the professor, looking round him with a bewildered glare as if the environs of Will Tree were being assailed by a herd of wild beasts. "Why, a bear? Up to now we had not even got a bear in our island! If there is one there may be many, and even numbers of other ferocious beasts--jaguars, panthers, tigers, hyænas, lions!"

Tartlet already beheld Phina Island given over to quite a menagerie escaped from their cages.

Godfrey answered that there was no need for him to exaggerate. He had seen one bear, that was certain. Why one of these animals had never been seen before in his wanderings on the island he could not explain, and it was indeed inexplicable. But to conclude from this that wild animals of

all kinds were prowling in the woods and prairies was to go too far.

Nevertheless, they would have to be cautious and never go out unarmed.

Unhappy Tartlet! From this day there commenced for him an existence of anxieties, emotions, alarms, and irrational terrors which gave him nostalgia for his native land in a most acute form.

"No!" repeated he. "No! If there are animals--I have had enough of it, and I want to get off!"

He had not the power.

Godfrey and his companions then had henceforth to be on their guard. An attack might take place not only on the shore side or the prairie side, but even in the group of sequoias. This is why serious measures were taken to put the habitation in a state to repel a sudden attack. The door was strengthened, so as to resist the clutches of a wild beast. As for the domestic animals Godfrey would have built a stable to shut them up in at least at night, but it was not easy to do so. He contented himself at present with making a sort of enclosure of branches not far from Will Tree, which would keep them as in a fold. But the enclosure was not solid enough nor high enough to hinder a bear or hyæna from upsetting it or getting over it.

Notwithstanding the remonstrances made to him, Carefinotu persisted in watching outside during the night, and Godfrey hoped thus to receive warning of a direct attack.

Decidedly Carefinotu endangered his life in thus constituting himself the guardian of Will Tree; but he had understood that he could thus be of service to his liberators, and he persisted, in spite of all Godfrey said to him, in watching as usual over the general safety.

A week passed without any of these formidable visitors appearing in the neighbourhood. Godfrey did not go very far from the dwelling, unless there was a necessity for his doing so. While the sheep and goats grazed on the neighbouring prairie, they were never allowed out of sight.

Generally Carefinotu acted as shepherd. He did not take a gun, for he did not seem to understand the management of fire-arms, but one of the hunting-knives hung from his belt, and he carried an axe in his right hand. Thus armed the active negro would not have hesitated to throw himself before a tiger or any animal of the worst description.

However, as neither a bear nor any of his congeners had appeared since the last encounter Godfrey began to gather confidence. He gradually resumed his hunting expeditions, but without pushing far into the interior of the island. Frequently the black accompanied him; Tartlet, safe in Will Tree, would not risk himself in the open, not even if he had the chance of giving a dancing lesson. Sometimes Godfrey would go alone, and then the professor had a companion to whose instruction he obstinately devoted himself.

Yes! Tartlet had at first thought of teaching Carefinotu the most ordinary words in the English language, but he had to give this up, as

the negro seemed to lack the necessary phonetic apparatus for that kind of pronunciation. "Then," had Tartlet said, "if I cannot be his professor, I will be his pupil!"

And he it was who attempted to learn the idiom spoken by Carefinotu. Godfrey had warned him that the accomplishment would be of little use. Tartlet was not dissuaded. He tried to get Carefinotu to name the objects he pointed at with his hand. In truth Tartlet must have got on excellently, for at the end of fifteen days he actually knew fifteen words! He knew that Carefinotu said "birsi" for fire, "aradore" for the sky, "mervira" for the sea, "doura" for a tree, &c. He was as proud of this as if he had taken the first prize for Polynesian at some examination!

It was then with a feeling of gratitude that he wished to make some recognition of what had been done for him, and instead of torturing the negro with English words, he resolved on teaching him deportment and the true principles of European choregraphy.

At this Godfrey could not restrain his peals of laughter. After all it would pass the time away, and on Sunday, when there was nothing else to do, he willingly assisted at the course of lectures delivered by the celebrated Professor Tartlet of San Francisco. Indeed, we ought to have seen them! The unhappy Carefinotu perspired profusely as he went through the elementary exercises. He was docile and willing, nevertheless; but like all his fellows, his shoulders did not set back, nor did his chest throw out, nor did his knees or his feet point apart! To make a Vestris

or a Saint Leon of a savage of this sort!

The professor pursued his task in quite a fury. Carefinotu, tortured as he was, showed no lack of zeal. What he suffered, even to get his feet into the first position can be imagined! And when he passed to the second and then to the third, it was still more agonizing.

"But look at me, you blockhead!" exclaimed Tartlet, who added example to precept. "Put your feet out! Further out! The heel of one to the heel of the other! Open your knees, you duffer! Put back your shoulders, you idiot! Stick up your head! Round your elbows!"

"But you ask what is impossible!" said Godfrey.

"Nothing is impossible to an intelligent man!" was Tartlet's invariable response.

"But his build won't allow of it."

"Well, his build must allow of it! He will have to do it sooner or later, for the savage must at least know how to present himself properly in a drawing-room!"

"But, Tartlet, he will never have the opportunity of appearing in a drawing-room!"

"Eh! How do you know that, Godfrey?" replied the professor, drawing

himself up. "Do you know what the future may bring forth?"

This was the last word in all discussions with Tartlet. And then the professor taking his kit would with the bow extract from it some squeaky little air to the delight of Carefinotu. It required but this to excite him. Oblivious of choregraphic rules, what leaps, what contortions, what capers!

And Tartlet, in a reverie, as he saw this child of Polynesia so demean himself, inquired if these steps, perhaps a little too characteristic, were not natural to the human being, although outside all the principles of his art.

But we must leave the professor of dancing and deportment to his philosophical meditations, and return to questions at once more practical and pressing.

During his last excursions into the plain, either by himself or with Carefinotu, Godfrey had seen no wild animal. He had even come upon no traces of such. The river to which they would come to drink bore no footprint on its banks. During the night there were no howlings nor suspicious noises. Besides the domestic animals continued to give no signs of uneasiness.

"This is singular," said Godfrey several times; "but I was not mistaken! Carefinotu certainly was not! It was really a bear that he showed me! It was really a bear that I shot! Supposing I killed him, was he the last

representative of the plantigrades on the island?"

It was quite inexplicable! Besides, if Godfrey had killed this bear, he would have found the body where he had shot it. Now they searched for it in vain! Were they to believe then that the animal mortally wounded had died far off in some den. It was possible after all, but then at this place, at the foot of this tree, there would have been traces of blood, and there were none.

"Whatever it is," thought Godfrey, "it does not much matter; and we must keep on our guard."

With the first days of November it could be said that the wet season had commenced in this unknown latitude. Cold rains fell for many hours. Later on probably they would experience those interminable showers which do not cease for weeks at a time, and are characteristic of the rainy period of winter in these latitudes.

Godfrey had then to contrive a fireplace in the interior of Will Tree--an indispensable fireplace that would serve as well to warm the dwelling during the winter months as to cook their food in shelter from the rain and tempest.

The hearth could at any time be placed in a corner of the chamber between big stones, some placed on the ground and others built up round them; but the question was how to get the smoke out, for to leave it to escape by the long chimney, which ran down the centre of the sequoia,

proved impracticable.

Godfrey thought of using as a pipe some of those long stout bamboos which grew on certain parts of the river banks. It should be said that on this occasion he was greatly assisted by Carefinotu. The negro, not without effort, understood what Godfrey required. He it was who accompanied him for a couple of miles from Will Tree to select the larger bamboos, he it was who helped him build his hearth. The stones were placed on the ground opposite to the door; the bamboos, emptied of their pith and bored through at the knots, afforded, when joined one to another, a tube of sufficient length, which ran out through an aperture made for it in the sequoia bark, and would serve every purpose, provided it did not catch fire. Godfrey soon had the satisfaction of seeing a good fire burning without filling the interior of Will Tree with smoke.

He was quite right in hastening on these preparations, for from the 3rd to the 10th of November the rain never ceased pouring down. It would have been impossible to keep a fire going in the open air. During these miserable days they had to keep indoors and did not venture out except when the flocks and poultry urgently required them to do so. Under these circumstances the reserve of camas roots began to fail; and these were what took the place of bread, and of which the want would be immediately felt.

Godfrey then one day, the 10th of November, informed Tartlet that as soon as the weather began to mend a little he and Carefinotu would go out and collect some. Tartlet, who was never in a hurry to run a couple

of miles across a soaking prairie, decided to remain at home during Godfrey's absence.

In the evening the sky began to clear of the heavy clouds which the west wind had been accumulating since the commencement of the month, the rain

gradually ceased, the sun gave forth a few crepuscular rays. It was to be hoped that the morning would yield a lull in the storm, of which it was advisable to make the most.

"To-morrow," said Godfrey, "I will go out, and Carefinotu will go with me."

"Agreed!" answered Tartlet.

The evening came, and when supper was finished and the sky, cleared of clouds, permitted a few brilliant stars to appear, the black wished to take up his accustomed place outside, which he had had to abandon during the preceding rainy nights. Godfrey tried to make him understand that he had better remain indoors, that there was no necessity to keep a watch as no wild animal had been noticed; but Carefinotu was obstinate. He therefore had to have his way.

The morning was as Godfrey had foreseen, no rain had fallen since the previous evening, and when he stepped forth from Will Tree, the first rays of the sun were lightly gilding the thick dome of the sequoias.

Carefinotu was at his post, where he had passed the night. He was waiting. Immediately, well armed and provided with large sacks, the two bid farewell to Tartlet, and started for the river, which they intended ascending along the left bank up to the camas bushes.

An hour afterwards they arrived there without meeting with any unpleasant adventure.

The roots were rapidly torn up and a large quantity obtained, so as to fill the sacks. This took three hours, so that it was about eleven o'clock in the morning when Godfrey and his companion set out on their return to Will Tree.

Walking close together, keeping a sharp look-out, for they could not talk to each other, they had reached a bend in the small river where there were a few large trees, grown like a natural cradle across the stream, when Godfrey suddenly stopped.

This time it was he who showed to Carefinotu a motionless animal at the foot of a tree whose eyes were gleaming with a singular light.

"A tiger!" he exclaimed.

He was not mistaken. It was really a tiger of large stature resting on its hind legs with its forepaws on the trunk of a tree, and ready to spring.

In a moment Godfrey had dropped his sack of roots. The loaded gun passed into his right hand; he cocked it, presented it, aimed it, and fired.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" he exclaimed.

This time there was no room for doubt; the tiger, struck by the bullet, had bounded backwards. But perhaps he was not mortally wounded, perhaps

rendered still more furious by his wound he would spring on to them!

Godfrey held his gun pointed, and threatened the animal with his second barrel.

But before Godfrey could stop him, Carefinotu had rushed at the place where the tiger disappeared, his hunting-knife in his hand.

Godfrey shouted for him to stop, to come back! It was in vain. The black, resolved even at the risk of his life to finish the animal which perhaps was only wounded, did not or would not hear.

Godfrey rushed after him.

When he reached the bank, he saw Carefinotu struggling with the tiger, holding him by the throat, and at last stabbing him to the heart with a powerful blow.

The tiger then rolled into the river, of which the waters, swollen by

the rains, carried it away with the quickness of a torrent. The corpse, which floated only for an instant, was swiftly borne off towards the sea.

A bear! A tiger! There could be no doubt that the island did contain formidable beasts of prey!

Godfrey, after rejoining Carefinotu, found that in the struggle the black had only received a few scratches. Then, deeply anxious about the future, he retook the road to Will Tree.