

## CHAPTER XX.

### IN WHICH TARTLET REITERATES IN EVERY KEY THAT HE WOULD RATHER BE OFF.

When Tartlet learnt that there were not only bears in the island, but tigers too, his lamentations again arose. Now he would never dare to go out! The wild beasts would end by discovering the road to Will Tree! There was no longer any safety anywhere! In his alarm the professor wanted for his protection quite a fortification! Yes! Stone walls with scarps and counterscarps, curtains and bastions, and ramparts, for what was the use of a shelter under a group of sequoias? Above all things, he would at all risks, like to be off.

"So would I," answered Godfrey quietly.

In fact, the conditions under which the castaways on Phina Island had lived up to now were no longer the same. To struggle to the end, to struggle for the necessaries of life, they had been able, thanks to fortunate circumstances. Against the bad season, against winter and its menaces, they knew how to act, but to have to defend themselves against wild animals, whose attack was possible every minute, was another thing altogether; and in fact they could not do it.

The situation, already complicated, had become very serious, for it had become intolerable.

"But," repeated Godfrey to himself, without cessation, "how is it that for four months we did not see a single beast of prey in the island, and why during the last fortnight have we had to encounter a bear and a tiger? What shall we say to that?"

The fact might be inexplicable, but it was none the less real.

Godfrey, whose coolness and courage increased, as difficulties grew, was not cast down. If dangerous animals menaced their little colony, it was better to put themselves on guard against their attacks, and that without delay.

But what was to be done?

It was at the outset decided that excursions into the woods or to the sea-shore should be rarer, and that they should never go out unless well armed, and only when it was absolutely necessary for their wants.

"We have been lucky enough in our two encounters!" said Godfrey frequently; "but there may come a time when we may not shoot so straight! So there is no necessity for us to run into danger!"

At the same time they had not only to settle about the excursions, but to protect Will Tree--not only the dwelling, but the annexes, the poultry roost, and the fold for the animals, where the wild beasts could easily cause irreparable disaster.

Godfrey thought then, if not of fortifying Will Tree according to the famous plans of Tartlet, at least of connecting the four or five large sequoias which surrounded it.

If he could devise a high and strong palisade from one tree to another, they would be in comparative security at any rate from a surprise.

It was practicable--Godfrey concluded so after an examination of the ground--but it would cost a good deal of labour. To reduce this as much as possible, he thought of erecting the palisade around a perimeter of only some three hundred feet. We can judge from this the number of trees he had to select, cut down, carry, and trim until the enclosure was complete.

Godfrey did not quail before his task. He imparted his projects to Tartlet, who approved them, and promised his active co-operation; but what was more important, he made his plans understood to Carefinotu, who was always ready to come to his assistance.

They set to work without delay.

There was at a bend in the stream, about a mile from Will Tree, a small wood of stone pines of medium height, whose trunks, in default of beams and planks, without wanting to be squared, would, by being placed close together, form a solid palisade.

It was to this wood that, at dawn on the 12th of November, Godfrey and his two companions repaired. Though well armed they advanced with great care.

"You can have too much of this sort of thing," murmured Tartlet, whom these new difficulties had rendered still more discontented, "I would rather be off!"

But Godfrey did not take the trouble to reply to him.

On this occasion his tastes were not being consulted, his intelligence even was not being appealed to. It was the assistance of his arms that the common interest demanded. In short, he had to resign himself to his vocation of beast of burden.

No unpleasant accident happened in the mile which separated the wood from Will Tree. In vain they had carefully beaten the underwood, and swept the horizon all around them. The domestic animals they had left out at pasture gave no sign of alarm. The birds continued their frolics with no more anxiety than usual.

Work immediately began. Godfrey, very properly did not want to begin carrying until all the trees he wanted had been felled. They could work at them in greater safety on the spot.

Carefinotu was of great service during this toilsome task. He had become very clever in the use of the axe and saw. His strength even allowed him

to continue at work when Godfrey was obliged to rest for a minute or so, and when Tartlet, with bruised hands and aching limbs, had not even strength left to lift his fiddle.

However, although the unfortunate professor of dancing and deportment had been transformed into a wood-cutter, Godfrey had reserved for him the least fatiguing part, that is, the clearing off of the smaller branches. In spite of this, if Tartlet had only been paid half a dollar a day, he would have stolen four-fifths of his salary!

For six days, from the 12th to the 17th of November, these labours continued. Our friends went off in the morning at dawn, they took their food with them, and they did not return to Will Tree until evening. The sky was not very clear. Heavy clouds frequently accumulated over it. It was harvest weather, with alternating showers and sunshine; and during the showers the wood-cutters would take shelter under the trees, and resume their task when the rain had ceased.

On the 18th all the trees, topped and cleared of branches, were lying on the ground, ready for transport to Will Tree.

During this time no wild beast had appeared in the neighbourhood of the river. The question was, were there any more in the island, or had the bear and the tiger been--a most improbable event--the last of their species?

Whatever it was, Godfrey had no intention of abandoning his project of

the solid palisade so as to be prepared against a surprise from savages, or bears, or tigers. Besides, the worst was over, and there only remained to take the wood where it was wanted.

We say "the worst was over," though the carriage promised to be somewhat laborious. If it were not so, it was because Godfrey had had a very practical idea, which materially lightened the task; this was to make use of the current of the river, which the flood occasioned by the recent rains had rendered very rapid, to transport the wood. Small rafts could be formed, and they would quietly float down to the sequoias, where a bar, formed by the small bridge, would stop them. From thence to Will Tree was only about fifty-five paces.

If any of them showed particular satisfaction at this mode of procedure, it was Tartlet.

On the 18th the first rafts were formed, and they arrived at the barrier without accident. In less than three days on the evening of the 25th, the palisade had been all sent down to its destination.

On the morrow, the first trunks, sunk two feet in the soil, began to rise in such a manner as to connect the principal sequoias which surrounded Will Tree. A capping of strong flexible branches, pointed by the axe, assured the solidity of the wall.

Godfrey saw the work progress with extreme satisfaction, and delayed not until it was finished.

"Once the palisade is done," he said to Tartlet, "we shall be really at home."

"We shall not be really at home," replied the professor drily, "until we are in Montgomery Street, with your Uncle Kolderup."

There was no disputing this opinion.

On the 26th of November the palisade was three parts done. It comprised among the sequoias attached one to another that in which the poultry had established themselves, and Godfrey's intention was to build a stable inside it.

In three or four days the fence was finished. There only remained to fit in a solid door, which would assure the closure of Will Tree.

But on the morning of the 27th of November the work was interrupted by an event which we had better explain with some detail, for it was one of those unaccountable things peculiar to Phina Island.

About eight o'clock, Carefinotu had climbed up to the fork of the sequoia, so as to more carefully close the hole by which the cold and rain penetrated, when he uttered a singular cry.

Godfrey, who was at work at the palisade, raised his head and saw the black, with expressive gestures, motioning to him to join him without

delay.

Godfrey, thinking Carefinotu would not have disturbed him unless he had serious reason, took his glasses with him and climbed up the interior passage, and passing through the hole, seated himself astride of one of the main branches.

Carefinotu, pointing with his arm towards the rounded angle which Phina Island made to the north-east, showed a column of smoke rising in the air like a long plume.

"Again!" exclaimed Godfrey.

And putting his glasses in the direction, he assured himself that this time there was no possible error, that it must escape from some important fire, which he could distinctly see must be about five miles off.

Godfrey turned towards the black.

Carefinotu expressed his surprise, by his looks, his exclamations, in fact by his whole attitude.

Assuredly he was no less astounded than Godfrey at this apparition.

Besides, in the offing, there was no ship, not a vessel native or other, nothing which showed that a landing had recently been made on the shore.



"Ah! This time I will find out the fire which produces that smoke!"  
exclaimed Godfrey.

And pointing to the north-east angle of the island, and then to the foot of the tree, he gesticulated to Carefinotu that he wished to reach the place without losing an instant.

Carefinotu understood him. He even gave him to understand that he approved of the idea.

"Yes," said Godfrey to himself, "if there is a human being there, we must know who he is and whence he comes! We must know why he hides himself! It will be for the safety of all!"

A moment afterwards Carefinotu and he descended to the foot of Will Tree. Then Godfrey, informing Tartlet of what had passed and what he was going to do, proposed for him to accompany them to the north coast.

A dozen miles to traverse in one day was not a very tempting suggestion to a man who regarded his legs as the most precious part of his body, and only designed for noble exercises. And so he replied that he would prefer to remain at Will Tree.

"Very well, we will go alone," answered Godfrey, "but do not expect us until the evening."

So saying, and Carefinotu and he carrying some provisions for lunch on the road, they set out, after taking leave of the professor, whose private opinion it was that they would find nothing, and that all their fatigue would be useless.

Godfrey took his musket and revolver; the black the axe and the hunting-knife which had become his favourite weapon. They crossed the plank bridge to the right bank of the river, and then struck off across the prairie to the point on the shore where the smoke had been seen rising amongst the rocks.

It was rather more easterly than the place which Godfrey had uselessly visited on his second exploration.

They progressed rapidly, not without a sharp look-out that the wood was clear and that the bushes and underwood did not hide some animal whose attack might be formidable.

Nothing disquieting occurred.

At noon, after having had some food, without, however, stopping for an instant, they reached the first line of rocks which bordered the beach.

The smoke, still visible, was rising about a quarter of a mile ahead.

They had only to keep straight on to reach their goal.

They hastened their steps, but took precautions so as to surprise, and not be surprised.

Two minutes afterwards the smoke disappeared, as if the fire had been suddenly extinguished.

But Godfrey had noted with exactness the spot whence it arose. It was at the point of a strangely formed rock, a sort of truncated pyramid, easily recognizable. Showing this to his companion, he kept straight on.

The quarter of a mile was soon traversed, then the last line was climbed, and Godfrey and Carefinotu gained the beach about fifty paces from the rock.

They ran up to it. Nobody! But this time half-smouldering embers and half-burnt wood proved clearly that the fire had been alight on the spot.

"There has been some one here!" exclaimed Godfrey. "Some one not a moment ago! We must find out who!"

He shouted. No response! Carefinotu gave a terrible yell. No one appeared!

Behold them then hunting amongst the neighbouring rocks, searching a cavern, a grotto, which might serve as a refuge for a shipwrecked man, an aboriginal, a savage--

It was in vain that they ransacked the slightest recesses of the shore.

There was neither ancient nor recent camp in existence, not even the traces of the passage of a man.

"But," repeated Godfrey, "it was not smoke from a warm spring this time! It was from a fire of wood and grass, and that fire could not light itself."

Vain was their search. Then about two o'clock Godfrey and Carefinotu, as weary as they were disconcerted at their fruitless endeavours, retook their road to Will Tree.

There was nothing astonishing in Godfrey being deep in thought. It seemed to him that the island was now under the empire of some occult power. The reappearance of this fire, the presence of wild animals, did not all this denote some extraordinary complication?

And was there not cause for his being confirmed in this idea when an hour after he had regained the prairie, he heard a singular noise, a sort of hard jingling.

Carefinotu pushed him aside at the same instant as a serpent glided beneath the herbage, and was about to strike at him.

"Snakes, now. Snakes in the island, after the bears and the tigers!" he exclaimed.

Yes! It was one of those reptiles well-known by the noise they make, a

rattlesnake of the most venomous species: a giant of the Crotalus family!

Carefinotu threw himself between Godfrey and the reptile, which hurried off under a thick bush.

But the negro pursued it and smashed in its head with a blow of the axe. When Godfrey rejoined him, the two halves of the reptile were writhing on the blood-stained soil.

Then other serpents, not less dangerous, appeared in great abundance on this part of the prairie which was separated by the stream from Will Tree.

Was it then a sudden invasion of reptiles? Was Phina Island going to become the rival of ancient Tenos, whose formidable ophidians rendered it famous in antiquity, and which gave its name to the viper?

"Come on! come on!" exclaimed Godfrey, motioning to Carefinotu to quicken the pace.

He was uneasy. Strange presentiments agitated him without his being able to control them.

Under their influence, fearing some approaching misfortune, he had hastened his return to Will Tree.

But matters became serious when he reached the planks across the river.

Screams of terror resounded from beneath the sequoias--cries for help in a tone of agony which it was impossible to mistake!

"It is Tartlet!" exclaimed Godfrey. "The unfortunate man has been attacked! Quick! quick!"

Once over the bridge, about twenty paces further on, Tartlet was perceived running as fast as his legs could carry him.

An enormous crocodile had come out of the river and was pursuing him with its jaws wide open. The poor man, distracted, mad with fright, instead of turning to the right or the left, was keeping in a straight line, and so running the risk of being caught. Suddenly he stumbled. He fell. He was lost.

Godfrey halted. In the presence of this imminent danger his coolness never forsook him for an instant. He brought his gun to his shoulder, and aimed at the crocodile. The well-aimed bullet struck the monster, and it made a bound to one side and fell motionless on the ground.

Carefinotu rushed towards Tartlet and lifted him up. Tartlet had escaped with a fright! But what a fright!

It was six o'clock in the evening.

A moment afterwards Godfrey and his two companions had reached Will Tree.

How bitter were their reflections during their evening repast! What long sleepless hours were in store for the inhabitants of Phina Island, on whom misfortunes were now crowding.

As for the professor, in his anguish he could only repeat the words which expressed the whole of his thoughts, "I had much rather be off!"