

CHAPTER XXI.

WHICH ENDS WITH QUITE A SURPRISING REFLECTION BY THE NEGRO CAREFINOTU.

The winter season, so severe in these latitudes, had come at last. The first frosts had already been felt, and there was every promise of rigorous weather. Godfrey was to be congratulated on having established his fireplace in the tree. It need scarcely be said that the work at the palisade had been completed, and that a sufficiently solid door now assured the closure of the fence.

During the six weeks which followed, that is to say, until the middle of December, there had been a good many wretched days on which it was impossible to venture forth. At the outset there came terrible squalls. They shook the group of sequoias to their very roots. They strewed the ground with broken branches, and so furnished an ample reserve for the fire.

Then it was that the inhabitants of Will Tree clothed themselves as warmly as they could. The woollen stuffs found in the box were used during the few excursions necessary for revictualling, until the weather became so bad that even these were forbidden. All hunting was at an end, and the snow fell in such quantity that Godfrey could have believed himself in the inhospitable latitudes of the Arctic Ocean.

It is well known that Northern America, swept by the Polar winds, with no obstacle to check them, is one of the coldest countries on the globe. The winter there lasts until the month of April. Exceptional precautions have to be taken against it. It was the coming of the winter as it did which gave rise to the thought that Phina Island was situated in a higher latitude than Godfrey had supposed.

Hence the necessity of making the interior of Will Tree as comfortable as possible. But the suffering from rain and cold was cruel. The reserves of provisions were unfortunately insufficient, the preserved turtle flesh gradually disappeared. Frequently there had to be sacrificed some of the sheep or goats or agouties, whose numbers had but slightly increased since their arrival in the island.

With these new trials, what sad thoughts haunted Godfrey!

It happened also that for a fortnight he fell into a violent fever. Without the tiny medicine-chest which afforded the necessary drugs for his treatment, he might never have recovered. Tartlet was ill-suited to attend to the petty cares that were necessary during the continuance of the malady. It was to Carefinotu that he mainly owed his return to health.

But what remembrances and what regrets! Who but himself could he blame for having got into a situation of which he could not even see the end? How many times in his delirium did he call Phina, whom he never should see again, and his Uncle Will, from whom he beheld himself separated for

ever! Ah! he had to alter his opinion of this Crusoe life which his boyish imagination had made his ideal! Now he was contending with reality! He could no longer even hope to return to the domestic hearth.

So passed this miserable December, at the end of which Godfrey began to recover his strength.

As for Tartlet, by special grace, doubtless, he was always well. But what incessant lamentations! What endless jeremiads! As the grotto of Calypso after the departure of Ulysses, Will Tree "resounded no more to his song"--that of his fiddle--for the cold had frozen the strings!

It should be said too that one of the gravest anxieties of Godfrey was not only the re-appearance of dangerous animals, but the fear of the savages returning in great numbers to Phina Island, the situation of which was known to them. Against such an invasion the palisade was but an insufficient barrier. All things considered, the refuge offered by the high branches of the sequoia appeared much safer, and the rendering the access less difficult was taken in hand. It would always be easy to defend the narrow orifice by which the top of the trunk was reached.

With the aid of Carefinotu Godfrey began to cut regular ledges on each side, like the steps of a staircase, and these, connected by a long cord of vegetable fibre, permitted of rapid ascent up the interior.

"Well," said Godfrey, when the work was done, "that gives us a town house below and a country house above!"

"I had rather have a cellar, if it was in Montgomery Street!" answered Tartlet.

Christmas arrived. Christmas kept in such style throughout the United States of America! The New Year's Day, full of memories of childhood, rainy, snowy, cold, and gloomy, began the new year under the most melancholy auspices.

It was six months since the survivors of the Dream had remained without communication with the rest of the world.

The commencement of the year was not very cheering. It made Godfrey and his companions anticipate that they would still have many trials to encounter.

The snow never ceased falling until January 18th. The flocks had to be let out to pasture to get what feed they could. At the close of the day, a very cold damp night enveloped the island, and the space shaded by the sequoias was plunged in profound obscurity.

Tartlet and Carefinotu, stretched on their beds inside Will Tree, were trying in vain to sleep. Godfrey, by the struggling light of a torch, was turning over the pages of his Bible.

About ten o'clock a distant noise, which came nearer and nearer, was heard outside away towards the north. There could be no mistake. It was

the wild beasts prowling in the neighbourhood, and, alarming to relate, the howling of the tiger and of the hyæna, and the roaring of the panther and the lion were this time blended in one formidable concert.

Godfrey, Tartlet, and the negro sat up, each a prey to indescribable anguish. If at this unaccountable invasion of ferocious animals Carefinotu shared the alarm of his companions, his astonishment was quite equal to his fright.

During two mortal hours all three kept on the alert. The howlings sounded at times close by; then they suddenly ceased, as if the beasts, not knowing the country, were roaming about all over it. Perhaps then Will Tree would escape an attack!

"It doesn't matter if it does," thought Godfrey. "If we do not destroy these animals to the very last one, there will be no safety for us in the island!"

A little after midnight the roaring began again in full strength at a moderate distance away. Impossible now to doubt but that the howling army was approaching Will Tree!

Yes! It was only too certain! But whence came these wild animals? They could not have recently landed on Phina Island! They must have been there then before Godfrey's arrival! But how was it that all of them had remained hidden during his walks and hunting excursions, as well across the centre as in the most out-of-the-way parts to the south? For Godfrey

had never found a trace of them. Where was the mysterious den which vomited forth lions, hyænas, panthers, tigers? Amongst all the unaccountable things up to now this was indeed the most unaccountable.

Carefinotu could not believe what he heard. We have said that his astonishment was extreme. By the light of the fire which illuminated the interior of Will Tree there could be seen on his black face the strangest of grimaces.

Tartlet in the corner, groaned and lamented, and moaned again. He would have asked Godfrey all about it, but Godfrey was not in the humour to reply. He had a presentiment of a very great danger, he was seeking for a way to retreat from it.

Once or twice Carefinotu and he went out to the centre of the palisade. They wished to see that the door was firmly and strongly shut.

Suddenly an avalanche of animals appeared with a huge tumult along the front of Will Tree.

It was only the goats and sheep and agouties. Terrified at the howling of the wild beasts, and scenting their approach, they had fled from their pasturage to take shelter behind the palisade.

"We must open the door!" exclaimed Godfrey.

Carefinotu nodded his head. He did not want to know the language to

understand what Godfrey meant.

The door was opened, and the frightened flock rushed into the enclosure.

But at that instant there appeared through the opening a gleaming of eyes in the depths of the darkness which the shadow of the sequoias rendered still more profound.

There was no time to close the enclosure!

To jump at Godfrey, seize him in spite of himself, push him into the dwelling and slam the door, was done by Carefinotu like a flash of lightning.

New roarings indicated that three or four wild beasts had just cleared the palisade.

Then these horrible roarings were mingled with quite a concert of bleatings and groanings of terror. The domestic flock were taken as in a trap and delivered over to the clutches of the assailants.

Godfrey and Carefinotu, who had climbed up to the two small windows in the bark of the sequoia, endeavoured to see what was passing in the gloom.

Evidently the wild animals--tigers or lions, panthers or hyænas, they did not know which yet--had thrown themselves on the flock and begun

their slaughter.

At this moment, Tartlet, in a paroxysm of blind terror, seized one of the muskets, and would have taken a chance shot out of one of the windows.

Godfrey stopped him.

"No!" said he. "In this darkness our shots will be lost, and we must not waste our ammunition! Wait for daylight!"

He was right. The bullets would just as likely have struck the domestic as the wild animals--more likely in fact, for the former were the most numerous. To save them was now impossible. Once they were sacrificed, the wild beasts, thoroughly gorged, might quit the enclosure before sunrise. They would then see how to act to guard against a fresh invasion.

It was most important too, during the dark night, to avoid as much as possible revealing to these animals the presence of human beings, whom they might prefer to the flock. Perhaps they would thus avoid a direct attack against Will Tree.

As Tartlet was incapable of understanding either this reasoning or any other, Godfrey contented himself with depriving him of his weapon. The professor then went and threw himself on his bed and freely anathematized all travelers and travellers and maniacs who could not

remain quietly at their own firesides.

Both his companions resumed their observations at the windows.

Thence they beheld, without the power of interference, the horrible massacre which was taking place in the gloom. The cries of the sheep and the goats gradually diminished as the slaughter of the animals was consummated, although the greater part had escaped outside, where death, none the less certain, awaited them. This loss was irreparable for the little colony; but Godfrey was not then anxious about the future. The present was disquieting enough to occupy all his thoughts.

There was nothing they could do, nothing they could try, to hinder this work of destruction.

Godfrey and Carefinotu kept constant watch, and now they seemed to see new shadows coming up and passing into the palisade, while a fresh sound of footsteps struck on their ears.

Evidently certain belated beasts, attracted by the odour of the blood which impregnated the air, had traced the scent up to Will Tree.

They ran to and fro, they rushed round and round the tree and gave forth their hoarse and angry growls. Some of the shadows jumped on the ground like enormous cats. The slaughtered flock had not been sufficient to satisfy their rage.

Neither Godfrey nor his companions moved. In keeping completely motionless they might avoid a direct attack.

An unlucky shot suddenly revealed their presence and exposed them to the greatest danger.

Tartlet, a prey to a veritable hallucination, had risen. He had seized a revolver; and this time, before Godfrey and Carefinotu could hinder him, and not knowing himself what he did, but believing that he saw a tiger standing before him, he had fired! The bullet passed through the door of Will Tree.

"Fool!" exclaimed Godfrey, throwing himself on Tartlet, while the negro seized the weapon.

It was too late. The alarm was given, and growlings still more violent resounded without. Formidable talons were heard tearing the bark of the sequoia. Terrible blows shook the door, which was too feeble to resist such an assault.

"We must defend ourselves!" shouted Godfrey.

And, with his gun in his hand and his cartridge-pouch round his waist, he took his post at one of the windows.

To his great surprise, Carefinotu had done the same! Yes! the black, seizing the second musket--a weapon which he had never before

handled--had filled his pockets with cartridges and taken his place at the second window.

Then the reports of the guns began to echo from the embrasures. By the flashes, Godfrey on the one side, and Carefinotu on the other, beheld the foes they had to deal with.

There, in the enclosure, roaring with rage, howling at the reports, rolling beneath the bullets which struck many of them, leapt of lions and tigers, and hyænas and panthers, at least a score. To their roarings and growlings which reverberated from afar, there echoed back those of other ferocious beasts running up to join them. Already the now distant roaring could be heard as they approached the environs of Will Tree. It was as though quite a menagerie of wild animals had been suddenly set free on the island!

[Illustration: Of lions and tigers quite a score. page 252]

However, Godfrey and Carefinotu, without troubling themselves about Tartlet, who could be of no use, were keeping as cool as they could, and refraining from firing unless they were certain of their aim. Wishing to waste not a shot, they waited till a shadow passed in front of them. Then came the flash and the report, and then a growl of grief told them that the animal had been hit.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, and then came a respite. Had the wild beasts given up the attack which had cost the lives of so many amongst

them? Were they waiting for the day to recommence the attempt under more favourable conditions?

Whatever might be the reason, neither Godfrey nor Carefinotu desired to leave his post. The black had shown himself no less ready with the gun than Godfrey. If that was due only to the instinct of imitation, it must be admitted that it was indeed surprising.

About two o'clock in the morning there came a new alarm--more furious than before. The danger was imminent, the position in the interior of Will Tree was becoming untenable. New growlings resounded round the foot of the sequoia. Neither Godfrey nor Carefinotu, on account of the situation of the windows, which were cut straight through, could see the assailants, nor, in consequence, could they fire with any chance of success.

It was now the door which the beasts attacked, and it was only too evident that it would be beaten in by their weight or torn down by their claws.

Godfrey and the black had descended to the ground. The door was already shaking beneath the blows from without. They could feel the heated breath making its way in through the cracks in the bark.

Godfrey and Carefinotu attempted to prop back the door with the stakes which kept up the beds, but these proved quite useless.

It was obvious that in a little while it would be driven in, for the beasts were mad with rage--particularly as no shots could reach them.

Godfrey was powerless. If he and his companions were inside Will Tree when the assailants broke in, their weapons would be useless to protect them.

Godfrey had crossed his arms. He saw the boards of the door open little by little. He could do nothing. In a moment of hesitation, he passed his hand across his forehead, as if in despair. But soon recovering his self-possession, he shouted,--

"Up we go! Up! All of us!"

And he pointed to the narrow passage which led up to the fork inside Will Tree.

Carefinotu and he, taking their muskets and revolvers, supplied themselves with cartridges.

And now he turned to make Tartlet follow them into these heights where he had never ventured before.

Tartlet was no longer there. He had started up while his companions were firing.

"Up!" repeated Godfrey.

It was a last retreat, where they would assuredly be sheltered from the wild beasts. If any tiger or panther attempted to come up into the branches of the sequoia, it would be easy to defend the hole through which he would have to pass.

Godfrey and Carefinotu had scarcely ascended thirty feet, when the roaring was heard in the interior of Will Tree. A few moments more and they would have been surprised. The door had just fallen in. They both hurried along, and at last reached the upper end of the hole.

A scream of terror welcomed them. It was Tartlet, who imagined he saw a panther or tiger! The unfortunate professor was clasping a branch, frightened almost out of his life lest he should fall.

Carefinotu went to him, and compelled him to lean against an upright bough, to which he firmly secured him with his belt.

Then, while Godfrey selected a place whence he could command the opening, Carefinotu went to another spot whence he could deliver a cross fire.

And they waited.

Under these circumstances it certainly looked as though the besieged were safe from attack.

Godfrey endeavoured to discover what was passing beneath them; but the night was still too dark. Then he tried to hear; and the growlings, which never ceased, showed that the assailants had no thought of abandoning the place.

Suddenly, towards four o'clock in the morning, a great light appeared at the foot of the tree. At once it shot out through the door and windows. At the same time a thick smoke spread forth from the upper opening and lost itself in the higher branches.

"What is that now?" exclaimed Godfrey.

It was easily explained. The wild beasts, in ravaging the interior of Will Tree, had scattered the remains of the fire. The fire had spread to the things in the room. The flame had caught the bark, which had dried and become combustible. The gigantic sequoia was ablaze below.

The position was now more terrible than it had ever been. By the light of the flames, which illuminated the space beneath the grove, they could see the wild beasts leaping round the foot of Will Tree.

At the same instant, a fearful explosion occurred. The sequoia, violently wrenched, trembled from its roots to its summit.

It was the reserve of gunpowder which had exploded inside Will Tree, and the air, violently expelled from the opening, rushed forth like the gas from a discharging cannon.

Godfrey and Carefinotu were almost torn from their resting-places. Had Tartlet not been lashed to the branch, he would assuredly have been hurled to the ground.

The wild beasts, terrified at the explosion, and more or less wounded, had taken to flight.

But at the same time the conflagration, fed by the sudden combustion of the powder, had considerably extended. It swiftly grew in dimensions as it crept up the enormous stem.

Large tongues of flame lapped the interior, and the highest soon reached the fork, and the dead wood snapped and crackled like shots from a revolver. A huge glare lighted up, not only the group of giant trees, but even the whole of the coast from Flag Point to the southern cape of Dream Bay.

Soon the fire had reached the lower branches of the sequoia, and threatened to invade the spot where Godfrey and his companions had taken refuge. Were they then to be devoured by the flames, with which they could not battle, or had they but the last resource of throwing themselves to the ground to escape being burnt alive? In either case they must die!

Godfrey sought about for some means of escape. He saw none!

Already the lower branches were ablaze and a dense smoke was struggling with the first gleams of dawn which were rising in the east.

At this moment there was a horrible crash of rending and breaking. The sequoia, burnt to the very roots, cracked violently--it toppled over--it fell!

But as it fell the stem met the stems of the trees which environed it; their powerful branches were mingled with its own, and so it remained obliquely cradled at an angle of about forty-five degrees from the ground.

At the moment that the sequoia fell, Godfrey and his companions believed themselves lost!

"Nineteenth of January!" exclaimed a voice, which Godfrey, in spite of his astonishment, immediately recognized.

It was Carefinotu! Yes, Carefinotu had just pronounced these words, and in that English language which up to then he had seemed unable to speak or to understand!

"What did you say?" asked Godfrey, as he followed him along the branches.

"I said, Mr. Morgan," answered Carefinotu, "that to-day your Uncle Will ought to reach us, and that if he doesn't turn up we are done for!"