

Facing the Flag

By

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FACING THE FLAG.

CHAPTER I.

HEALTHFUL HOUSE.

The carte de visite received that day, June 15, 189-, by the director of the establishment of Healthful House was a very neat one, and simply bore, without escutcheon or coronet, the name:

COUNT D'ARTIGAS.

Below this name, in a corner of the card, the following address was written in lead pencil:

"On board the schooner Ebba, anchored off New-Berne, Pamlico Sound."

The capital of North Carolina--one of the forty-four states of the Union at this epoch--is the rather important town of Raleigh, which is about one hundred and fifty miles in the interior of the province. It is owing to its central position that this city has become the seat of the State legislature, for there are others that equal and

even surpass it in industrial and commercial importance, such as Wilmington, Charlotte, Fayetteville, Edenton, Washington, Salisbury, Tarborough, Halifax, and New-Berne. The latter town is situated on estuary of the Neuse River, which empties itself into Pamlico Sound, a sort of vast maritime lake protected by a natural dyke formed by the isles and islets of the Carolina coast.

The director of Healthful House could never have imagined why the card should have been sent to him, had it not been accompanied by a note from the Count d'Artigas soliciting permission to visit the establishment. The personage in question hoped that the director would grant his request, and announced that he would present himself in the afternoon, accompanied by Captain Spade, commander of the schooner Ebba.

This desire to penetrate to the interior of the celebrated sanitarium, then in great request by the wealthy invalids of the United States, was natural enough on the part of a foreigner. Others who did not bear such a high-sounding name as the Count d'Artigas had visited it, and had been unstinting in their compliments to the director. The latter therefore hastened to accord the authorization demanded, and added that he would be honored to open the doors of the establishment to the Count d'Artigas.

Healthful House, which contained a select personnel, and was assured of the co-operation of the most celebrated doctors in the country, was a private enterprise. Independent of hospitals and almshouses, but

subjected to the surveillance of the State, it comprised all the conditions of comfort and salubrity essential to establishments of this description designed to receive an opulent clientele.

It would have been difficult to find a more agreeable situation than that of Healthful House. On the landward slope of a hill extended a park of two hundred acres planted with the magnificent vegetation that grows so luxuriantly in that part of North America, which is equal in latitude to the Canary and Madeira Islands. At the furthest limit of the park lay the wide estuary of the Neuse, swept by the cool breezes of Pamlico Sound and by the winds that blew from the ocean beyond the narrow lido of the coast.

Healthful House, where rich invalids were cared for under such excellent hygienic conditions, was more generally reserved for the treatment of chronic complaints; but the management did not decline to admit patients affected by mental troubles, when the latter were not of an incurable nature.

It thus happened--a circumstance that was bound to attract a good deal of attention to Healthful House, and which perhaps was the motive for the visit of the Count d'Artigas--that a person of world-wide notoriety had for eighteen months been under special observation there.

This person was a Frenchman named Thomas Roch, forty-five years of age. He was, beyond question, suffering from some mental malady, but

expert alienists admitted that he had not entirely lost the use of his reasoning faculties. It was only too evident that he had lost all notion of things as far as the ordinary acts of life were concerned; but in regard to subjects demanding the exercise of his genius, his sanity was unimpaired and unassailable--a fact which demonstrates how true is the dictum that genius and madness are often closely allied! Otherwise his condition manifested itself by complete loss of memory;--the impossibility of concentrating his attention upon anything, lack of judgment, delirium and incoherence. He no longer even possessed the natural animal instinct of self-preservation, and had to be watched like an infant whom one never permits out of one's sight. Therefore a warder was detailed to keep close watch over him by day and by night in Pavilion No. 17, at the end of Healthful House Park, which had been specially set apart for him.

Ordinary insanity, when it is not incurable, can only be cured by moral means. Medicine and therapeutics are powerless, and their inefficacy has long been recognized by specialists. Were these moral means applicable to the case of Thomas Roch? One may be permitted to doubt it, even amid the tranquil and salubrious surroundings of Healthful House. As a matter of fact the very symptoms of uneasiness, changes of temper, irritability, queer traits of character, melancholy, apathy, and a repugnance for serious occupations were distinctly apparent; no treatment seemed capable of curing or even alleviating these symptoms. This was patent to all his medical attendants.

It has been justly remarked that madness is an excess of subjectivity; that is to say, a state in which the mind accords too much to mental labor and not enough to outward impressions. In the case of Thomas Roch this indifference was practically absolute. He lived but within himself, so to speak, a prey to a fixed idea which had brought him to the condition in which we find him. Could any circumstance occur to counteract it--to "exteriorize" him, as it were? The thing was improbable, but it was not impossible.

It is now necessary to explain how this Frenchman came to quit France, what motive attracted him to the United States, why the Federal government had judged it prudent and necessary to intern him in this sanitarium, where every utterance that unconsciously escaped him during his crises were noted and recorded with the minutest care.

Eighteen months previously the Secretary of the Navy at Washington, had received a demand for an audience in regard to a communication that Thomas Roch desired to make to him.

As soon as he glanced at the name, the secretary perfectly understood the nature of the communication and the terms which would accompany it, and an immediate audience was unhesitatingly accorded.

Thomas Roch's notoriety was indeed such that, out of solicitude for the interests confided to his keeping, and which he was bound to safeguard, he could not hesitate to receive the petitioner and listen to the proposals which the latter desired personally to submit to him.

Thomas Roch was an inventor--an inventor of genius. Several important discoveries had brought him prominently to the notice of the world. Thanks to him, problems that had previously remained purely theoretical had received practical application. He occupied a conspicuous place in the front rank of the army of science. It will be seen how worry, deceptions, mortification, and the outrages with which he was overwhelmed by the cynical wits of the press combined to drive him to that degree of madness which necessitated his internment in Healthful House.

His latest invention in war-engines bore the name of Roch's Fulgurator. This apparatus possessed, if he was to be believed, such superiority over all others, that the State which acquired it would become absolute master of earth and ocean.

The deplorable difficulties inventors encounter in connection with their inventions are only too well known, especially when they endeavor to get them adopted by governmental commissions. Several of the most celebrated examples are still fresh in everybody's memory. It is useless to insist upon this point, because there are sometimes circumstances underlying affairs of this kind upon which it is difficult to obtain any light. In regard to Thomas Roch, however, it is only fair to say that, as in the case of the majority of his predecessors, his pretensions were excessive. He placed such an exorbitant price upon his new engine that it was practicably impossible to treat with him.

This was due to the fact--and it should not be lost sight of--that in respect of previous inventions which had been most fruitful in result, he had been imposed upon with the greatest audacity. Being unable to obtain therefrom the profits which he had a right to expect, his temper had become soured. He became suspicious, would give up nothing without knowing just what he was doing, impose conditions that were perhaps unacceptable, wanted his mere assertions accepted as sufficient guarantee, and in any case asked for such a large sum of money on account before condescending to furnish the test of practical experiment that his overtures could not be entertained.

In the first place he had offered the fulgurator to France, and made known the nature of it to the commission appointed to pass upon his proposition. The fulgurator was a sort of auto-propulsive engine, of peculiar construction, charged with an explosive composed of new substances and which only produced its effect under the action of a deflagrator that was also new.

When this engine, no matter in what way it was launched, exploded, not on striking the object aimed at, but several hundred yards from it, its action upon the atmospheric strata was so terrific that any construction, warship or floating battery, within a zone of twelve thousand square yards, would be blown to atoms. This was the principle of the shell launched by the Zalinski pneumatic gun with which experiments had already been made at that epoch, but its results were multiplied at least a hundred-fold.

If, therefore, Thomas Roch's invention possessed this power, it assured the offensive and defensive superiority of his native country. But might not the inventor be exaggerating, notwithstanding that the tests of other engines he had conceived had proved incontestably that they were all he had claimed them to be? This, experiment could alone show, and it was precisely here where the rub came in. Roch would not agree to experiment until the millions at which he valued his fulgurator had first been paid to him.

It is certain that a sort of disequilibrium had then occurred in his mental faculties. It was felt that he was developing a condition of mind that would gradually lead to definite madness. No government could possibly condescend to treat with him under the conditions he imposed.

The French commission was compelled to break off all negotiations with him, and the newspapers, even those of the Radical Opposition, had to admit that it was difficult to follow up the affair.

In view of the excess of subjectivity which was unceasingly augmenting in the profoundly disturbed mind of Thomas Roch, no one will be surprised at the fact that the cord of patriotism gradually relaxed until it ceased to vibrate. For the honor of human nature be it said that Thomas Roch was by this time irresponsible for his actions. He preserved his whole consciousness only in so far as subjects bearing directly upon his invention were concerned. In this particular he had

lost nothing of his mental power. But in all that related to the most ordinary details of existence his moral decrepitude increased daily and deprived him of complete responsibility for his acts.

Thomas Roch's invention having been refused by the commission, steps ought to have been taken to prevent him from offering it elsewhere. Nothing of the kind was done, and there a great mistake was made.

The inevitable was bound to happen, and it did. Under a growing irritability the sentiment of patriotism, which is the very essence of the citizen--who before belonging to himself belongs to his country--became extinct in the soul of the disappointed inventor. His thoughts turned towards other nations. He crossed the frontier, and forgetting the ineffaceable past, offered the fulgurator to Germany.

There, as soon as his exorbitant demands were made known, the government refused to receive his communication. Besides, it so happened that the military authorities were just then absorbed by the construction of a new ballistic engine, and imagined they could afford to ignore that of the French inventor.

As the result of this second rebuff Roch's anger became coupled with hatred--an instinctive hatred of humanity--especially after his pourparlers with the British Admiralty came to naught. The English being practical people, did not at first repulse Thomas Roch. They sounded him and tried to get round him; but Roch would listen to nothing. His secret was worth millions, and these millions he would

have, or they would not have his secret. The Admiralty at last declined to have anything more to do with him.

It was in these conditions, when his intellectual trouble was growing daily worse, that he made a last effort by approaching the American Government. That was about eighteen months before this story opens.

The Americans, being even more practical than the English, did not attempt to bargain for Roch's fulgurator, to which, in view of the French chemist's reputation, they attached exceptional importance. They rightly esteemed him a man of genius, and took the measures justified by his condition, prepared to indemnify him equitably later.

As Thomas Roch gave only too visible proofs of mental alienation, the Administration, in the very interest of his invention, judged it prudent to sequester him.

As is already known, he was not confined in a lunatic asylum, but was conveyed to Healthful House, which offered every guarantee for the proper treatment of his malady. Yet, though the most careful attention had been devoted to him, no improvement had manifested itself.

Thomas Roch, let it be again remarked--this point cannot be too often insisted upon--incapable though he was of comprehending and performing the ordinary acts and duties of life, recovered all his powers when the field of his discoveries was touched upon. He became animated, and spoke with the assurance of a man who knows whereof he is descanting,

and an authority that carried conviction with it. In the heat of his eloquence he would describe the marvellous qualities of his fulgurator and the truly extraordinary effects it caused. As to the nature of the explosive and of the deflagrator, the elements of which the latter was composed, their manufacture, and the way in which they were employed, he preserved complete silence, and all attempts to worm the secret out of him remained ineffectual. Once or twice, during the height of the paroxysms to which he was occasionally subject, there had been reason to believe that his secret would escape him, and every precaution had been taken to note his slightest utterance. But Thomas Roch had each time disappointed his watchers. If he no longer preserved the sentiment of self-preservation, he at least knew how to preserve the secret of his discovery.

Pavilion No. 17 was situated in the middle of a garden that was surrounded by hedges, and here Roch was accustomed to take exercise under the surveillance of his guardian. This guardian lived in the same pavilion, slept in the same room with him, and kept constant watch upon him, never leaving him for an hour. He hung upon the lightest words uttered by the patient in the course of his hallucinations, which generally occurred in the intermediary state between sleeping and waking--watched and listened while he dreamed.

This guardian was known as Gaydon. Shortly after the sequestration of Thomas Roch, having learned that an attendant speaking French fluently was wanted, he had applied at Healthful House for the place, and had been engaged to look after the new inmate.

In reality the alleged Gaydon was a French engineer named Simon Hart, who for several years past had been connected with a manufactory of chemical products in New Jersey. Simon Hart was forty years of age. His high forehead was furrowed with the wrinkle that denoted the thinker, and his resolute bearing denoted energy combined with tenacity. Extremely well versed in the various questions relating to the perfecting of modern armaments, Hart knew everything that had been invented in the shape of explosives, of which there were over eleven hundred at that time, and was fully able to appreciate such a man as Thomas Roch. He firmly believed in the power of the latter's fulgurator, and had no doubt whatever that the inventor had conceived an engine that was capable of revolutionizing the condition of both offensive and defensive warfare on land and sea. He was aware that the demon of insanity had respected the man of science, and that in Roch's partially diseased brain the flame of genius still burned brightly. Then it occurred to him that if, during Roch's crises, his secret was revealed, this invention of a Frenchman would be seized upon by some other country to the detriment of France. Impelled by a spirit of patriotism, he made up his mind to offer himself as Thomas Roch's guardian, by passing himself off as an American thoroughly conversant with the French language, in order that if the inventor did at any time disclose his secret, France alone should benefit thereby. On pretext of returning to Europe, he resigned his position at the New Jersey manufactory, and changed his name so that none should know what had become of him.

Thus it came to pass that Simon Hart, alias Gaydon, had been an attendant at Healthful House for fifteen months. It required no little courage on the part of a man of his position and education to perform the menial and exacting duties of an insane man's attendant; but, as has been before remarked, he was actuated by a spirit of the purest and noblest patriotism. The idea of depriving Roch of the legitimate benefits due to the inventor, if he succeeded in learning his secret, never for an instant entered his mind.

He had kept the patient under the closest possible observation for fifteen months yet had not been able to learn anything from him, or worm out of him a single reply to his questions that was of the slightest value. But he had become more convinced than ever of the importance of Thomas Roch's discovery, and was extremely apprehensive lest the partial madness of the inventor should become general, or lest he should die during one of his paroxysms and carry his secret with him to the grave.

This was Simon Hart's position, and this the mission to which he had wholly devoted himself in the interest of his native country.

However, notwithstanding his deceptions and troubles, Thomas Roch's physical health, thanks to his vigorous constitution, was not particularly affected. A man of medium height, with a large head, high, wide forehead, strongly-cut features, iron-gray hair and moustache, eyes generally haggard, but which became piercing and imperious when illuminated by his dominant idea, thin lips closely

compressed, as though to prevent the escape of a word that could betray his secret--such was the inventor confined in one of the pavilions of Healthful House, probably unconscious of his sequestration, and confided to the surveillance of Simon Hart the engineer, become Gaydon the warder.