

## CHAPTER II.

### COUNT D'ARTIGAS.

Just who was this Count d'Artigas? A Spaniard? So his name would appear to indicate. Yet on the stern of his schooner, in letters of gold, was the name Ebba, which is of pure Norwegian origin. And had you asked him the name of the captain of the Ebba, he would have replied, Spade, and would doubtless have added that that of the boatswain was Effrondat, and that of the ship's cook, Helim--all singularly dissimilar and indicating very different nationalities.

Could any plausible hypothesis be deducted from the type presented by Count d'Artigas? Not easily. If the color of his skin, his black hair, and the easy grace of his attitude denoted a Spanish origin, the ensemble of his person showed none of the racial characteristics peculiar to the natives of the Iberian peninsula.

He was a man of about forty-five years of age, about the average height, and robustly constituted. With his calm and haughty demeanor he resembled an Hindoo lord in whose blood might mingle that of some superb type of Malay. If he was not naturally of a cold temperament, he at least, with his imperious gestures and brevity of speech, endeavored to make it appear that he was. As to the language usually spoken by him and his crew, it was one of those idioms current in the islands of the Indian Ocean and the adjacent seas. Yet when his

maritime excursions brought him to the coasts of the old or new world he spoke English with remarkable facility, and with so slight an accent as to scarcely betray his foreign origin.

None could have told anything about his past, nor even about his present life, nor from what source he derived his fortune,--obviously a large one, inasmuch as he was able to gratify his every whim and lived in the greatest luxury whenever he visited America,--nor where he resided when at home, nor where was the port from which his schooner hailed, and none would have ventured to question him upon any of these points so little disposed was he to be communicative. He was not the kind of man to give anything away or compromise himself in the slightest degree, even when interviewed by American reporters.

All that was known about him was what was published in the papers when the arrival of the Ebba was reported in some port, and particularly in the ports of the east coast of the United States, where the schooner was accustomed to put in at regular periods to lay in provisions and stores for a lengthy voyage. She would take on board not only flour, biscuits, preserves, fresh and dried meat, live stock, wines, beers, and spirits, but also clothing, household utensils, and objects of luxury--all of the finest quality and highest price, and which were paid for either in dollars, guineas, or other coins of various countries and denominations.

Consequently, if no one knew anything about the private life of Count d'Artigas, he was nevertheless very well known in the various ports of

the United States from the Florida peninsula to New England.

It is therefore in no way surprising that the director of Healthful House should have felt greatly flattered by the Count's visit, and have received him with every mark of honor and respect.

It was the first time that the schooner Ebba had dropped anchor in the port of New-Berne, and no doubt a mere whim of her owner had brought him to the mouth of the Neuse. Otherwise why should he have come to such a place? Certainly not to lay in stores, for Pamlico Sound offered neither the resources nor facilities to be found in such ports as Boston, New York, Dover, Savannah, Wilmington in North Carolina, and Charleston in South Carolina. What could he have procured with his piastres and bank-notes in the small markets of New-Berne? This chief town of Craven County contained barely six thousand inhabitants. Its commerce consisted principally in the exportation of grain, pigs, furniture, and naval munitions. Besides, a few weeks previously, the schooner had loaded up for some destination which, as usual, was unknown.

Had this enigmatical personage then come solely for the purpose of visiting Healthful House? Very likely. There would have been nothing surprising in the fact, seeing that the establishment enjoyed a high and well-merited reputation.

Or perhaps the Count had been inspired by curiosity to meet Thomas Roch? This curiosity would have been legitimate and natural enough

in view of the universal renown of the French inventor. Fancy--a mad genius who claimed that his discoveries were destined to revolutionize the methods of modern military art!

As he had notified the director he would do, the Count d'Artigas presented himself in the afternoon at the door of Healthful House, accompanied by Captain Spade, the commander of the Ebba.

In conformity with orders given, both were admitted and conducted to the office of the director. The latter received his distinguished visitor with empressement, placed himself at his disposal, and intimated his intention of personally conducting him over the establishment, not being willing to concede to anybody else the honor of being his cicerone. The Count on his part was profuse in the expression of his thanks for the considerations extended to him.

They went over the common rooms and private habitations of the establishment, the director prattling unceasingly about the care with which the patients were tended--much better care, if he was to be believed, than they could possibly have had in the bosoms of their families--and priding himself upon the results achieved, and which had earned for the place its well-merited success.

The Count d'Artigas listened to his ceaseless chatter with apparent interest, probably in order the better to dissemble the real motive of his visit. However, after going the rounds for an hour he ventured to remark:

"Have you not among your patients, sir, one anent whom there was a great deal of talk some time ago, and whose presence here contributed in no small measure to attract public attention to Healthful House?"

"You refer to Thomas Roch, I presume, Count?" queried the director.

"Precisely--that Frenchman--that inventor--whose mental condition is said to be very precarious."

"Very precarious, Count, and happily so, perhaps! In my opinion humanity has nothing to gain by his discoveries, the application of which would increase the already too numerous means of destruction."

"You speak wisely, sir, and I entirely agree with you. Real progress does not lie in that direction, and I regard as inimical to society all those who seek to follow it. But has this inventor entirely lost the use of his intellectual faculties?"

"Entirely, no; save as regards the ordinary things of life. In this respect he no longer possesses either comprehension or responsibility. His genius as an inventor, however, remains intact; it has survived his moral degeneracy, and, had his insensate demands been complied with, I have no doubt he would have produced a new war engine--which the world can get along very well without."

"Very well without, as you say, sir," re-echoed the Count d'Artigas,

and Captain Spade nodded approval.

"But you will be able to judge for yourself, Count, for here is the pavilion occupied by Thomas Roch. If his confinement is well justified from the point of view of public security he is none the less treated with all the consideration due to him and the attention which his condition necessitates. Besides, Healthful House is beyond the reach of indiscreet persons who might...."

The director completed the phrase with a significant motion of his head--which brought an imperceptible smile to the lips of the stranger.

"But," asked the Count, "is Thomas Roch never left alone?"

"Never, Count, never. He has a permanent attendant in whom we have implicit confidence, who speaks his language and keeps the closest possible watch upon him. If in some way or other some indication relative to his discovery were to escape him, it would be immediately noted down and its value would be passed upon by those competent to judge."

Here the Count d'Artigas stole a rapid and meaning glance at Captain Spade, who responded with a gesture which said plainly enough: "I understand." And had any one observed the captain during the visit, they could not have failed to remark that he examined with the greatest minuteness that portion of the park surrounding Pavilion No.

17, and the different paths leading to the latter--probably in view of some prearranged scheme.

The garden of the pavilion was near the high wall surrounding the property, from the foot of which on the other side the hill sloped gently to the right bank of the Neuse.

The pavilion itself was a one-story building surmounted by a terrace in the Italian style. It contained two rooms and an ante-room with strongly-barred windows. On each side and in rear of the habitation were clusters of fine trees, which were then in full leaf. In front was a cool, green velvety lawn, ornamented with shrubs and brilliantly tinted flowers. The whole garden extended over about half an acre, and was reserved exclusively for the use of Thomas Roch, who was free to wander about it at pleasure under the surveillance of his guardian.

When the Count d'Artigas, Captain Spade, and the director entered the garden, the first person they saw was the warder Gaydon, standing at the door of the pavilion. Unnoticed by the director the Count d'Artigas eyed the attendant with singular persistence.

It was not the first time that strangers had come to see the occupant of Pavilion No. 17, for the French inventor was justly regarded as the most interesting inmate of Healthful House. Nevertheless, Gaydon's attention was attracted by the originality of the type presented by the two visitors, of whose nationality he was ignorant. If the name of the Count d'Artigas was not unfamiliar to him, he had never had

occasion to meet that wealthy gentleman during the latter's sojourn in the eastern ports. He therefore had no idea as to who the Count was. Neither was he aware that the schooner Ebba was then anchored at the entrance to the Neuse, at the foot of the hill upon which Healthful House was situated.

"Gaydon," demanded the director, "where is Thomas Roch?"

"Yonder," replied the warder, pointing to a man who was walking meditatively under the trees in rear of the pavilion.

"The Count d'Artigas has been authorized to visit Healthful House," the director explained; "and does not wish to go away without having seen Thomas Roch, who was lately the subject of a good deal too much discussion."

"And who would be talked about a great deal more," added the Count, "had the Federal Government not taken the precaution to confine him in this establishment."

"A necessary precaution, Count."

"Necessary, as you observe, Mr. Director. It is better for the peace of the world that his secret should die with him."

After having glanced at the Count d'Artigas, Gaydon had not uttered a word; but preceding the two strangers he walked towards the clump of



trees where the inventor was pacing back and forth.

Thomas Roch paid no attention to them. He appeared to be oblivious of their presence.

Meanwhile, Captain Spade, while being careful not to excite suspicion, had been minutely examining the immediate surroundings of the pavilion and the end of the park in which it was situated. From the top of the sloping alleys he could easily distinguish the peak of a mast which showed above the wall of the park. He recognized the peak at a glance as being that of the Ella, and knew therefore that the wall at this part skirted the right bank of the Neuse.

The Count d'Artigas' whole attention was concentrated upon the French inventor. The latter's health appeared to have suffered in no way from his eighteen months' confinement; but his queer attitude, his incoherent gestures, his haggard eye, and his indifference to what was passing around him testified only too plainly to the degeneration of his mental faculties.

At length Thomas Roch dropped into a seat and with the end of a switch traced in the sand of the alley the outline of a fortification. Then kneeling down he made a number of little mounds that were evidently intended to represent bastions. He next plucked some leaves from a neighboring tree and stuck them in the mounds like so many tiny flags. All this was done with the utmost seriousness and without any attention whatever being paid to the onlookers.

It was the amusement of a child, but a child would have lacked this characteristic gravity.

"Is he then absolutely mad?" demanded the Count d'Artigas, who in spite of his habitual impassibility appeared to be somewhat disappointed.

"I warned you, Count, that nothing could be obtained from him."

"Couldn't he at least pay some attention to us?"

"It would perhaps be difficult to induce him to do so."

Then turning to the attendant:

"Speak to him, Gaydon. Perhaps he will answer you."

"Oh! he'll answer me right enough, sir, never fear," replied Gaydon.

He went up to the inventor and touching him on the shoulder, said gently: "Thomas Roch!"

The latter raised his head, and of the persons present he doubtless saw but his keeper, though Captain Spade had come up and all formed a circle about him.

"Thomas Roch," continued Gaydon, speaking in English, "here are some visitors to see you. They are interested in your health--in your work."

The last word alone seemed to rouse him from his indifference.

"My work?" he replied, also in English, which he spoke like a native.

Then taking a pebble between his index finger and bent thumb, as a boy plays at marbles, he projected it against one of the little sand-heaps. It scattered, and he jumped for joy.

"Blown to pieces! The bastion is blown to pieces! My explosive has destroyed everything at one blow!" he shouted, the light of triumph flashing in his eyes.

"You see," said the director, addressing the Count d'Artigas. "The idea of his invention never leaves him."

"And it will die with him," affirmed the attendant.

"Couldn't you, Gaydon, get him to talk about his fulgurator?" asked his chief.

"I will try, if you order me to do so, sir."

"Well, I do order you, for I think it might interest the Count

d'Artigas."

"Certainly," assented the Count, whose physiognomy betrayed no sign of the sentiments which were agitating him.

"I ought to warn you that I risk bringing on another fit," observed Gaydon.

"You can drop the conversation when you consider it prudent. Tell Thomas Roch that a foreigner wishes to negotiate with him for the purchase of his fulgurator."

"But are you not afraid he may give his secret away?" questioned the Count.

He spoke with such vivacity that Gaydon could not restrain a glance of distrust, which, however, did not appear to disturb the equanimity of that impenetrable nobleman.

"No fear of that," said the warder. "No promise would induce him to divulge his secret. Until the millions he demands are counted into his hand he will remain as mute as a stone."

"I don't happen to be carrying those millions about me," remarked the Count quietly.

Gaydon again touched Roch on the shoulder and repeated:

"Thomas Roch, here are some foreigners who are anxious to acquire your invention."

The madman started.

"My invention?" he cried. "My deflagrator?"

And his growing animation plainly indicated the imminence of the fit that Gaydon had been apprehensive about, and which questions of this character invariably brought on.

"How much will you give me for it--how much?" continued Roch. "How much--how much?"

"Ten million dollars," replied Gaydon.

"Ten millions! Ten millions! A fulgurator ten million times more powerful than anything hitherto invented! Ten millions for an autopropulsive projectile which, when it explodes, destroys everything in sight within a radius of over twelve thousand square yards! Ten millions for the only deflagrator that can provoke its explosion! Why, all the wealth of the world wouldn't suffice to purchase the secret of my engine, and rather than sell it at such a price I would cut my tongue in half with my teeth. Ten millions, when it is worth a billion--a billion--a billion!"

It was clear that Roch had lost all notion of things, and had Gaydon offered him ten billions the madman would have replied in exactly the same manner.

The Count d'Artigas and Captain Spade had not taken their eyes off him. The Count was impassible as usual, though his brow had darkened, but the captain shook his head in a manner that implied plainly:

"Decidedly there is nothing to hope from this poor devil!"

After his outburst Roch fled across the garden crying hoarsely:

"Billions! Billions!"

Gaydon turned to the director and remarked:

"I told you how it would be."

Then he rushed after his patient, caught him by the arm, and led him, without any attempt at resistance, into the pavilion and closed the door.

The Count d'Artigas remained alone with the director, Captain Spade having strolled off again in the direction of the wall at the bottom of the park.

"You see I was not guilty of exaggeration, Count," said the director.

"It is obvious to every one that Thomas Roch is becoming daily worse.

In my opinion his case is a hopeless one. If all the money he asks for were offered to him, nothing could be got from him."

"Very likely," replied the Count, "still, if his pecuniary demands are supremely absurd, he has none the less invented an engine the power of which is infinite, one might say."

"That is the opinion expressed by competent persons, Count. But what he has discovered will ere long be lost with himself in one of these fits which are becoming more frequent and intense. Very soon even the motive of interest, the only sentiment that appears to have survived in his mind, will become extinct."

"Mayhap the sentiment of hatred will remain, though," muttered the Count, as Spade joined them at the garden gate.