

CHAPTER III.

KIDNAPPED.

Half an hour later the Count d'Artigas and Captain Spade were following the beech-lined road that separated the Healthful House estate from the right bank of the Neuse. Both had taken leave of the director, the latter declaring himself greatly honored by their visit, and the former thanking him warmly for his courteous reception. A hundred-dollar bill left as a tip for the staff of the establishment had certainly not belied the Count's reputation for generosity. He was--there could be no doubt about it--a foreigner of the highest distinction, if distinction be measured by generosity.

Issuing by the gate at the main entrance to Healthful House, they had skirted the wall that surrounded the property, and which was high enough to preclude the possibility of climbing it. Not a word passed between them for some time; the Count was deep in thought and Captain Spade was not in the habit of addressing him without being first spoken to.

At last when they stood beneath the rear wall behind which, though it was not visible, the Count knew Pavilion No. 17 was situated, he said:

"You managed, I presume, to thoroughly explore the place, and are acquainted with every detail of it?"

"Certainly, Count" replied Captain Spade, emphasizing the title.

"You are perfectly sure about it?"

"Perfectly. I could go through the park with my eyes shut. If you still persist in carrying out your scheme the pavilion can be easily reached."

"I do persist, Spade."

"Notwithstanding Thomas Roch's mental condition?"

"Notwithstanding his condition; and if we succeed in carrying him off----"

"That is my affair. When night comes on I undertake to enter the park of Healthful House, and then the pavilion garden without being seen by anybody."

"By the entrance gate?"

"No, on this side."

"Yes, but on this side there is the wall, and if you succeed in climbing it, how are you going to get over it again with Thomas Roch? What if the madman cries out--what if he should resist--what if his

keeper gives the alarm?"

"Don't worry yourself in the least about that. We have only got to go in and come out by this door."

Captain Spade pointed to a narrow door let into the wall a few paces distant, and which was doubtless used by the staff of the establishment when they had occasion to go out by the river.

"That is the way I propose to go in. It's much easier than scaling the wall with a ladder."

"But the door is closed."

"It will open."

"Has it no bolts?"

"Yes, but I shot them back while we were strolling about, and the director didn't notice what I had done."

"How are you going to open it?" queried the Count, going to the door.

"Here is the key," replied Spade, producing it.

He had withdrawn it from the lock, where it happened to be, when he had unbolted the door.

"Capital!" exclaimed the Count. "It couldn't be better. The business will be easier than I expected. Let us get back to the schooner. At eight o'clock one of the boats will put you ashore with five men."

"Yes, five men will do," said Captain Spade. "There will be enough of them to effect our object even if the keeper is aroused and it becomes necessary to put him out of the way."

"Put him out of the way--well, if it becomes absolutely necessary of course you must, but it would be better to seize him too and bring him aboard the *Ebba* Who knows but what he has already learned a part of Roch's secret?"

"True."

"Besides, Thomas Roch is used to him, and I don't propose to make him change his habitudes in any way."

This observation was accompanied by such a significant smile that Captain Spade could entertain no doubt as to the rôle reserved for the warder of Healthful House.

The plan to kidnap them both was thus settled, and appeared to have every chance of being successful; unless during the couple of hours of daylight that yet remained it was noticed that the key of the door had been stolen and the bolts drawn back, Captain Spade and his men could

at least count upon being able to enter the park, and the rest, the captain affirmed, would be easy enough.

Thomas Roch was the only patient in the establishment isolated and kept under special surveillance. All the other invalids lived in the main building, or occupied pavilions in the front of the park. The plan was to try and seize Roch and Gaydon separately and bind and gag them before they could cry out.

The Count d'Artigas and his companion wended their way to a creek where one of the Ebba's boats awaited them. The schooner was anchored two cable lengths from the shore, her sails neatly rolled upon her yards, which were squared as neatly as those of a pleasure yacht or of a man-of-war. At the peak of the mainmast a narrow red pennant was gently swayed by the wind, which came in fitful puffs from the east.

The Count and the captain jumped into the boat and a few strokes of the four oars brought them alongside of the schooner. They climbed on deck and going forward to the jib-boom, leaned over the starboard bulwark and gazed at an object that floated on the water a few strokes ahead of the vessel. It was a small buoy that was rocked by the ripple of the ebbing tide.

Twilight gradually set in, and the outline of New-Berne on the left bank of the sinuous Neuse became more and more indistinct until it disappeared in the deepening shades of night. A mist set in from the

sea, but though it obscured the moon it brought no sign of rain. The lights gleamed out one by one in the houses of the town. The fishing smacks came slowly up the river to their anchorage, impelled by the oars of their crews which struck the water with sharp, rhythmical strokes, and with their sails distended on the chance of catching an occasional puff of the dropping wind to help them along. A couple of steamers passed, sending up volumes of black smoke and myriads of sparks from their double stacks, and lashing the water into foam with their powerful paddles.

At eight o'clock the Count d'Artigas appeared on the schooner's deck accompanied by a man about fifty years of age, to whom he remarked:

"It is time to go, Serko."

"Very well, I will tell Spade," replied Serko.

At that moment the captain joined them.

"You had better get ready to go," said the Count.

"All is ready."

"Be careful to prevent any alarm being given, and arrange matters so that no one will for a minute suspect that Thomas Roch and his keeper have been brought on board the Ebba."

"They wouldn't find them if they came to look for them," observed Serko, shrugging his shoulders and laughing heartily as though he had perpetrated a huge joke.

"Nevertheless, it is better not to arouse their suspicion," said d'Artigas.

The boat was lowered, and Captain Spade and five sailors took their places in it. Four of the latter got out the oars. The boatswain, Effrondat, who was to remain in charge of the boat, went to the stern beside Captain Spade and took the tiller.

"Good luck, Spade," said Serko with a smile, "and don't make more noise about it than if you were a gallant carrying off his lady-love."

"I won't--unless that Gaydon chap--"

"We must have both Roch and Gaydon," insisted the Count d'Artigas.

"That is understood," replied Spade.

The boat pushed off, and the sailors on the deck of the schooner watched it till it was lost to sight in the darkness.

Pending its return, no preparations for the Ebba's departure were made. Perhaps there was no intention of quitting the port after the men had been kidnapped. Besides, how could the vessel have reached the

open sea? Not a breath of air was now stirring, and in half an hour the tide would be setting in again, and rising strongly and rapidly for several miles above New-Berne.

Anchored, as has already been said, a couple of cable-lengths from the shore, the Ebba might have been brought much nearer to it, for the water was deep enough, and this would have facilitated the task of the kidnappers when they returned from their expedition. If, however, the Count d'Artigas preferred to let the vessel stay where she was, he probably had his reasons.

Not a soul was in sight on the bank, and the road, with its borders of beech trees that skirted the wall of Healthful House estate, was equally deserted. The boat was made fast to the shore. Then Captain Spade and his four sailors landed, leaving the boatswain in charge, and disappeared amid the trees.

When they reached the wall Captain Spade stopped and the sailors drew up on each side of the doorway. The captain had only to turn the key in the lock and push the door, unless one of the servants, noticing that the door was not secured as usual, had bolted it. In this event their task would be an extremely difficult one, even if they succeeded in scaling the high wall.

The captain put his ear to the key-hole and listened.

Not a sound was to be heard in the park. Not even a leaf was rustling

in the branches of the beeches under which they were standing. The surrounding country was wrapt in the profoundest silence.

Captain Spade drew the key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock and turned it noiselessly. Then he cautiously pushed the door, which opened inward.

Things were, then, just as he had left them, and no one had noticed the theft of the key.

After assuring himself that nobody happened to be in the neighborhood of the pavilion the captain entered, followed by his men. The door was left wide open, so that they could beat a hurried and uninterrupted retreat in case of necessity. The trees and bushes in this shady part of the park were very thick, and it was so dark that it would not have been easy to distinguish the pavilion had not a light shone brightly in one of the windows.

No doubt this was the window of the room occupied by Roch and his guardian, Gaydon, seeing that the latter never left the patient placed in his charge either by night or day. Captain Spade had expected to find him there.

The party approached cautiously, taking the utmost precaution to avoid kicking a pebble or stepping on a twig, the noise of which might have revealed their presence. In this way they reached the door of the pavilion near which was the curtained window of the room in which the

light was burning.

But if the door was locked, how were they going to get in? Captain Spade must have asked himself. He had no key, and to attempt to effect an entrance through the window would be hazardous, for, unless Gaydon could be prevented from giving the alarm, he would rouse the whole establishment.

There was no help for it, however. The essential was to get possession of Roch. If they could kidnap Gaydon, too, in conformity with the intentions of the Count d'Artigas, so much the better. If not--

Captain Spade crept stealthily to the window, and standing on tiptoe, looked in. Through an aperture in the curtain he could see all over the room.

Gaydon was standing beside Thomas Roch, who had not yet recovered from the fit with which he had been attacked during the Count d'Artigas' visit. His condition necessitated special attention, and the warder was ministering to the patient under the direction of a third person.

The latter was one of the doctors attached to Healthful House, and had been at once sent to the pavilion by the director when Roch's paroxysm came on. His presence of course rendered the situation more complicated and the work of the kidnapppers more difficult.

Roch, fully dressed, was extended upon a sofa. He was now fairly calm.

The paroxysm, which was abating, would be followed by several hours of torpor and exhaustion.

Just as Captain Spade peeped through the window the doctor was making preparations to leave. The Captain heard him say to Gaydon that his (the doctor's) presence was not likely to be required any more that night, and that there was nothing to be done beyond following the instructions he had given.

The doctor then walked towards the door, which, it will be remembered, was close to the window in front of which Spade and his men were standing. If they remained where they were they could not fail to be seen, not only by the doctor, but by the warder, who was accompanying him to the door.

Before they made their appearance, however, the sailors, at a sign from their chief, had dispersed and hidden themselves behind the bushes, while Spade himself crouched in the shadow beneath the window. Luckily Gaydon had not brought the lamp with him, so that the captain was in no danger of being seen.

As he was about to take leave of Gaydon, the doctor stopped on the step and remarked:

"This is one of the worst attacks our patient has had. One or two more like that and he will lose the little reason he still possesses."

"Just so," said Gaydon. "I wonder that the director doesn't prohibit all visitors from entering the pavilion. Roch owes his present attack to a Count d'Artigas, for whose amusement harmful questions were put to him."

"I will call the director's attention to the matter," responded the doctor.

He then descended the steps and Gaydon, leaving the door of the pavilion ajar, accompanied him to the end of the path.

When they had gone Captain Spade stood up, and his men rejoined him.

Had they not better profit by the chance thus unexpectedly afforded them to enter the room and secure Roch, who was in a semi-comatose condition, and then await Gaydon's return, and seize the warder as he entered?

This would have involved considerable risk. Gaydon, at a glance, would perceive that his patient was missing and raise an alarm; the doctor would come running back; the whole staff of Healthful House would turn out, and Spade would not have time to escape with his precious prisoner and lock the door in the wall after him.

He did not have much chance to deliberate about it, for the warder was heard returning along the gravel path. Spade decided that the best

thing to be done was to spring upon him as he passed and stifle his cries and overpower him before he could attempt to offer any resistance. The carrying off of the mad inventor would be easy enough, inasmuch as he was unconscious, and could not raise a finger to help himself.

Gaydon came round a clump of bushes and approached the entrance to the pavilion. As he raised his foot to mount the steps the four sailors sprang upon him, bore him backwards to the ground, and had gagged him, securely bound him hand and foot, and bandaged his eyes before he began to realize what had happened.

Two of the men then kept guard over him, while Captain Spade and the others entered the house.

As the captain had surmised, Thomas Roch had sunk into such a torpor that he could have heard nothing of what had been going on outside. Reclining at full length, with his eyes closed, he might have been taken for a dead man but for his heavy breathing. There was no need either to bind or gag him. One man took him by the head and another by the feet and started off with him to the schooner.

Captain Spade was the last to quit the house after extinguishing the lamp and closing the door behind him. In this way there was no reason to suppose that the inmates would be missed before morning.

Gaydon was carried off in the same way as Thomas Roch had been. The

two remaining sailors lifted him and bore him quietly but rapidly down the path to the door in the wall. The park was pitch dark. Not even a glimmer of the lights in the windows of Healthful House could be seen through the thick foliage.

Arrived at the wall, Spade, who had led the way, stepped aside to allow the sailors with their burdens to pass through, then followed and closed and locked the door. He put the key in his pocket, intending to throw it into the Neuse as soon as they were safely on board the schooner.

There was no one on the road, nor on the bank of the river.

The party made for the boat, and found that Efrondat, the boatswain, had made all ready to receive them.

Thomas Roch and Gaydon were laid in the bottom of the boat, and the sailors again took their places at the oars.

"Hurry up, Efrondat, and cast off the painter," ordered the captain.

The boatswain obeyed, and pushed the boat off with his foot as he scrambled in.

The men bent to their oars and rowed rapidly to the schooner, which was easily distinguishable, having hung out a light at her mizzenmast head.

In two minutes they were alongside.

The Count d'Artigas was leaning on the bulwarks by the gangway.

"All right, Spade?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir, all right!"

"Both of them?"

"Both the madman and his keeper."

"Doesn't anybody know about it up at Healthful House?"

"Not a soul."

It was not likely that Gaydon, whose eyes and ears were bandaged, but who preserved all his sang-froid, could have recognized the voices of the Count d'Artigas and Captain Spade. Nor did he have the chance to. No attempt was immediately made to hoist him on board. He had been lying in the bottom of the boat alongside the schooner for fully half an hour, he calculated, before he felt himself lifted, and then lowered, doubtless to the bottom of the hold.

The kidnapping having been accomplished it would seem that it only remained for the Ebba to weigh anchor, descend the estuary and make

her way out to sea through Pamlico Sound. Yet no preparations for departure were made.

Was it not dangerous to stay where they were after their daring raid? Had the Count d'Artigas hidden his prisoners so securely as to preclude the possibility of their being discovered if the Ebba, whose presence in proximity to Healthful House could not fail to excite suspicion, received a visit from the New-Berne police?

However this might have been, an hour after the return of the expedition, every soul on board save the watch--the Count d'Artigas, Serko, and Captain Spade in their respective cabins, and the crew in the fore-castle, were sound asleep.