

CHAPTER V.

WHERE AM I?

(Notes by Simon Hart, the Engineer.)

Where am I? What has happened since the sudden aggression of which I was the victim near the pavilion.

I had just quitted the doctor, and was about to mount the steps, close the door and resume my post beside Thomas Roch when several men sprang upon me and knocked me down. Who are they? My eyes having been bandaged I was unable to recognize them. I could not cry for help, having been gagged. I could make no resistance, for they had bound me hand and foot. Thus powerless, I felt myself lifted and carried about one hundred paces, then hoisted, then lowered, then laid down.

Where? Where?

And Thomas Roch, what has become of him? It must have been he rather than I they were after. I was but Gaydon, the warder. None suspected that I was Simon Hart, the engineer, nor could they have suspected my nationality. Why, therefore, should they have desired to kidnap a mere hospital attendant?

There can consequently be no doubt that the French inventor has been

carried off; and if he was snatched from Healthful House it must have been in the hope of forcing his secret from him.

But I am reasoning on the supposition that Thomas Roch was carried off with me. Is it so? Yes--it must be--it is. I can entertain no doubt whatever about it. I have not fallen into the hands of malefactors whose only intention is robbery. They would not have acted in this way. After rendering it impossible for me to cry out, after having thrown me into a clump of bushes in the corner of the garden, after having kidnapped Thomas Roch they would not have shut me up--where I now am.

Where? This is the question which I have been asking myself for hours without being able to answer it.

However, one thing is certain, and that is that I have embarked upon an extraordinary adventure, that will end?--In what manner I know not--I dare not even imagine what the upshot of it will be. Anyhow, it is my intention to commit to memory, minute by minute, the least circumstance, and then, if it be possible, to jot down my daily impressions. Who knows what the future has in store for me? And who knows but what, in my new position, I may finally discover the secret of Roth's fulgurator? If I am to be delivered one day, this secret must be made known, as well as who is the author, or who are the authors, of this criminal outrage, which may be attended with such serious consequences.

I continually revert to this question, hoping that some incident will occur to enlighten me:

Where am I?

Let me begin from the beginning.

After having been carried by the head and feet from Healthful House, I felt that I was laid, without any brutality, I must admit, upon the stretchers of a row-boat of small dimensions.

The rocking caused by the weight of my body was succeeded shortly afterwards by a further rocking--which I attribute to the embarking of a second person. Can there be room for doubt that it was Thomas Roch? As far as he was concerned they would not have had to take the precaution of gagging him, or of bandaging his eyes, or of binding him. He must still have been in a state of prostration which precluded the possibility of his making any resistance, or even of being conscious of what was being done. The proof that I am not deceiving myself is that I could smell the unmistakable odor of ether. Now, yesterday, before taking leave of us, the doctor administered a few drops of ether to the invalid and--I remember distinctly--a little of this extremely volatile substance fell upon his clothing while he was struggling in his fit. There is therefore nothing astonishing in the fact that this odor should have clung to him, nor that I should have distinguished it, even beneath the bandages that covered my face.

Yes, Thomas Roch was extended near me in the boat. And to think that had I not returned to the pavilion when I did, had I delayed a few minutes longer, I should have found him gone!

Let me think. What could have inspired that Count d'Artigas with the unfortunate curiosity to visit Healthful House? If he had not been allowed to see my patient nothing of the kind would have happened. Talking to Thomas Roch about his inventions brought on a fit of exceptional violence. The director is primarily to blame for not heeding my warning. Had he listened to me the doctor would not have been called upon to attend him, the door of the pavilion would have been locked, and the attempt of the band would have been frustrated.

As to the interest there could have been in carrying off Thomas Roch, either on behalf of a private person or of one of the states of the Old World, it is so evident that there is no need to dwell upon it. However, I can be perfectly easy about the result. No one can possibly succeed in learning what for fifteen months I have been unable to ascertain. In the condition of intellectual collapse into which my fellow-countryman has fallen, all attempts to force his secret from him will be futile. Moreover, he is bound to go from bad to worse until he is hopelessly insane, even as regards those points upon which he has hitherto preserved his reason intact.

After all, however, it is less about Thomas Roch than myself that I must think just now, and this is what I have experienced, to resume the thread of my adventure where I dropped it:

After more rocking caused by our captors jumping into it, the boat is rowed off. The distance must be very short, for a minute after we bumped against something. I surmise that this something must be the hull of a ship, and that we have run alongside. There is some scurrying and excitement. Indistinctly through my bandages I can hear orders being given and a confused murmur of voices that lasts for about five minutes, but I cannot distinguish a word that is said.

The only thought that occurs to me now is that they will hoist me on board and lower me to the bottom of the hold and keep me there till the vessel is far out at sea. Obviously they will not allow either Thomas Roch or his keeper to appear on deck as long as she remains in Pamlico Sound.

My conjecture is correct. Still gagged and bound I am at last lifted by the legs and shoulders. My impression, however, is that I am not being raised over a ship's bulwark, but on the contrary am being lowered. Are they going to drop me overboard to drown like a rat, so as to get rid of a dangerous witness? This thought flashes into my brain, and a quiver of anguish passes through my body from head to foot. Instinctively I draw a long breath, and my lungs are filled with the precious air they will speedily lack.

No, there is no immediate cause for alarm. I am laid with comparative gentleness upon a hard floor, which gives me the sensation of metallic coldness. I am lying at full length. To my extreme surprise, I find

that the ropes with which I was bound have been untied and loosened. The tramping about around me has ceased. The next instant I hear a door closed with a bang.

Where am I? And, in the first place, am I alone? I tear the gag from my mouth, and the bandages from my head.

It is dark--pitch dark. Not a ray of light, not even the vague perception of light that the eyes preserve when the lids are tightly closed.

I shout--I shout repeatedly. No response. My voice is smothered. The air I breathe is hot, heavy, thick, and the working of my lungs will become difficult, impossible, unless the store of air is renewed.

I extend my arms and feel about me, and this is what I conclude:

I am in a compartment with sheet-iron walls, which cannot measure more than four cubic yards. I can feel that the walls are of bolted plates, like the sides of a ship's water-tight compartment.

I can feel that the entrance to it is by a door on one side, for the hinges protrude somewhat. This door must open inwards, and it is through here, no doubt, that I was carried in.

I place my ear to the door, but not a sound can be heard. The silence is as profound as the obscurity--a strange silence that is only broken

by the sonorousness of the metallic floor when I move about. None of the dull noises usually to be heard on board a ship is perceptible, not even the rippling of the water along the hull. Nor is there the slightest movement to be felt; yet, in the estuary of the Neuse, the current is always strong enough, to cause a marked oscillation to any vessel.

But does the compartment in which I am confined, really belong to a ship? How do I know that I am afloat on the Neuse, though I was conveyed a short distance in a boat? Might not the latter, instead of heading for a ship in waiting for it, opposite Healthful House, have been rowed to a point further down the river? In this case is it not possible that I was carried into the collar of a house? This would explain the complete immobility of the compartment. It is true that the walls are of bolted plates, and that there is a vague smell of salt water, that odor *sui generis* which generally pervades the interior of a ship, and which there is no mistaking.

An interval, which I estimate at about four hours, must have passed since my incarceration. It must therefore be near midnight. Shall I be left here in this way till morning? Luckily, I dined at six o'clock, which is the regular dinner-hour at Healthful House. I am not suffering from hunger. In fact I feel more inclined to sleep than to eat. Still, I hope I shall have energy enough to resist the inclination. I will not give way to it. I must try and find out what is going on outside. But neither sound nor light can penetrate this iron box. Wait a minute, though; perhaps by listening intently I may

hear some sound, however feeble. Therefore I concentrate all my vital power in my sense of hearing. Moreover, I try--in case I should really not be on terra firma--to distinguish some movement, some oscillation of my prison. Admitting that the ship is still at anchor, it cannot be long before it will start--otherwise I shall have to give up imagining why Thomas Roch and I have been carried off.

At last--it is no illusion--a slight rolling proves to me, beyond a doubt, that I am not on land. We are evidently moving, but the motion is scarcely perceptible. It is not a jerky, but rather a gliding movement, as though we were skimming through the water without effort, on an even keel.

Let me consider the matter calmly. I am on board a vessel that was anchored in the Neuse, waiting under sail or steam, for the result of the expedition. A boat brought me aboard, but, I repeat, I did not feel that I was lifted over her bulwarks. Was I passed through a porthole? But after all, what does it matter? Whether I was lowered into the hold or not, I am certainly upon something that is floating and moving.

No doubt I shall soon be let out, together with Thomas Roch, supposing them to have locked him up as carefully as they have me. By being let out, I mean being accorded permission to go on deck. It will not be for some hours to come, however, that is certain, for they won't want us to be seen, so that there is no chance of getting a whiff of fresh air till we are well out at sea. If it is a sailing vessel, she must

have waited for a breeze--for the breeze that freshens off shore at daybreak, and is favorable to ships navigating Pamlico Sound.

It certainly cannot be a steamer. I could not have failed to smell the oil and other odors of the engine-room. And then I should feel the trembling of the machinery, the jerks of the pistons, and the movements of the screws or paddles.

The best thing to do is to wait patiently. I shan't be taken out of this hole until to-morrow, anyway. Moreover, if I am not released, somebody will surely bring me something to eat. There is no reason to suppose that they intend to starve me to death. They wouldn't have taken the trouble to bring me aboard, but would have dropped me to the bottom of the river had they been desirous of getting rid of me. Once we are out at sea, what will they have to fear from me? No one could hear my shouts. As to demanding an explanation and making a fuss, it would be useless. Besides, what am I to the men who have carried us off? A mere hospital attendant--one Gaydon, who is of no consequence. It is Thomas Roch they were after. I was taken along too because I happened to return to the pavilion at the critical moment.

At any rate, no matter what happens, no matter who our kidnappers may be, no matter where we are taken, I shall stick to this resolution: I will continue to play my role of warder. No one, no! none, can suspect that Gaydon is Simon Hart, the engineer. There are two advantages in this: in the first place, they will take no notice of a poor devil of a warder, and in the second, I may be able to solve the mystery

surrounding this plot and turn my knowledge to profit, if I succeed in making my escape.

But whither are my thoughts wandering? I must perforce wait till we arrive at our destination before thinking of escaping. It will be time enough to bother about that when the occasion presents itself. Until then the essential is that they remain ignorant as to my identity, and they cannot, and shall not, know who I am.

I am now certain that we are going through the water. But there is one thing that puzzles me. It is not a sailing vessel, neither can it be a steamer. Yet it is incontestably propelled by some powerful machine. There are none of the noises, nor is there the trembling that accompanies the working of steam engines. The movement of the vessel is more continuous and regular, it is a sort of direct rotation that is communicated by the motor, whatever the latter may be. No mistake is possible: the ship is propelled by some special mechanism. But what is it?

Is it one of those turbines that have been spoken of lately, which, fitted into a submerged tube, are destined to replace the ordinary screw, it being claimed that they utilize the resistance of the water better than the latter and give increased speed to a ship?

In a few hours' time I shall doubtless know all about this means of locomotion.

Meanwhile there is another thing that equally puzzles me. There is not the slightest rolling or pitching. How is it that Pamlico Sound is so extraordinarily calm? The varying currents continuously ruffle the surface of the Sound, even if nothing else does.

It is true the tide may be out, and I remember that last night the wind had fallen altogether. Still, no matter, the thing is inexplicable, for a ship propelled by machinery, no matter at what speed she may be going, always oscillates more or less, and I cannot perceive the slightest rocking.

Such are the thoughts with which my mind is persistently filled. Despite an almost overpowering desire to sleep, despite the torpor that is coming upon me in this suffocating atmosphere, I am resolved not to close my eyes. I will keep awake till daylight, and there will be no daylight for me till it is let into my prison from the outside. Perhaps even if the door were open it would not penetrate to this black hole, and I shall probably not see it again until I am taken on deck.

I am squatting in a corner of my prison, for I have no stool or anything to sit upon, but as my eyelids are heavy and I feel somnolent in spite of myself, I get up and walk about. Then I wax wrathful, anger fills my soul, I beat upon the iron walls with my fists, and shout for help. In vain! I hurt my hands against the bolts of the plates, and no one answers my cries.

Such conduct is unworthy of me. I flattered myself that I would remain calm under all circumstances and here I am acting like a child.

The absence of any rolling or lurching movement at least proves that we are not yet at sea. Instead of crossing Pamlico Sound, may we not be going in the opposite direction, up the River Neuse? No! What would they go further inland for? If Thomas Roch has been carried off from Healthful House, his captors obviously mean to take him out of the United States--probably to a distant island in the Atlantic, or to some point on the European continent. It is, therefore, not up the Neuse that our maritime machine, whatever it may be, is going, but across Pamlico Sound, which must be as calm as a mirror.

Very well, then, when we get to sea I shall soon, know, for the vessel will rock right enough in the swell off shore, even though there be no wind,--unless I am aboard a battleship, or big cruiser, and this I fancy can hardly be!

But hark! If I mistake not--no, it was not imagination--I hear footsteps. Some one is approaching the side of the compartment where the door is. One of the crew no doubt. Are they going to let me out at last? I can now hear voices. A conversation is going on outside the door, but it is carried on in a language that I do not understand. I shout to them--I shout again, but no answer is vouchsafed.

There is nothing to do, then, but wait, wait, wait! I keep repeating the word and it rings in my ears like a bell.

Let me try to calculate how long I have been here. The ship must have been under way for at least four or five hours. I reckon it must be past midnight, but I cannot tell, for unfortunately my watch is of no use to me in this Cimmerian darkness.

Now, if we have been going for five hours, we must have cleared Pamlico Sound, whether we issued by Ocracoke or Hatteras inlet, and must be off the coast a good mile, at least. Yet I haven't felt any motion from the swell of the sea.

It is inexplicable, incredible! Come now, have I made a mistake? Am I the dupe of an illusion? Am I not imprisoned in the hold of a ship under way?

Another hour has passed and the movement of the ship suddenly ceases; I realize perfectly that she is stationary. Has she reached her destination? In this event we can only be in one of the coast ports to the north or south of Pamlico Sound. But why should Thomas Roch be landed again? The abduction must soon have been discovered, and our kidnappers would run the greatest risk of falling into the hands of the authorities if they attempted to disembark.

However this may be, if the vessel is coming to anchor I shall hear the noise of the chain as it is paid out, and feel the jerk as the ship is brought up. I know that sound and that jerk well from experience, and I am bound to hear and feel them in a minute or two.

I wait--I listen.

A dead and disquieting silence reigns on board. I begin to wonder whether I am not the only living being in the ship.

Now I feel an irresistible torpor coming over me. The air is vitiated. I cannot breathe. My chest is bursting. I try to resist, but it is impossible to do so. The temperature rises to such a degree that I am compelled to divest myself of part of my clothing. Then I lie me down in a corner. My heavy eyelids close, and I sink into a prostration that eventually forces me into heavy slumber.

How long have I been asleep? I cannot say. Is it night? Is it day? I know not. I remark, however, that I breathe more easily, and that the air is no longer poisoned carbonic acid.

Was the air renewed while I slept? Has the door been opened? Has anybody been in here?

Yes, here is the proof of it!

In feeling about, my hand has come in contact with a mug filled with a liquid that exhales an inviting odor. I raise it to my lips, which, are burning, for I am suffering such an agony of thirst that I would even drink brackish water.

It is ale--an ale of excellent quality--which refreshes and comforts me, and I drain the pint to the last drop.

But if they have not condemned me to die of thirst, neither have they condemned me to die of hunger, I suppose?

No, for in one of the corners I find a basket, and this basket contains some bread and cold meat.

I fall to, eating greedily, and my strength little by little returns.

Decidedly, I am not so abandoned as I thought I was. Some one entered this obscure hole, and the open door admitted a little of the oxygen from the outside, without which I should have been suffocated. Then the wherewithal to quench my thirst and appease the pangs of hunger was placed within my reach.

How much longer will this incarceration last? Days? Months? I cannot estimate the hours that have elapsed since I fell asleep, nor have I any idea as to what time of the day or night it may be. I was careful to wind up my watch, though, and perhaps by feeling the hands--Yes, I think the little hand marks eight o'clock--in the morning, no doubt. What I do know, however, is that the ship is not in motion. There is not the slightest quiver.

Hours and hours, weary, interminable hours go by, and I wonder whether they are again waiting till night comes on to renew my stock of

air and provisions. Yes, they are waiting to take advantage of my slumbers. But this time I am resolved to resist. I will feign to be asleep--and I shall know how to force an answer from whoever enters!