

CHAPTER VI.

ON DECK.

Here I am in the open air, breathing freely once more. I have at last been hauled out of that stifling box and taken on deck. I gaze around me in every direction and see no sign of land. On every hand is that circular line which defines earth and sky. No, there is not even a speck of land to be seen to the west, where the coast of North America extends for thousands of miles.

The setting sun now throws but slanting rays upon the bosom of the ocean. It must be about six o'clock in the evening. I take out my watch and it marks thirteen minutes past six.

As I have already mentioned, I waited for the door of my prison to open, thoroughly resolved not to fall asleep again, but to spring upon the first person who entered and force him to answer my questions. I was not aware then that it was day, but it was, and hour after hour passed and no one came. I began to suffer again from hunger and thirst, for I had not preserved either bite or sup.

As soon as I awoke I felt that the ship was in motion again, after having, I calculated, remained stationary since the previous day--no doubt in some lonely creek, since I had not heard or felt her come to anchor.

A few minutes ago--it must therefore have been six o'clock--I again heard footsteps on the other side of the iron wall of my compartment. Was anybody coming to my cell? Yes, for I heard the creaking of the bolts as they were drawn back, and then the door opened, and the darkness in which I had been plunged since the first hour of my captivity was illumined by the light of a lantern.

Two men, whom I had no time to look at, entered and seized me by the arms. A thick cloth was thrown over my head, which was enveloped in such a manner that I could see absolutely nothing.

What did it all mean? What were they going to do with me? I struggled, but they held me in an iron grasp. I questioned them, but they made no reply. The men spoke to each other in a language that I could not understand, and had never heard before.

They stood upon no ceremony with me. It is true I was only a madhouse warder, and they probably did not consider it necessary to do so; but I question very much whether Simon Hart, the engineer, would have received any more courtesy at their hands.

This time, however, no attempt was made to gag me nor to bind either my arms or legs. I was simply restrained by main force from breaking away from them.

In a moment I was dragged out of the compartment and pushed along a

narrow passage. Next, the steps of a metallic stairway resounded under our feet. Then the fresh air blew in my face and I inhaled it with avidity.

Finally they took their hands from off me, and I found myself free. I immediately tore the cloth off my head and gazed about me.

I am on board a schooner which is ripping through the water at a great rate and leaving a long white trail behind her.

I had to clutch at one of the stays for support, dazzled as I was by the light after my forty-eight hours' imprisonment in complete obscurity.

On the deck a dozen men with rough, weather-beaten faces come and go--very dissimilar types of men, to whom it would be impossible to attribute any particular nationality. They scarcely take any notice of me.

As to the schooner, I estimate that she registers from two hundred and fifty to three hundred tons. She has a fairly wide beam, her masts are strong and lofty, and her large spread of canvas must carry her along at a spanking rate in a good breeze.

Aft, a grizzly-faced man is at the wheel, and he is keeping her head to the sea that is running pretty high.

I try to find out the name of the vessel, but it is not to be seen anywhere, even on the life-buoys.

I walk up to one of the sailors and inquire:

"What is the name of this ship?"

No answer, and I fancy the man does not understand me.

"Where is the captain?" I continue.

But the sailor pays no more heed to this than he did to the previous question.

I turn on my heel and go forward.

Above the forward hatchway a bell is suspended. Maybe the name of the schooner is engraved upon it. I examine it, but can find no name upon it.

I then return to the stern and address the man at the wheel. He gazes at me sourly, shrugs his shoulders, and bending, grasps the spokes of the wheel solidly, and brings the schooner, which had been headed off by a large wave from port, stem on to sea again.

Seeing that nothing is to be got from that quarter, I turn away and look about to see if I can find Thomas Roch, but I do not perceive

him anywhere. Is he not on board? He must be. They could have had no reason for carrying me off alone. No one could have had any idea that I was Simon Hart, the engineer, and even had they known it what interest could they have had in me, and what could they expect of me?

Therefore, as Roch is not on deck, I conclude that he is locked in one of the cabins, and trust he has met with better treatment than his ex-guardian.

But what is this--and how on earth could I have failed to notice it before? How is this schooner moving? Her sails are furled--there is not an inch of canvas set--the wind has fallen, and the few puffs that occasionally come from the east are unfavorable, in view of the fact that we are going in that very direction. And yet the schooner speeds through the sea, her bows down, throwing off clouds of foam, and leaving a long, milky, undulating trail in her wake.

Is she a steam-yacht? No--there is not a smokestack about her. Is she propelled by electricity--by a battery of accumulators, or by piles of great power that work her screw and send her along at this rate?

I can come to no other conclusion. In any case she must be fitted with a screw, and by leaning over the stern I shall be able to see it, and can find out what sets it working afterwards.

The man at the wheel watches me ironically as I approach, but makes no effort to prevent me from looking over.

I gaze long and earnestly, but there is no foaming and seething of the water such as is invariably caused by the revolutions of the screw--naught but the long white furrow that a sailing vessel leaves behind is discernible in the schooner's wake.

Then, what kind of a machine is it that imparts such a marvellous speed to the vessel? As I have already said, the wind is against her, and there is a heavy swell on.

I must--I will know. No one pays the slightest attention, and I again go forward.

As I approach the forecastle I find myself face to face with a man who is leaning nonchalantly on the raised hatchway and who is watching me. He seems to be waiting for me to speak to him.

I recognize him instantly. He is the person who accompanied the Count d'Artigas during the latter's visit to Healthful House. There can be no mistake--it is he right enough.

It was, then, that rich foreigner who abducted Thomas Roch, and I am on board the Ebba his schooner-yacht which is so well known on the American coast!

The man before me will enlighten me about what I want to know. I remember that he and the Count spoke English together.

I take him to be the captain of the schooner.

"Captain," I say, "you are the person I saw at Healthful House. You remember me, of course?"

He looks me up and down but does not condescend to reply.

"I am Warder Gaydon, the attendant of Thomas Roch," I continue, "and I want to know why you have carried me off and placed me on board this schooner?"

The captain interrupts me with a sign. It is not made to me, however, but to some sailors standing near.

They catch me by the arms, and taking no notice of the angry movement that I cannot restrain, bundle me down the hatchway. The hatchway stair in reality, I remark, is a perpendicular iron ladder, at the bottom of which, to right and left, are some cabins, and forward, the men's quarters.

Are they going to put me back in my dark prison at the bottom of the hold?

No. They turn to the left and push me into a cabin. It is lighted by a port-hole, which is open, and through which the fresh air comes in gusts from the briny. The furniture consists of a bunk, a chair, a

chest of drawers, a wash-hand-stand and a table.

The latter is spread for dinner, and I sit down. Then the cook's mate comes in with two or three dishes. He is a colored lad, and as he is about to withdraw, I try to question him, but he, too, vouchsafes no reply. Perhaps he doesn't understand me.

The door is closed, and I fall to and eat with an excellent appetite, with the intention of putting off all further questioning till some future occasion when I shall stand a chance of getting answered.

It is true I am a prisoner, but this time I am comfortable enough, and I hope I shall be permitted to occupy this cabin for the remainder of the voyage, and not be lowered into that black hole again.

I now give myself up to my thoughts, the first of which is that it was the Count d'Artigas who planned the abduction; that it was he who is responsible for the kidnapping of Thomas Roch, and that consequently the French inventor must be just as comfortably installed somewhere on board the schooner.

But who is this Count d'Artigas? Where does he hail from? If he has seized Thomas Roch, is it not because he is determined to secure the secret of the fulgurator at no matter what cost? Very likely, and I must therefore be careful not to betray my identity, for if they knew the truth, I should never be afforded a chance to get away.

But what a lot of mysteries to clear up, how many inexplicable things to explain--the origin of this d'Artigas, his intentions as to the future, whither we are bound, the port to which the schooner belongs, and this mysterious progress through the water without sails and without screws, at a speed of at least ten knots an hour!

The air becoming keener as night deepens, I close and secure the port-hole, and as my cabin is bolted on the outside, the best thing I can do is to get into my bunk and let myself be gently rocked to sleep by the broad Atlantic in this mysterious cradle, the Ebba.

The next morning I rise at daybreak, and having performed my ablutions, dress myself and wait.

Presently the idea of trying the door occurs to me. I find that it has been unbolted, and pushing it open, climb the iron ladder and emerge on deck.

The crew are washing down the deck, and standing aft and conversing are two men, one of whom is the captain. The latter manifests no surprise at seeing me, and indicates my presence to his companion by a nod.

This other man, whom I have never before seen, is an individual of about fifty years of age, whose dark hair is streaked with gray. His features are delicately chiselled, his eyes are bright, and his expression is intelligent and not at all displeasing. He is somewhat

of the Grecian type, and I have no doubt that he is of Hellenic origin when I hear him called Serko--Engineer Serko--by the Captain of the Ebba.

As to the latter, he is called Spade--Captain Spade--and this name has an Italian twang about it. Thus there is a Greek, an Italian, and a crew recruited from every corner of the earth to man a schooner with a Norwegian name! This mixture strikes me as being suspicious.

And that Count d'Artigas, with his Spanish name and Asiatic type, where does he come from?

Captain Spade and Engineer Serko continue to converse in a low tone of voice. The former is keeping a sharp eye on the man at the wheel, who does not appear to pay any particular attention to the compass in front of him. He seems to pay more heed to the gestures of one of the sailors stationed forward, and who signals to him to put the helm to port or to starboard.

Thomas Roch is near them, gazing vacantly out upon the vast expanse which is not limited on the horizon by a single speck of land. Two sailors watch his every movement. It is evidently feared that the madman may possibly attempt to jump overboard.

I wonder whether I shall be permitted to communicate with my ward.

I walk towards him, and Captain Spade and Engineer Serko watch me.

Thomas Roch doesn't see me coming, and I stand beside him. Still he takes no notice of me, and makes no movement. His eyes, which sparkle brightly, wander over the ocean, and he draws in deep breaths of the salt, vivifying atmosphere. Added to the air surcharged with oxygen is a magnificent sunset in a cloudless sky. Does he perceive the change in his situation? Has he already forgotten about Healthful House, the pavilion in which he was a prisoner, and Gaydon, his keeper? It is highly probable. The past has presumably been effaced from his memory and he lives solely in the present.

In my opinion, even on the deck of the Ebba, in the middle of the sea, Thomas Roch is still the helpless, irresponsible man whom I tended for fifteen months. His intellectual condition has undergone no change, and his reason will return only when he is spoken to about his inventions. The Count d'Artigas is perfectly aware of this mental disposition, having had a proof of it during his visit, and he evidently relies thereon to surprise sooner or later the inventor's secret. But with what object?

"Thomas Roch!" I exclaim.

My voice seems to strike him, and after gazing at me fixedly for an instant he averts his eyes quickly.

I take his hand and press it. He withdraws it brusquely and walks away, without having recognized me, in the direction of Captain Spade

and Engineer Serko.

Does he think of speaking to one or other of these men, and if they speak to him will he be more reasonable than he was with me, and reply to them?

At this moment his physiognomy lights up with a gleam of intelligence. His attention, obviously, has been attracted by the queer progress of the schooner. He gazes at the masts and the furled sails. Then he turns back and stops at the place where, if the Ebba were a steamer, the funnel ought to be, and which in this case ought to be belching forth a cloud of black smoke.

What appeared so strange to me evidently strikes Thomas Roch as being strange, too. He cannot explain what I found inexplicable, and, as I did, he walks aft to see if there is a screw.

On the flanks of the Ebba a shoal of porpoises are sporting. Swift as is the schooner's course they easily pass her, leaping and gambolling in their native element with surprising grace and agility.

Thomas Roch pays no attention to them, but leans over the stern.

Engineer Serko and Captain Spade, fearful lest he should fall overboard, hurry to him and drag him gently, but firmly, away.

I observe from long experience that Roch is a prey to violent

excitement. He turns about and gesticulates, uttering incoherent phrases the while.

It is plain to me that another fit is coming on, similar to the one he had in the pavilion of Healthful House on the night we were abducted. He will have to be seized and carried down to his cabin, and I shall perhaps be summoned to attend to him.

Meanwhile Engineer Serko and Captain Spade do not lose sight of him for a moment. They are evidently curious to see what he will do.

After walking towards the mainmast and assuring himself that the sails are not set, he goes up to it and flinging his arms around it, tries with all his might to shake it, as though seeking to pull it down.

Finding his efforts futile, he quits it and goes to the foremast, where the same performance is gone through. He waxes more and more excited. His vague utterances are followed by inarticulate cries.

Suddenly he rushes to the port stays and clings to them, and I begin to fear that he will leap into the rigging and climb to the cross-tree, where he might be precipitated into the sea by a lurch of the ship.

On a sign from Captain Spade, some sailors run up and try to make him relinquish his grasp of the stays, but are unable to do so. I know

that during his fits he is endowed with the strength of ten men, and many a time I have been compelled to summon assistance in order to overpower him.

Other members of the crew, however, come up, and the unhappy madman is borne to the deck, where two big sailors hold him down, despite his extraordinary strength.

The only thing to do is to convey him to his cabin, and let him lie there till he gets over his fit. This is what will be done in conformity with orders given by a new-comer whose voice seems familiar to me.

I turn and recognize him.

He is the Count d'Artigas, with a frown on his face and an imperious manner, just as I had seen him at Healthful House.

I at once advance toward him. I want an explanation and mean to have it.

"By what right, sir?"--I begin.

"By the right of might," replies the Count.

Then he turns on his heel, and Thomas Roch is carried below.