

CHAPTER VII.

TWO DAYS AT SEA.

Perhaps--should circumstances render it necessary--I may be induced to tell the Count d'Artigas that I am Simon Hart, the engineer. Who knows but what I may receive more consideration than if I remain Warder Gaydon? This measure, however, demands reflection. I have always been dominated by the thought that if the owner of the Ebba kidnapped the French inventor, it was in the hope of getting possession of Roch's fulgurator, for which, neither the old nor new continent would pay the impossible price demanded. In that case the best thing I can do is to remain Warder Gaydon, on the chance that I may be allowed to continue in attendance upon him. In this way, if Thomas Roch should ever divulge his secret, I may learn what it was impossible to do at Healthful House, and can act accordingly.

Meanwhile, where is the Ebba bound?--first question.

Who and what is the Count d'Artigas?--second question.

The first will be answered in a few days' time, no doubt, in view of the rapidity with which we are ripping through the water, under the action of a means of propulsion that I shall end by finding out all about. As regards the second, I am by no means so sure that my curiosity will ever be gratified.

In my opinion this enigmatical personage has an all important reason for hiding his origin, and I am afraid there is no indication by which I can gauge his nationality. If the Count d'Artigas speaks English fluently--and I was able to assure myself of that fact during his visit to Pavilion No. 17,--he pronounces it with a harsh, vibrating accent, which is not to be found among the peoples of northern latitudes. I do not remember ever to have heard anything like it in the course of my travels either in the Old or New World--unless it be the harshness characteristic of the idioms in use among the Malays. And, in truth, with his olive, verging on copper-tinted skin, his jet-black, crinkly hair, his piercing, deep-set, restless eyes, his square shoulders and marked muscular development, it is by no means unlikely that he belongs to one of the extreme Eastern races.

I believe this name of d'Artigas is an assumed one, and his title of Count likewise. If his schooner bears a Norwegian name, he at any rate is not of Scandinavian origin. He has nothing of the races of Northern Europe about him.

But whoever and whatever he may be, this man abducted Thomas Roch--and me with him--with no good intention, I'll be bound.

But what I should like to know is, has he acted as the agent of a foreign power, or on his own account? Does he wish to profit alone by Thomas Roch's invention, and is he in the position to dispose of it profitably? That is another question that I cannot yet answer. Maybe

I shall be able to find out from what I hear and see ere I make my escape, if escape be possible.

The Ebba continues on her way in the same mysterious manner. I am free to walk about the deck, without, however, being able to go beyond the fore hatchway. Once I attempted to go as far as the bows where I could, by leaning over, perceive the schooner's stem as it cut through the water, but acting, it was plain, on orders received, the watch on deck turned me back, and one of them, addressing me brusquely in harsh, grating English, said:

"Go back! Go back! You are interfering with the working of the ship!"

With the working of the ship! There was no working.

Did they realize that I was trying to discover by what means the schooner was propelled? Very likely, and Captain Spade, who had looked on, must have known it, too. Even a hospital attendant could not fail to be astonished at the fact that a vessel without either screw or sails was going along at such a speed. However this may be, for some reason or other, the bows of the Ebba are barred to me.

Toward ten o'clock a breeze springs up--a northwest wind and very favorable--and Captain Spade gives an order to the boatswain. The latter immediately pipes all hands on deck, and the mainsail, the foresail, staysail and jibs are hoisted. The work could not have been executed with greater regularity and discipline on board a man-of-war.

The Ebba now has a slight list to port, and her speed is notably increased. But the motor continues to push her along, as is evident from the fact that the sails are not always as full as they ought to be if the schooner were bowling along solely under their action. However, they continue to render yeoman's service, for the breeze has set in steadily.

The sky is clear, for the clouds in the west disappear as soon as they attain the horizon, and the sunlight dances on the water.

My preoccupation now is to find out as near as possible where we are bound for. I am a good-enough sailor to be able to estimate the approximate speed of a ship. In my opinion the Ebba has been travelling at the rate of from ten to eleven knots an hour. As to the direction we have been going in, it is always the same, and I have been able to verify this by casual glances at the binnacle. If the fore part of the vessel is barred to Warder Gaydon he has been allowed a free run of the remainder of it. Time and again I have glanced at the compass, and noticed that the needle invariably pointed to the east, or to be exact, east-southeast.

These are the conditions in which we are navigating this part of the Atlantic Ocean, which is bounded on the west by the coast of the United States of America.

I appeal to my memory. What are the islands or groups of islands to

be found in the direction we are going, ere the continent of the Old World is reached?

North Carolina, which the schooner quitted forty-eight hours ago, is traversed by the thirty-fifth parallel of latitude, and this parallel, extending eastward, must, if I mistake not, cut the African coast at Morocco. But along the line, about three thousand miles from America, are the Azores. Is it presumable that the Ebba is heading for this archipelago, that the port to which she belongs is somewhere in these islands which constitute one of Portugal's insular domains? I cannot admit such an hypothesis.

Besides, before the Azores, on the line of the thirty-fifth parallel, is the Bermuda group, which belongs to England. It seems to me to be a good deal less hypothetical that, if the Count d'Artigas was entrusted with the abduction of Thomas Roch by a European Power at all, it was by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The possibility, however, remains that he may be acting solely in his own interest.

Three or four times during the day Count d'Artigas has come aft and remained for some time scanning the surrounding horizon attentively. When a sail or the smoke from a steamer heaves in sight he examines the passing vessel for a considerable time with a powerful telescope. I may add that he has not once condescended to notice my presence on deck.

Now and then Captain Spade joins him and both exchange a few words in

a language that I can neither understand nor recognize.

It is with Engineer Serko, however, that the owner of the Ebba converses more readily than with anybody else, and the latter appears to be very intimate with him. The engineer is a good deal more free, more loquacious and less surly than his companions, and I wonder what position he occupies on the schooner. Is he a personal friend of the Count d'Artigas? Does he scour the seas with him, sharing the enviable life enjoyed by the rich yachtsman? He is the only man of the lot who seems to manifest, if not sympathy with, at least some interest in me.

I have not seen Thomas Roch all day. He must be shut in his cabin, still under the influence of the fit that came upon him last night.

I feel certain that this is so, when about three o'clock in the afternoon, just as he is about to go below, the Count beckons me to approach.

I do not know what he wishes to say to me, this Count d'Artigas, but I do know what I will say to him.

"Do these fits to which Thomas Roch is subject last long?" he asks me in English.

"Sometimes forty-eight hours," I reply.

"What is to be done?"

"Nothing at all. Let him alone until he falls asleep. After a night's sleep the fit will be over and Thomas Roch will be his own helpless self again."

"Very well, Warder Gaydon, you will continue to attend him as you did at Healthful House, if it be necessary."

"To attend to him!"

"Yes--on board the schooner--pending our arrival."

"Where?"

"Where we shall be to-morrow afternoon," replies the Count.

To-morrow, I say to myself. Then we are not bound for the coast of Africa, nor even the Azores. There only remains the hypothesis that we are making for the Bermudas.

Count d'Artigas is about to go down the hatchway when I interrogate him in my turn:

"Sir," I exclaim, "I desire to know, I have the right to know, where I am going, and----"

"Here, Warder Gaydon," he interrupted, "you have no rights. All you

have to do is to answer when you are spoken to." "I protest!"

"Protest, then," replies this haughty and imperious personage, glancing at me menacingly.

Then he disappears down the hatchway, leaving me face to face with Engineer Serko.

"If I were you, Warder Gaydon, I would resign myself to the inevitable," remarks the latter with a smile. "When one is caught in a trap----"

"One can cry out, I suppose?"

"What is the use when no one is near to hear you?"

"I shall be heard some day, sir."

"Some day--that's a long way off. However, shout as much as you please."

And with this ironical advice, Engineer Serko leaves me to my own reflections.

Towards four o'clock a big ship is reported about six miles off to the east, coming in our direction. She is moving rapidly and grows perceptibly larger. Black clouds of smoke pour out of her two funnels.

She is a warship, for a narrow pennant floats from her main-mast, and though she is not flying any flag I take her to be an American cruiser.

I wonder whether the Ebba will render her the customary salute as she passes.

No; for the schooner suddenly changes her course with the evident intention of avoiding her.

This proceeding on the part of such a suspicious yacht does not astonish me greatly. But what does cause me extreme surprise is Captain Spade's way of manoeuvring.

He runs forward to a signalling apparatus in the bows, similar to that by which orders are transmitted to the engine room of a steamer. As soon as he presses one of the buttons of this apparatus the Ebba veers off a point to the south-west.

Evidently an order of "some kind" has been transmitted to the driver of the machine of "some kind" which causes this inexplicable movement of the schooner by the action of a motor of "some kind" the principle of which I cannot guess at.

The result of this manoeuvre is that the Ebba slants away from the cruiser, whose course does not vary. Why should this warship cause a pleasure-yacht to turn out of its way? I have no idea.

But the Ebba behaves in a very different manner when about six o'clock in the evening a second ship comes in sight on the port bow. This time, instead of seeking to avoid her, Captain Spade signals an order by means of the apparatus above referred to, and resumes his course to the east--which will bring him close to the said ship.

An hour later, the two vessels are only about four miles from each other.

The wind has dropped completely. The strange ship, which is a three-masted merchantman, is taking in her top-gallant sails. It is useless to expect the wind to spring up again during the night, and she will lay becalmed till morning. The Ebba, however, propelled by her mysterious motor, continues to approach her.

It goes without saying, that Captain Spade has also begun to take in sail, and the work, under the direction of the boatswain Effrondat, is executed with the same precision and promptness that struck me before.

When the twilight deepens into darkness, only a mile and a half separates the vessels.

Captain Spade then comes up to me--I am standing on the starboard side--and unceremoniously orders me to go below.

I can but obey. I remark, however, ere I go, that the boatswain has

not lighted the head-lamps, whereas the lamps of the three-master shine brightly--green to starboard, and red to port.

I entertain no doubt that the schooner intends to pass her without being seen; for though she has slackened speed somewhat, her direction has not been in any way modified.

I enter my cabin under the impression of a vague foreboding. My supper is on the table, but uneasy, I know not why, I hardly touch it, and lie down to wait for sleep that does not come.

I remain in this condition for two hours. The silence is unbroken save by the water that ripples along the vessel's sides.

My mind is full of the events of the past two days, and other thoughts crowd thickly upon me. To-morrow afternoon we shall reach our destination. To-morrow, I shall resume, on land, my attendance upon Thomas Roch, "if it be necessary," said the Count d'Artigas.

If, when I was thrown into that black hole at the bottom of the hold, I was able to perceive when the schooner started off across Pamlico Sound, I now feel that she has come to a stop. It must be about ten o'clock.

Why has she stopped? When Captain Spade ordered me below, there was no land in sight. In this direction, there is no island until the Bermuda group is reached--at least there is none on the map--and we shall have

to go another fifty or sixty miles before the Bermudas can be sighted by the lookout men. Not only has the Ebba stopped, but her immobility is almost complete. There is not a breath of wind, and scarcely any swell, and her slight, regular rocking is hardly perceptible.

Then my thoughts turn to the merchantman, which was only a mile and a half off, on our bow, when I came below. If the schooner continued her course towards her, she must be almost alongside now. We certainly cannot be lying more than one or two cables' length from her. The three-master, which was becalmed at sundown, could not have gone west. She must be close by, and if the night is clear, I shall be able to see her through the porthole.

It occurs to me, that perhaps a chance of escape presents itself. Why should I not attempt it, since no hope of being restored to liberty is held out to me? It is true I cannot swim, but if I seize a life buoy and jump overboard, I may be able to reach the ship, if I am not observed by the watch on deck.

I must quit my cabin and go up by the forward hatchway. I listen. I hear no noise, either in the men's quarters, or on deck. The sailors must all be asleep at this hour. Here goes.

I try to open the door, and find it is bolted on the outside, as I might have expected.

I must give up the attempt, which, after all, had small chance of success.

The best thing I can do, is to go to sleep, for I am weary of mind, if not of body. I am restless and racked by conflicting thoughts, and apprehensions of I know not what. Oh! if I could but sink into the blessed oblivion of slumber!

I must have managed to fall asleep, for I have just been awakened by a noise--an unusual noise, such as I have not hitherto heard on board the schooner.

Day begins to peer through the glass of my port-hole, which is turned towards the east. I look at my watch. It is half-past four.

The first thing I wonder is, whether the Ebba has resumed her voyage.

No, I am certain she has not, either by sail, or by her motor. The sea is as calm at sunrise as it was at sunset. If the Ebba has been going ahead while I slept, she is at any rate, stationary now.

The noise to which I referred, is caused by men hurrying to and fro on deck--by men heavily laden. I fancy I can also hear a similar noise in the hold beneath my cabin floor, the entrance to which is situated abaft the foremast. I also feel that something is scraping against the schooner's hull. Have boats come alongside? Are the crew engaged in

loading or unloading merchandise?

And yet we cannot possibly have reached our journey's end. The Count d'Artigas said that we should not reach our destination till this afternoon. Now, I repeat, she was, last night, fully fifty or sixty miles from the nearest land, the group of the Bermudas. That she could have returned westward, and can be in proximity to the American coast, is inadmissible, in view of the distance. Moreover, I have reason to believe that the Ebba has remained stationary all night. Before I fell asleep, I know she had stopped, and I now know that she is not moving.

However, I shall see when I am allowed to go on deck. My cabin door is still bolted, I find on trying it; but I do not think they are likely to keep me here when broad daylight is on.

An hour goes by, and it gradually gets lighter. I look out of my porthole. The ocean is covered by a mist, which the first rays of the sun will speedily disperse.

I can, however, see for a half a mile, and if the three-masted merchantman is not visible, it is probably because she is lying off the other, or port, side of the Ebba.

Presently I hear a key turned in my door, and the bolts drawn. I push the door open and clamber up the iron ladder to the deck, just as the men are battening down the cover of the hold.

I look for the Count d'Artigas, but do not see him. He has not yet left his cabin.

Aft, Captain Spade and Engineer Serko are superintending the stowing of some bales, which have doubtless been hoisted from the hold. This explains the noisy operations that were going on when I was awakened. Obviously, if the crew are getting out the cargo, we are approaching the end of our voyage. We are not far from port, and perhaps in a few hours, the schooner will drop anchor.

But what about the sailing ship that was to port of us? She ought to be in the same place, seeing that there has been and is no wind.

I look for her, but she is nowhere to be seen. There is not a sail, not a speck on the horizon either east, west, north or south.

After cogitating upon the circumstance I can only arrive at the following conclusion, which, however, can only be accepted under reserve: Although I did not notice it, the Ebba resumed her voyage while I slept, leaving the three-master becalmed behind her, and this is why the merchantman is no longer visible.

I am careful not to question Captain Spade about it, nor even Engineer Serko, as I should certainly receive no answer.

Besides, at this moment Captain Spade goes to the signalling apparatus

and presses one of the buttons on the upper disk. Almost immediately the Ebba gives a jerk, then with her sails still furled, she starts off eastward again.

Two hours later the Count d'Artigas comes up through the main hatchway and takes his customary place aft. Serko and Captain Spade at once approach and engage in conversation with him.

All three raise their telescopes and sweep the horizon from southeast to northeast.

No one will be surprised to learn that I gaze intently in the same direction; but having no telescope I cannot distinguish anything.

The midday meal over we all return on deck--all with the exception of Thomas Roch, who has not quitted his cabin.

Towards one o'clock land is sighted by the lookout man on the foretop cross-tree. Inasmuch as the Elba is bowling along at great speed I shall soon be able to make out the coast line.

In effect, two hours later a vague semicircular line that curves outward is discernible about eight miles off. As the schooner approaches it becomes more distinct. It is a mountain, or at all events very high ground, and from its summit a cloud of smoke ascends.

What! A volcano in these parts? It must then be----