

CHAPTER IX.

INSIDE BACK CUP.

The next morning I am able to make a first inspection of the vast cavern of Back Cup. No one seeks to prevent me.

What a night I have passed! What strange visions I have seen! With what impatience I waited for morning!

I was conducted to a grotto about a hundred paces from the edge of the lake where the tug stopped. The grotto, twelve feet by ten, was lighted by an incandescent lamp, and fitted with an entrance door that was closed upon me.

I am not surprised that electricity is employed in lighting the interior of the cavern, as it is also used in the submarine boat. But where is it generated? Where does it come from? Is there a manufactory installed somewhere or other in this vast crypt, with machinery, dynamos and accumulators?

My cell is neatly furnished with a table on which provisions are spread, a bunk with bedding, a basket chair, a wash-hand-stand with toilet set, and a closet containing linen and various suits of clothes. In a drawer of the table I find paper, ink and pens.

My dinner consists of fresh fish, preserved meat, bread of excellent quality, ale and whisky; but I am so excited that I scarcely touch it. Yet I feel that I ought to fortify myself and recover my calmness of mind. I must and will solve the mystery surrounding the handful of men who burrow in the bowels of this island.

So it is under the carapace of Back Cup that Count d'Artigas has established himself! This cavity, the existence of which is not even suspected, is his home when he is not sailing in the Ebba along the coasts of the new world or the old. This is the unknown retreat he has discovered, to which access is obtained by a submarine passage twelve or fifteen feet below the surface of the ocean.

Why has he severed himself from the world? What has been his past? If, as I suspect, this name of d'Artigas and this title of Count are assumed, what motive has he for hiding his identity? Has he been banished, is he an outcast of society that he should have selected this place above all others? Am I not in the power of an evildoer anxious to ensure impunity for his crimes and to defy the law by seeking refuge in this undiscoverable burrow? I have the right of supposing anything in the case of this suspicious foreigner, and I exercise it.

Then the question to which I have never been able to suggest a satisfactory answer once more surges into my mind. Why was Thomas Roch abducted from Healthful House in the manner already fully described?

Does the Count d'Artigas hope to force from him the secret of his fulgurator with a view to utilizing it for the defence of Back Cup in case his retreat should by chance be discovered? Hardly. It would be easy enough to starve the gang out of Back Cup, by preventing the tug from supplying them with provisions. On the other hand, the schooner could never break through the investing lines, and if she did her description would be known in every port. In this event, of what possible use would Thomas Roch's invention be to the Count d'Artigas? Decidedly, I cannot understand it!

About seven o'clock in the morning I jump out of bed. If I am a prisoner in the cavern I am at least not imprisoned in my grotto cell. The door yields when I turn the handle and push against it, and I walk out.

Thirty yards in front of me is a rocky plane, forming a sort of quay that extends to right and left. Several sailors of the Ebba are engaged in landing bales and stores from the interior of the tug, which lays alongside a little stone jetty.

A dim light to which my eyes soon grow accustomed envelops the cavern and comes from a hole in the centre of the roof, through which the blue sky can be seen.

"It is from that hole that the smoke which can be seen for such a distance issues," I say to myself, and this discovery suggests a whole series of reflections.

Back Cup, then, is not a volcano, as was supposed--as I supposed myself. The flames that were seen a few years ago, and the columns of smoke that still rise were and are produced artificially. The detonations and rumblings that so alarmed the Bermudan fishers were not caused by the internal workings of nature. These various phenomena were fictitious. They manifested themselves at the mere will of the owner of the island, who wanted to scare away the inhabitants who resided on the coast. He succeeded, this Count d'Artigas, and remains the sole and undisputed monarch of the mountain. By exploding gunpowder, and burning seaweed swept up in inexhaustible quantities by the ocean, he has been able to simulate a volcano upon the point of eruption and effectually scare would-be settlers away!

The light becomes stronger as the sun rises higher, the daylight streams through the fictitious crater, and I shall soon be able to estimate the cavern's dimensions. This is how I calculate:

Exteriorly the island of Back Cup, which is as nearly as possible circular, measures two hundred and fifty yards in circumference, and presents an interior superficies of about six acres. The sides of the mountain at its base vary in thickness from thirty to a hundred yards.

It therefore follows that this excavation practically occupies the whole of that part of Back Cup island which appears above water. As to the length of the submarine tunnel by which communication is obtained with the outside, and through which the tug passed, I estimate that it

is fifty yards in length.

The size of the cavern can be judged from these approximate figures. But vast as it is, I remember that there are caverns of larger dimensions both in the old and new worlds. For instance in Carniole, Northumberland, Derbyshire, Piedmont, the Balearics, Hungary and California are larger grottoes than Back Cup, and those at Han-sur-Lesse in Belgium, and the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky, are also more extensive. The latter contain no fewer than two hundred and twenty-six domes, seven rivers, eight cataracts, thirty two wells of unknown depth, and an immense lake which extends over six or seven leagues, the limit of which has never been reached by explorers.

I know these Kentucky grottoes, having visited them, as many thousands of tourists have done. The principal one will serve as a comparison to Back Cup. The roof of the former, like that of the latter, is supported by pillars of various lengths, which give it the appearance of a Gothic cathedral, with naves and aisles, though it lacks the architectural regularity of a religious edifice. The only difference is that whereas the roof of the Kentucky grotto is over four hundred feet high, that of Back Cup is not above two hundred and twenty at that part of it where the round hole through which issue the smoke and flames is situated.

Another peculiarity, and a very important one, that requires to be pointed out, is that whereas the majority of the grottoes referred to are easily accessible, and were therefore bound to be discovered some

time or other, the same remark does not apply to Back Cup. Although it is marked on the map as an island forming part of the Bermuda group, how could any one imagine that it is hollow, that its rocky sides are only the walls of an enormous cavern? In order to make such a discovery it would be necessary to get inside, and to get inside a submarine apparatus similar to that of the Count d'Artigas would be necessary.

In my opinion this strange yachtsman's discovery of the tunnel by which he has been able to found this disquieting colony of Back Cup must have been due to pure chance.

Now I turn my attention to the lake and observe that it is a very small one, measuring not more than four hundred yards in circumference. It is, properly speaking, a lagoon, the rocky sides of which are perpendicular. It is large enough for the tug to work about in it, and holds enough water too, for it must be one hundred and twenty-five feet deep.

It goes without saying that this crypt, given its position and structure, belongs to the category of those which are due to the encroachments of the sea. It is at once of Neptunian and Plutonian origin, like the grottoes of Crozon and Morgate in the bay of Douarnenez in France, of Bonifacio on the Corsican coast, Thorgatten in Norway, the height of which is estimated at over three hundred feet, the catavaults of Greece, the grottoes of Gibraltar in Spain, and Tourana in Cochin China, whose carapace indicates that they are

all the product of this dual geological labor.

The islet of Back Cup is in great part formed of calcareous rocks, which slope upwards gently from the lagoon towards the sides and are separated from each other by narrow beaches of fine sand. Thick layers of seaweed that have been swept through the tunnel by the tide and thrown up around the lake have been piled into heaps, some of which are dry and some still wet, but all of which exhale the strong odor of the briny ocean. This, however, is not the only combustible employed by the inhabitants of Back Cup, for I see an enormous store of coal that must have been brought by the schooner and the tug. But it is the incineration of masses of dried seaweed that causes the smoke vomited forth by the crater of the mountain.

Continuing my walk I perceive on the northern side of the lagoon the habitations of this colony of troglodytes--do they not merit the appellation? This part of the cavern, which is known as the Beehive, fully justifies its name, for it is honeycombed by cells excavated in the limestone rock and in which these human bees--or perhaps they should rather be called wasps--reside.

The lay of the cavern to the east is very different. Here hundreds of pillars of all shapes rise to the dome, and form a veritable forest of stone trees through the sinuous avenues of which one can thread one's way to the extreme limit of the place.

By counting the cells of the Beehive I calculate that Count d'Artigas'

companions number from eighty to one hundred.

As my eye wanders over the place I notice that the Count is standing in front of one of the cells, which is isolated from the others, and talking to Engineer Serko and Captain Spade. After a while they stroll down to the jetty alongside which the tug is lying.

A dozen men have been emptying the merchandise out of the tug and transporting the goods in boats to the other side, where great cellars have been excavated in the rocks and form the storehouses of the band.

The orifice of the tunnel is not visible in the waters of the lagoon, and I remember that when I was brought here I felt the tug sink several feet before it entered. In this respect therefore Back Cup does not resemble either the grottoes of Staffa or Morgate, entrance to which is always open, even at high tide. There may be another passage communicating with the coast, either natural or artificial, and this I shall have to make my business to find out.

The island well merits its name of Back Cup. It is indeed a gigantic cup turned upside down, not only to outward appearance, but inwardly, too, though people are ignorant of the fact.

I have already remarked that the Beehive is situated to the north of the lagoon, that is to say to the left on entering by the tunnel. On the opposite side are the storerooms filled with provisions of all kinds, bales of merchandise, barrels of wine, beer, and spirits and

various packets bearing different marks and labels that show that they came from all parts of the world. One would think that the cargoes of a score of ships had been landed here.

A little farther on is a large wooden shed the nature of which is easily distinguishable. From a pole above it a network of thick copper wires extends which conducts the current to the powerful electric lights suspended from the roof or dome, and to the incandescent lamps in each of the cells of the hive. A large number of lamps are also installed among the stone pillars and light up the avenues to their extremities.

"Shall I be permitted to roam about wherever I please?" I ask myself. I hope so. I cannot for the life of me see why the Count d'Artigas should prohibit me from doing so, for I cannot get farther than the surrounding walls of his mysterious domain. I question whether there is any other issue than the tunnel, and how on earth could I get through that?

Besides, admitting that I am able to get through it, I cannot get off the island. My disappearance would be soon noticed, and the tug would take out a dozen men who would explore every nook and cranny. I should inevitably be recaptured, brought back to the Beehive, and deprived of my liberty for good.

I must therefore give up all idea of making my escape, unless I can see that it has some chance of being successful, and if ever an

opportunity does present itself I shall not be slow to take advantage of it.

On strolling round by the rows of cells I am able to observe a few of these companions of the Count d'Artigas who are content to pass their monotonous existence in the depths of Back Cup. As I said before, calculating from the number of cells in the Beehive, there must be between eighty and a hundred of them.

They pay no attention whatever to me as I pass, and on examining them closely it seems to me that they must have been recruited from every country. I do not distinguish any community of origin among them, not even a similarity by which they might be classed as North Americans, Europeans or Asiatics. The color of their skin shades from white to yellow and black--the black peculiar to Australia rather than to Africa. To sum up, they appear for the most part to pertain to the Malay races. I may add that the Count d'Artigas certainly belongs to that particular race which peoples the Dutch isles in the West Pacific, while Engineer Serko must be Levantine and Captain Spade of Italian origin.

But if the inhabitants of Back Cup are not bound to each other by ties of race, they certainly are by instinct and inclination. What forbidding, savage-looking faces they have, to be sure! They are men of violent character who have probably never placed any restraint upon their passions, nor hesitated at anything, and it occurs to me that in all likelihood they have sought refuge in this cavern, where they

fancy they can continue to defy the law with impunity, after a long series of crimes--robbery, murder, arson, and excesses of all descriptions committed together. In this case Back Cup is nothing but a lair of pirates, the Count d'Artigas is the leader of the band and Serko and Spade are his lieutenants.

I cannot get this idea out of my head, and the more I consider the more convinced I am that I am right, especially as everything I see during my stroll about the cavern seems to confirm my opinion.

However this may be, and whatever may be the circumstances that have brought them together in this place, Count d'Artigas' companions appear to accept his all-powerful domination without question. On the other hand, if he keeps them under his iron heel by enforcing the severest discipline, certain advantages, some compensation, must accrue from the servitude to which they bow. What can this compensation be?

Having turned that part of the bank under which the tunnel passes, I find myself on the opposite side of the lagoon, where are situated the storerooms containing the merchandise brought by the Ebba on each trip, and which contain a great quantity of bales.

Beyond is the manufactory of electric energy. I gaze in at the windows as I pass and notice that it contains machines of the latest invention and highest attained perfection, which take up little space. Not one steam engine, with its more or less complicated mechanism and need

of fuel, is to be seen in the place. As I had surmised, piles of extraordinary power supply the current to the lamps in the cavern, as well as to the dynamos of the tug. No doubt the current is also utilized for domestic purposes, such as warming the Beehive and cooking food, I can see that in a neighboring cavity it is applied to the alembics used to produce fresh water. At any rate the colonists of Back Cup are not reduced to catching the rain water that falls so abundantly upon the exterior of the mountain.

A few paces from the electric power house is a large cistern that, save in the matter of proportions, is the counterpart of those I visited in Bermuda. In the latter place the cisterns have to supply the needs of over ten thousand people, this one of a hundred--what?

I am not sure yet what to call them. That their chief had serious reasons for choosing the bowels of this island for his abiding place is obvious. But what were those reasons? I can understand monks shutting themselves behind their monastery walls with the intention of separating themselves from the world, but these subjects of the Count d'Artigas have nothing of the monk about them, and would not be mistaken for such by the most simple-minded of mortals.

I continue my way through the pillars to the extremity of the cavern. No one has sought to stop me, no one has spoken to me, not a soul apparently has taken the very slightest notice of me. This portion of Back Cup is extremely curious, and comparable to the most marvellous of the grottoes of Kentucky or the Balearics. I need hardly say that

nowhere is the labor of man apparent. All this is the handiwork of nature, and it is not without wonder, mingled with awe, that I reflect upon the telluric forces capable of engendering such prodigious substructions. The daylight from the crater in the centre only strikes this part of the cavern obliquely, so that it is very imperfectly lighted, but at night, when illuminated by the electric lamps, its aspect must be positively fantastic.

I have examined the walls everywhere with minute attention, but have been unable to discover any means of communicating with the outside.

Quite a colony of birds--gulls, sea-swallows and other feathery denizens of the Bermudan beaches have made their home in the cavern. They have apparently never been hunted, for they are in no way disturbed by the presence of man.

But besides sea-birds, which are free to come and go as they please by the orifice in the dome, there is a whole farmyard of domestic poultry, and cows and pigs. The food supply is therefore no less assured than it is varied, when the fish of all kinds that abound in the lagoon and around the island are taken into consideration.

Moreover, a mere glance at the colonists of Back Cup amply suffices to show that they are not accustomed to fare scantily. They are all vigorous, robust seafaring men, weatherbeaten and seasoned in the burning beat of tropical latitudes, whose rich blood is surcharged with oxygen by the breezes of the ocean. There is not a youth nor an

old man among them. They are all in their prime, their ages ranging from thirty to fifty.

But why do they submit to such an existence? Do they never leave their rocky retreat?

Perhaps I shall find out ere I am much older.