

CHAPTER X.

KER KARRAJE.

The cell in which I reside is about a hundred paces from the habitation of the Count d'Artigas, which is one of the end ones of this row of the Beehive. If I am not to share it with Thomas Roch, I presume the latter's cell is not far off, for in order that Warder Gaydon may continue to care for the ex-patient of Healthful House, their respective apartments will have to be contiguous. However, I suppose I shall soon be enlightened on this point.

Captain Spade and Engineer Serko reside separately in proximity to D'Artigas' mansion.

Mansion? Yes, why not dignify it with the title since this habitation has been arranged with a certain art? Skillful hands have carved an ornamental façade in the rock. A large door affords access to it. Colored glass windows in wooden frames let into the limestone walls admit the light. The interior comprises several chambers, a dining-room and a drawing-room lighted by a stained-glass window, the whole being perfectly ventilated. The furniture is of various styles and shapes and of French, English and American make. The kitchen, larder, etc., are in adjoining cells in rear of the Beehive.

In the afternoon, just as I issue from my cell with the firm intention

of "obtaining an audience" of the Count d'Artigas, I catch sight of him coming along the shore of the lagoon towards the hive. Either he does not see me, or wishes to avoid me, for he quickens his steps and I am unable to catch him.

"Well, he will have to receive me, anyhow!" I mutter to myself.

I hurry up to the door through which he has just disappeared and which has closed behind him.

It is guarded by a gigantic, dark-skinned Malay, who orders me away in no amiable tone of voice.

I decline to comply with his injunction, and repeat to him twice the following request in my very best English:

"Tell the Count d'Artigas that I desire to be received immediately."

I might just as well have addressed myself to the surrounding rock. This savage, no doubt, does not understand a word of English, for he scowls at me and orders me away again with a menacing cry.

I have a good mind to attempt to force the door and shout so that the Count d'Artigas cannot fail to hear me, but in all probability I shall only succeed in rousing the wrath of the Malay, who appears to be endowed with herculean strength. I therefore judge discretion to be the better part of valor, and put off the explanation that is owing

to me--and which, sooner or later, I will have--to a more propitious occasion.

I meander off in front of the Beehive towards the east, and my thoughts revert to Thomas Roch. I am surprised that I have not seen him yet. Can he be in the throes of a fresh paroxysm?

This hypothesis is hardly admissible, for if the Count d'Artigas is to be believed, he would in this event have summoned me to attend to the inventor.

A little farther on I encounter Engineer Serko.

With his inviting manner and usual good-humor this ironical individual smiles when he perceives me, and does not seek to avoid me. If he knew I was a colleague, an engineer--providing he himself really is one--perhaps he might receive me with more cordiality than I have yet encountered, but I am not going to be such a fool as to tell him who and what I am.

He stops, with laughing eyes and mocking mouth, and accompanies a "Good day, how do you do?" with a gracious gesture of salutation.

I respond coldly to his politeness--a fact which he affects not to notice.

"May Saint Jonathan protect you, Mr. Gaydon!" he continues in his

clear, ringing voice. "You are not, I presume, disposed to regret the fortunate circumstance by which you were permitted to visit this surpassingly marvellous cavern--and it really is one of the finest, although the least known on this spheroid."

This word of a scientific language used in conversation with a simple hospital attendant surprises me, I admit, and I merely reply:

"I should have no reason to complain, Mr. Serko, if, after having had the pleasure of visiting this cavern, I were at liberty to quit it."

"What! Already thinking of leaving us, Mr. Gaydon,--of returning to your dismal pavilion at Healthful House? Why, you have scarcely had time to explore our magnificent domain, or to admire the incomparable beauty with which nature has endowed it."

"What I have seen suffices," I answer; "and should you perchance be talking seriously I will assure you seriously that I do not want to see any more of it."

"Come, now, Mr. Gaydon, permit me to point out that you have not yet had the opportunity of appreciating the advantages of an existence passed in such unrivalled surroundings. It is a quiet life, exempt from care, with an assured future, material conditions such as are not to be met with anywhere, an even climate and no more to fear from the tempests which desolate the coasts in this part of the Atlantic than from the cold of winter, or the heat of summer. This temperate and

salubrious atmosphere is scarcely affected by changes of season. Here we have no need to apprehend the wrath of either Pluto or Neptune."

"Sir," I reply, "it is impossible that this climate can suit you, that you can appreciate living in this grotto of----"

I was on the point of pronouncing the name of Back Cup. Fortunately I restrained myself in time. What would happen if they suspected that I am aware of the name of their island, and, consequently, of its position at the extremity of the Bermuda group?

"However," I continue, "if this climate does not suit me, I have, I presume, the right to make a change."

"The right, of course."

"I understand from your remark that I shall be furnished with the means of returning to America when I want to go?"

"I have no reason for opposing your desires, Mr. Gaydon," Engineer Serko replies, "and I regard your presumption as a very natural one. Observe, however, that we live here in a noble and superb independence, that we acknowledge the authority of no foreign power, that we are subject to no outside authority, that we are the colonists of no state, either of the old or new world. This is worth consideration by whomsoever has a sense of pride and independence. Besides, what memories are evoked in a cultivated mind by these

grottoes which seem to have been chiselled by the hands of the gods and in which they were wont to render their oracles by the mouth of Trophonius."

Decidedly, Engineer Serko is fond of citing mythology! Trophonius after Pluto and Neptune? Does he imagine that Warder Gaydon ever heard of Trophonius? It is clear this mocker continues to mock, and I have to exercise the greatest patience in order not to reply in the same tone.

"A moment ago," I continue shortly, "I wanted to enter yon habitation, which, if I mistake not, is that of the Count d'Artigas, but I was prevented."

"By whom, Mr. Gaydon?"

"By a man in the Count's employ."

"He probably had received strict orders about it."

"Possibly, yet whether he likes it or not, Count d'Artigas will have to see me and listen to me."

"Maybe it would be difficult, and even impossible to get him to do so," says Engineer Serko with a smile.

"Why so?"

"Because there is no such person as Count d'Artigas here."

"You are jesting, I presume; I have just seen him."

"It was not the Count d'Artigas whom you saw, Mr. Gaydon."

"Who was it then, may I ask?"

"The pirate Ker Karraje."

This name was thrown at me in a hard tone of voice, and Engineer Serko walked off before I had presence of mind enough to detain him.

The pirate Ker Karraje!

Yes, this name is a revelation to me. I know it well, and what memories it evokes! It by itself explains what has hitherto been inexplicable to me. I now know into whose hands I have fallen.

With what I already knew, with what I have learned since my arrival in Back Cup from Engineer Serko, this is what I am able to tell about the past and present of Ker Karraje:

Eight or nine years ago, the West Pacific was infested by pirates who acted with the greatest audacity. A band of criminals of various origins, composed of escaped convicts, military and naval deserters,

etc., operated with incredible audacity under the orders of a redoubtable chief. The nucleus of the band had been formed by men pertaining to the scum of Europe who had been attracted to New South Wales, in Australia, by the discovery of gold there. Among these gold-diggers, were Captain Spade and Engineer Serko, two outcasts, whom a certain community of ideas and character soon bound together in close friendship.

These intelligent, well educated, resolute men would most assuredly have succeeded in any career. But being without conscience or scruples, and determined to get rich at no matter what cost, deriving from gambling and speculation what they might have earned by patient and steady work, they engaged in all sorts of impossible adventures. One day they were rich, the next day poor, like most of the questionable individuals who had hurried to the gold-fields in search of fortune.

Among the diggers in New South Wales was a man of incomparable audacity, one of those men who stick at nothing--not even at crime--and whose influence upon bad and violent natures is irresistible.

That man's name was Ker Karraje.

The origin or nationality or antecedents of this pirate were never established by the investigations ordered in regard to him. He eluded all pursuit, and his name--or at least the name he gave himself--was

known all over the world, and inspired horror and terror everywhere, as being that of a legendary personage, a bogey, invisible and unseizable.

I have now reason to believe that Ker Karraje is a Malay. However, it is of little consequence, after all. What is certain is that he was with reason regarded as a formidable and dangerous villain who had many crimes, committed in distant seas, to answer for.

After spending a few years on the Australian goldfields, where he made the acquaintance of Engineer Serko and Captain Spade, Ker Karraje managed to seize a ship in the port of Melbourne, in the province of Victoria. He was joined by about thirty rascals whose number was speedily tripled. In that part of the Pacific Ocean where piracy is still carried on with great facility, and I may say, profit, the number of ships pillaged, crews massacred, and raids committed in certain western islands which the colonists were unable to defend, cannot be estimated.

Although the whereabouts of Ker Karraje's vessel, commanded by Captain Spade, was several times made known to the authorities, all attempts to capture it proved futile. The marauder would disappear among the innumerable islands of which he knew every cove and creek, and it was impossible to come across him.

He maintained a perfect reign of terror. England, France, Germany, Russia and America vainly dispatched warships in pursuit of the

phantom vessel which disappeared, no one knew whither, after robberies and murders that could not be prevented or punished had been committed by her crew.

One day this series of crimes came to an end, and no more was heard of Ker Karraje. Had he abandoned the Pacific for other seas? Would this pirate break out in a fresh place? It was argued that notwithstanding what they must have spent in orgies and debauchery the pirate and his companions must still have an enormous amount of wealth hidden in some place known only to themselves, and that they were enjoying their ill-gotten gains.

Where had the band hidden themselves since they had ceased their depredations? This was a question which everybody asked and none was able to answer. All attempts to run them to earth were vain. Terror and uneasiness having ceased with the danger, Ker Karraje's exploits soon began to be forgotten, even in the West Pacific.

This is what had happened--and what will never be known unless I succeed in escaping from Back Cup:

These wretches were, as a matter of fact, possessed of great wealth when they abandoned the Southern Seas. Having destroyed their ship they dispersed in different directions after having arranged to meet on the American continent.

Engineer Serko, who was well versed in his profession, and was a

clever mechanic to boot, and who had made a special study of submarine craft, proposed to Ker Karraje that they should construct one of these boats in order to continue their criminal exploits with greater secrecy and effectiveness.

Ker Karraje at once saw the practical nature of the proposition, and as they had no lack of money the idea was soon carried out.

While the so-called Count d'Artigas ordered the construction of the schooner Ebba at the shipyards of Gotteborg, in Sweden, he gave to the Cramps of Philadelphia, in America, the plans of a submarine boat whose construction excited no suspicion. Besides, as will be seen, it soon disappeared and was never heard of again.

The boat was constructed from a model and under the personal supervision of Engineer Serko, and fitted with all the known appliances of nautical science. The screw was worked with electric piles of recent invention which imparted enormous propulsive power to the motor.

It goes without saying that no one imagined that Count d'Artigas was none other than Ker Karraje, the former pirate of the Pacific, and that Engineer Serko was the most formidable and resolute of his accomplices. The former was regarded as a foreigner of noble birth and great fortune, who for several months had been frequenting the ports of the United States, the Ebba having been launched long before the tug was ready.

Work upon the latter occupied fully eighteen months, and when the boat was finished it excited the admiration of all those interested in these engines of submarine navigation. By its external form, its interior arrangements, its air-supply system, the rapidity with which it could be immersed, the facility with which it could be handled and controlled, and its extraordinary speed, it was conceded to be far superior to the Goubet, the Gymnote, the Zede, and other similar boats which had made great strides towards perfection.

After several extremely successful experiments a public test was given in the open sea, four miles off Charleston, in presence of several American and foreign warships, merchant vessels, and pleasure boats invited for the occasion.

Of course the Ebba was among them, with the Count d'Artigas, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade on board, and the old crew as well, save half a dozen men who manned the submarine machine, which was worked by a mechanical engineer named Gibson, a bold and very clever Englishman.

The programme of this definite experiment comprised various evolutions on the surface of the water, which were to be followed by an immersion to last several hours, the boat being ordered not to rise again until a certain buoy stationed many miles out at sea had been attained.

At the appointed time the lid was closed and the boat at first

manoeuvred on the surface. Her speed and the ease with which she turned and twisted were loudly praised by all the technical spectators.

Then at a signal given on board the Ebba the tug sank slowly out of sight, and several vessels started for the buoy where she was to reappear.

Three hours went by, but there was no sign of the boat.

No one could suppose that in accordance with instructions received from the Count d'Artigas and Engineer Serko this submarine machine, which was destined to act as the invisible tug of the schooner, would not emerge till it had gone several miles beyond the rendezvous. Therefore, with the exception of those who were in the secret, no one entertained any doubt that the boat and all inside her had perished as the result of an accident either to her metallic covering or machinery.

On board the Ebba consternation was admirably simulated. On board the other vessels it was real. Drags were used and divers sent down along the course the boat was supposed to have taken, but it could not be found, and it was agreed that it had been swallowed up in the depths of the Atlantic.

Two days later the Count d'Artigas put to sea again, and in forty-eight hours came up with the tug at the place appointed.

This is how Ker Karraje became possessed of the admirable vessel which was to perform the double function of towing the schooner and attacking ships. With this terrible engine of destruction, whose very existence was ignored, the Count d'Artigas was able to recommence his career of piracy with security and impunity.

These details I have learned from Engineer Serko, who is very proud of his handiwork,--and also very positive that the prisoner of Back Cup will never be able to disclose the secret.

It will easily be realized how powerful was the offensive weapon Ker Karraje now possessed. During the night the tug would rush at a merchant vessel, and bore a hole in her with its powerful ram. At the same time the schooner which could not possibly have excited any suspicion, would run alongside and her horde of cutthroats would pour on to the doomed vessel's deck and massacre the helpless crew, after which they would hurriedly transfer that part of the cargo that was worth taking to the Ebba. Thus it happened that ship after ship was added to the long list of those that never reached port and were classed as having gone down with all on board.

For a year after the odious comedy in the bay of Charleston Ker Karraje operated in the Atlantic, and his wealth increased to enormous proportions. The merchandise for which he had no use was disposed of in distant markets in exchange for gold and silver. But what was sadly needed was a place where the profits could be safely hidden pending

the time when they were to be finally divided.

Chance came to their aid. While exploring the bottom of the sea in the neighborhood of the Bermudas, Engineer Serko and Driver Gibson discovered at the base of Back Cup island the tunnel which led to the interior of the mountain. Would it have been possible for Ker Karraje to have found a more admirable refuge than this, absolutely safe as it was from any possible chance of discovery? Thus it came to pass that one of the islands of the Archipelago of Bermuda, erstwhile the haunt of buccaneers, became the lair of another gang a good deal more to be dreaded.

This retreat having been definitely adopted, Count d'Artigas and his companions set about getting their place in order. Engineer Serko installed an electric power house, without having recourse to machines whose construction abroad might have aroused suspicion, simply employing piles that could be easily mounted and required but metal plates and chemical substances that the Ebba procured during her visits to the American coast.

What happened on the night of the 19th inst. can easily be divined. If the three-masted merchantman which lay becalmed was not visible at break of day it was because she had been scuttled by the tug, boarded by the cut-throat band on the Ebba, and sunk with all on board after being pillaged. The bales and things that I had seen on the schooner were a part of her cargo, and all unknown to me the gallant ship was lying at the bottom of the broad Atlantic!

How will this adventure end? Shall I ever be able to escape from Back Cup, denounce the false Count d'Artigas and rid the seas of Ker Karraje's pirates?

And if Ker Karraje is terrible as it is, how much more so will he become if he ever obtains possession of Roch's fulgurator! His power will be increased a hundred-fold? If he were able to employ this new engine of destruction no merchantman could resist him, no warship escape total destruction.

I remain for some time absorbed and oppressed by the reflections with which the revelation of Ker Karraje's name inspires me. All that I have ever heard about this famous pirate recurs to me--his existence when he skimmed the Southern Seas, the useless expeditions organized by the maritime powers to hunt him down. The unaccountable loss of so many vessels in the Atlantic during the past few years is attributable to him. He had merely changed the scene of his exploits. It was supposed that he had been got rid of, whereas he is continuing his piratical practices in the most frequented ocean on the globe, by means of the tug which is believed to be lying at the bottom of Charleston Bay.

"Now," I say to myself, "I know his real name and that of his lair--Ker Karraje and Back Cup;" and I surmise that if Engineer Serko has let me into the secret he must have been authorized to do so. Am I not meant to understand from this that I must give up all hope of ever

recovering my liberty?

Engineer Serko had manifestly remarked the impression created upon me by this revelation. I remember that on leaving me he went towards Ker Karraje's habitation, no doubt with the intention of apprising him of what had passed.

After a rather long walk around the lagoon I am about to return to my cell, when I hear footsteps behind me. I turn and find myself face to face with the Count d'Artigas, who is accompanied by Captain Spade. He glances at me sharply, and in a burst of irritation that I cannot suppress, I exclaim:

"You are keeping me here, sir, against all right. If it was to wait upon Thomas Roch that you carried me off from Healthful House, I refuse to attend to him, and insist upon being sent back."

The pirate chief makes a gesture, but does not reply.

Then my temper gets the better of me altogether.

"Answer me, Count d'Artigas--or rather, for I know who you are--answer me, Ker Karraje!" I shout.

"The Count d'Artigas is Ker Karraje," he coolly replies, "just as Warder Gaydon is Engineer Simon Hart; and Ker Karraje will never restore to liberty Engineer Simon Hart, who knows his secrets."