

CHAPTER XII.

ENGINEER SERKO'S ADVICE.

Thomas Roch has started work and spends hours and hours in a wooden shed on the left bank of the lagoon that has been set apart as his laboratory and workshop. No one enters it except himself. Does he insist upon preparing the explosive in secret and does he intend to keep the formula thereof to himself? I should not wonder.

The manner of employing Roch's fulgurator is, I believe, very simple indeed. The projectile in which it is used requires neither gun nor mortar to launch it, nor pneumatic tube like the *Zalinski* shell. It is autopropulsive, it projects itself, and no ship within a certain zone when the engine explodes could escape utter destruction. With such a weapon as this at his command Ker Karraje would be invincible.

From August 11 to August 17.--During the past week Thomas Roch has been working without intermission. Every morning the inventor goes to his laboratory and does not issue therefrom till night. I have made no attempt to stop him or speak to him, knowing that it would be useless to do so.

Although he is still indifferent to everything that does not touch upon his work he appears to be perfectly self-possessed. Why should he not have recovered his reason? Has he not obtained what he has so long

sought for? Is he not at last able to carry out the plans he formed years and years ago?

August 18.--At one o'clock this morning I was roused by several detonations.

"Has Back Cup been attacked?" was my first thought. "Has the schooner excited suspicion, and been chased to the entrance to the passes? Is the island being bombarded with a view to its destruction? Has justice at last overtaken these evil-doers ere Thomas Roch has been able to complete the manufacture of his explosive, and before the autopropulsive engine could be fetched from the continent?"

The detonations, which are very violent, continue, succeeding each other at regular intervals, and it occurs to me that if the schooner has been destroyed, all communication with the bases of supply being impossible, Back Cup cannot be provisioned.

It is true the tug would be able to land the Count d'Artigas somewhere on the American coast where, money being no object, he could easily buy or order another vessel. But no matter. If Back Cup is only destroyed before Ker Karraje has Roch's fulgurator at his disposal I shall render thanks to heaven.

A few hours later, at the usual time, I quit my cell. All is quiet at the Beehive. The men are going about their business as usual. The tug is moored near the jetty. Thomas Roch is going to his laboratory, and

Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko are tranquilly pacing backwards and forwards by the lake and chatting. The island therefore could not have been attacked during the night. Yet I was awakened by the report of cannon, this I will swear.

At this moment Ker Karraje goes off towards his abode and Engineer Serko, smilingly ironical, as usual, advances to meet me.

"Well, Mr. Simon Hart," he says, "are you getting accustomed to your tranquil existence? Do you appreciate at their just merit the advantages of this enchanted grotto? Have you given up all hope of recovering your liberty some day or other?"

What is the use of waxing wroth with this jester? I reply calmly:

"No, sir. I have not given up hope, and I still expect that I shall be released."

"What! Mr. Hart, separate ourselves from a man whom we all esteem--and I from a colleague who perhaps, in the course of Thomas Roch's fits of delirium, has learned some of his secrets? You are not serious!"

So this is why they are keeping me a prisoner in Back Cup! They suppose that I am in part familiar with Roch's invention, and they hope to force me to tell what I know if Thomas Roch refuses to give up his secret. This is the reason why I was kidnapped with him, and why I have not been accommodated with an involuntary plunge in the lagoon

with a stone fastened to my neck. I see it all now, and it is just as well to know it.

"Very serious," I affirm, in response to the last remark of my interlocutor.

"Well," he continues, "if I had the honor to be Simon Hart, the engineer, I should reason as follows: 'Given, on the one hand, the personality of Ker Karraje, the reasons which incited him to select such a mysterious retreat as this cavern, the necessity of the said cavern being kept from any attempt to discover it, not only in the interest of the Count d'Artigas, but in that of his companions--'"

"Of his accomplices, if you please."

"'Of his accomplices,' then--'and on the other hand, given the fact that I know the real name of the Count d'Artigas and in what mysterious safe he keeps his riches--'"

"Riches stolen, and stained with blood, Mr. Serko."

"'Riches stolen and stained with blood,' if you like--'I ought to understand that this question of liberty cannot be settled in accordance with my desires.'"

It is useless to argue the point under these conditions, and I switch the conversation on to another line.

"May I ask," I continue, "how you came to find out that Gaydon, the warder, was Simon Hart, the engineer?"

"I see no reason for keeping you in ignorance on the subject, my dear colleague. It was largely by hazard. We had certain relations with the manufactory in New Jersey with which you were connected, and which you quitted suddenly one day under somewhat singular circumstances. Well, during a visit I made to Healthful House some months before the Count d'Artigas went there, I saw and recognized you."

"You?"

"My very self, and from that moment I promised myself the pleasure of having you for a fellow-passenger on board the Ebba."

I do not recall ever having seen this Serko at Healthful House, but what he says is very likely true.

"I hope your whim of having me for a companion will cost you dear, some day or other," I say to myself.

Then, abruptly, I go on:

"If I am not mistaken, you have succeeded in inducing Thomas Roch to disclose the secret of his fulgurator?"

"Yes, Mr. Hart. We paid millions for it. But millions, you know, are nothing to us. We have only the trouble of taking them! Therefore we filled all his pockets--covered him with millions!"

"Of what use are these millions to him if he is not allowed to enjoy them outside?"

"That, Mr. Hart, is a matter that does not trouble him a little bit! This man of genius thinks nothing of the future: he lives but in the present. While engines are being constructed from his plans over yonder in America, he is preparing his explosive with chemical substances with which he has been abundantly supplied. He! he! What an invention it is, this autopropulsive engine, which flies through the air of its own power and accelerates its speed till the goal is reached, thanks to the properties of a certain powder of progressive combustion! Here we have an invention that will bring about a radical change in the art of war."

"Defensive war, Mr. Serko."

"And offensive war, Mr. Hart."

"Naturally," I answer.

Then pumping him still more closely, I go on:

"So, what no one else has been able to obtain from Thomas Roch--"

"We obtained without much difficulty."

"By paying him."

"By paying him an incredible price--and, moreover, by causing to vibrate what in him is a very sensitive chord."

"What chord?"

"That of vengeance!"

"Vengeance?--against whom?"

"Against all those who have made themselves his enemies by discouraging him, by spurning him, expelling him, by constraining him to go a-begging from country to country with an invention of incontestable superiority! Now all notion of patriotism is extinct in his soul. He has now but one thought, one ferocious desire: to avenge himself upon those who have denied him--and even upon all mankind! Really, Mr. Hart, your governments of Europe and America committed a stupendous blunder in refusing to pay Roch the price his fulgurator is worth!"

And Engineer Serko describes enthusiastically the various advantages of the new explosive which, he says, is incontestably superior to any yet invented.

"And what a destructive effect it has," he adds. "It is analogous to that of the Zalinski shell, but is a hundred times more powerful, and requires no machine for firing it, as it flies through the air on its own wings, so to speak."

I listen in the hope that Engineer Serko will give away a part of the secret, but in vain. He is careful not to say more than he wants to.

"Has Thomas Roch," I ask, "made you acquainted with the composition of his explosive?"

"Yes, Mr. Hart--if it is all the same to you--and we shall shortly have considerable quantities of it stored in a safe place."

"But will there not be a great and ever-impending danger in accumulating large quantities of it? If an accident were to happen it would be all up with the island of----!"

Once more the name of Back Cup was on the point of escaping me. They might consider me too well-informed if they were aware that in addition to being acquainted with the Count d'Artigas' real name I also know where his stronghold is situated.

Luckily Engineer Serko has not remarked my reticence, and he replies:

"There will be no cause for alarm. Thomas Roch's explosive will not

burn unless subjected to a special deflagrator. Neither fire nor shock will explode it."

"And has Thomas Roch also sold you the secret of his deflagrator?"

"Not yet, Mr. Hart, but it will not be long before the bargain is concluded. Therefore, I repeat, no danger is to be apprehended, and you need not keep awake of nights on that account. A thousand devils, sir! We have no desire to be blown up with our cavern and treasures! A few more years of good business and we shall divide the profits, which will be large enough to enable each one of us to live as he thinks proper and enjoy life to the top of his bent--after the dissolution of the firm of Ker Karraje and Co. I may add that though there is no danger of an explosion, we have everything to fear from a denunciation--which you are in the position to make, Mr. Hart. Therefore, if you take my advice, you will, like a sensible man, resign yourself to the inevitable until the disbanding of the company. We shall then see what in the interest of our security is best to be done with you!"

It will be admitted that these words are not exactly calculated to reassure me. However, a lot of things may happen ere then. I have learned one good thing from this conversation, and that is that if Thomas Roch has sold his explosive to Ker Karraje and Co., he has at any rate, kept the secret of his deflagrator, without which the explosive is of no more value than the dust of the highway.

But before terminating the interview I think I ought to make a very natural observation to Mr. Serko.

"Sir," I say, "you are now acquainted with the composition of Thomas Roch's explosive. Does it really possess the destructive power that the inventor attributes to it? Has it ever been tried? May you not have purchased a composition as inert as a pinch of snuff?"

"You are doubtless better informed upon this point than you pretend, Mr. Hart. Nevertheless, I thank you for the interest you manifest in our affairs, and am able to reassure you. The other night we made a series of decisive experiments. With only a few grains of this substance great blocks of rock were reduced to impalpable dust!"

This explanation evidently applies to the detonation I heard.

"Thus, my dear colleague," continues Engineer Serko, "I can assure you that our expectations have been answered. The effects of the explosive surpass anything that could have been imagined. A few thousand tons of it would burst our spheroid and scatter the fragments into space. You can be absolutely certain that it is capable of destroying no matter what vessel at a distance considerably greater than that attained by present projectiles and within a zone of at least a mile. The weak point in the invention is that rather too much time has to be expended in regulating the firing."

Engineer Serko stops short, as though reluctant to give any further

information, but finally adds:

"Therefore, I end as I began, Mr. Hart. Resign yourself to the inevitable. Accept your new existence without reserve. Give yourself up to the tranquil delights of this subterranean life. If one is in good health, one preserves it; if one has lost one's health, one recovers it here. That is what is happening to your fellow countryman. Yes, the best thing you can do is to resign yourself to your lot."

Thereupon this giver of good advice leaves me, after saluting me with a friendly gesture, like a man whose good intentions merit appreciation. But what irony there is in his words, in his glance, in his attitude. Shall I ever be able to get even with him?

I now know that at any rate it is not easy to regulate the aim of Roch's auto-propulsive engine. It is probable that it always bursts at the same distance, and that beyond the zone in which the effects of the fulgurator are so terrible, and once it has been passed, a ship is safe from its effects. If I could only inform the world of this vital fact!

August 20.--For two days no incident worth recording has occurred. I have explored Back Cup to its extreme limits. At night when the long perspective of arched columns are illuminated by the electric lamps, I am almost religiously impressed when I gaze upon the natural wonders of this cavern, which has become my prison. I have never given up hope of finding somewhere in the walls a fissure of some kind of which the

pirates are ignorant and through which I could make my escape. It is true that once outside I should have to wait till a passing ship hove in sight. My evasion would speedily be known at the Beehive, and I should soon be recaptured, unless--a happy thought strikes me--unless I could get at the Ebba's boat that was drawn up high and dry on the little sandy beach in the creek. In this I might be able to make my way to St. George or Hamilton.

This evening--it was about nine o'clock--I stretched myself on a bed of sand at the foot of one of the columns, about one hundred yards to the east of the lagoon. Shortly afterwards I heard footsteps, then voices. Hiding myself as best I could behind the rocky base of the pillar, I listened with all my ears.

I recognized the voices as those of Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko. The two men stopped close to where I was lying, and continued their conversation in English--which is the language generally used in Back Cup. I was therefore able to understand all that they said.

They were talking about Thomas Roch, or rather his fulgurator.

"In a week's time," said Ker Karraje, "I shall put to sea in the Ebba, and fetch the sections of the engines that are being cast in that Virginian foundry."

"And when they are here," observed Engineer Serko, "I will piece them together and fix up the frames for firing them. But beforehand, there

is a job to be done which it seems to me is indispensable."

"What is that?"

"To cut a tunnel through the wall of the cavern."

"Through the wall of the cavern?"

"Oh! nothing but a narrow passage through which only one man at a time could squeeze, a hole easy enough to block, and the outside end of which would be hidden among the rocks."

"Of what use could it be to us, Serko?"

"I have often thought about the utility of having some other way of getting out besides the submarine tunnel. We never know what the future may have in store for us."

"But the walls are so thick and hard," objected Ker Karraje.

"Oh, with a few grains of Roch's explosive I undertake to reduce the rock to such fine powder that we shall be able to blow it away with our breath," Serko replied.

It can easily be imagined with what interest and eagerness I listened to this. Here was a ray of hope. It was proposed to open up communication with the outside by a tunnel in the wall, and this held

out the possibility of escape.

As this thought flashed through my mind, Ker Karraje said:

"Very well, Serko, and if it becomes necessary some day to defend Back Cup and prevent any ship from approaching it----. It is true," he went on, without finishing the reflection, "our retreat would have to have been discovered by accident--or by denunciation."

"We have nothing to fear either from accident or denunciation," affirmed Serko.

"By one of our band, no, of course not, but by Simon Hart, perhaps."

"Hart!" exclaimed Serko. "He would have to escape first and no one can escape from Back Cup. I am, by the bye, interested in this Hart. He is a colleague, after all, and I have always suspected that he knows more about Roch's invention than he pretends. I will get round him so that we shall soon be discussing physics, mechanics, and matters ballistic like a couple of friends."

"No matter," replied the generous and sensible Count d'Artigas, "when we are in full possession of the secret we had better get rid of the fellow."

"We have plenty of time to do that, Ker Karraje."

"If God permits you to, you wretches," I muttered to myself, while my heart thumped against my ribs.

And yet, without the intervention of Providence, what hope is there for me?

The conversation then took another direction.

"Now that we know the composition of the explosive, Serko," said Ker Karraje, "we must, at all cost, get that of the deflagrator from Thomas Roch."

"Yes," replied Engineer Serko, "that is what I am trying to do. Unfortunately, however, Roch positively refuses to discuss it. Still he has already made a few drops of it with which those experiments were made, and he will furnish as with some more to blow a hole through the wall."

"But what about our expeditions at sea?" queried Ker Karraje.

"Patience! We shall end by getting Roch's thunderbolts entirely in our own hand, and then----"

"Are you sure, Serko?"

"Quite sure,--by paying the price, Ker Karraje."

The conversation dropped at this point, and they strolled off without having seen me--very luckily for me, I guess. If Engineer Serko spoke up somewhat in defence of a colleague, Ker Karraje is apparently animated with much less benevolent sentiments in regard to me. On the least suspicion they would throw me into the lake, and if I ever got through the tunnel, it would only be as a corpse carried out by the ebbing tide.

August 21.--Engineer Serko has been prospecting with a view to piercing the proposed passage through the wall, in such a way that its existence will never be dreamed of outside. After a minute examination he decided to tunnel through the northern end of the cavern about sixty feet from the first cells of the Beehive.

I am anxious for the passage to be made, for who knows but what it may be the way to freedom for me? Ah! if I only knew how to swim, perhaps I should have attempted to escape through the submarine tunnel, as since it was disclosed by the lashing back of the waters by the whale in its death-struggle, I know exactly where the orifice is situated.

It seems to me that at the time of the great tides, this orifice must be partly uncovered. At the full and new moon, when the sea attains its maximum depression below the normal level, it is possible that--I must satisfy myself about this.

I do not know how the fact will help me in any way, even if the entrance to the tunnel is partly uncovered, but I cannot afford to miss any detail that may possibly aid in my escape from Back Cup.

August 29.--This morning I am witnessing the departure of the tug. The Count d'Artigas is, no doubt, going off in the Ebba to fetch the sections of Thomas Roch's engines. Before embarking, the Count converses long and earnestly with Engineer Serko, who, apparently, is not going to accompany him on this trip, and is evidently giving him some recommendations, of which I may be the object. Then, having stepped on to the platform, he goes below, the lid shuts with a bang, and the tug sinks out of sight, leaving a trail of bubbles behind it.

The hours go by, night is coming on, yet the tug does not return. I conclude that it has gone to tow the schooner, and perhaps to destroy any merchant vessels that may come in their way.

It cannot, however, be absent very long, as the trip to America and back will not take more than a week.

Besides, if I can judge from the calm atmosphere in the interior of the cavern, the Ebba must be favored with beautiful weather. This is, in fact, the fine season in this part of the world. Ah! if only I could break out of my prison!