

## CHAPTER XVI.

### ONLY A FEW MORE HOURS.

What effect this news has upon me, and what emotion it awakens within my soul! The end, I feel, is at hand. May it be such as civilization and humanity are entitled to.

Up to the present I have indited my notes day by day. Henceforward it is imperative that I should inscribe them hour by hour, minute by minute. Who knows but what Thomas Roch's last secret may be revealed to me and that I shall have time to commit it to paper! Should I die during the attack God grant that the account of the five months I have passed in Back Cup may be found upon my body!

At first Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, Captain Spade, and several of their companions took up position on the exterior base of the island. What would I not give to be able follow to them, and in the friendly shelter of a rook watch the on-coming warships!

An hour later they return after having left a score of men to keep watch. As the days at this season of the year are very short there is nothing to fear before the morrow. It is not likely that the ships will attempt a night attack and land a storming party, for they must imagine that the place is in a thorough condition of defence.

All night long the pirates work, installing the trestles at different points of the coast. Six have been taken through the passage to places selected in advance.

This done, Engineer Serko joins Thomas Roch in his laboratory. Is he going to tell him what is passing, that a squadron is in view of Back Cup, and that his fulgurator will be employed to defend the island?

What is certain is that half a hundred engines, each charged with several pounds of the explosive and of the substance that ensures a trajectory superior to that of any other projectile, are ready for their work of destruction.

As to the deflagrator liquid, Thomas Roch has a certain number of phials of it, and--I know only too well--will not refuse to help Ker Karraje's pirates with it.

During these preparations night has come on. Only the lamps of the Beehive are lighted and a semi-obscurity reigns in the cavern.

I return to my cell. It is to my interest to keep out of the way as much as possible, for Engineer Serko's suspicions might be revived now that the squadron is approaching Back Cup.

But will the vessels sighted continue on their course in this direction? May they not be merely passing on their way to Bermuda? For an instant this doubt enters my mind. No, no, it cannot be! Besides, I

have just heard Captain Spade declare that they are lying to in view of the island.

To what nation do they belong? Have the English, desirous of avenging the destruction of the Sword, alone undertaken the expedition? May not cruisers of other nations be with them? I know not, and it is impossible to ascertain. And what does it matter, after all, so long as this haunt is destroyed, even though I should perish in the ruins like the heroic Lieutenant Davon and his brave crew?

Preparations for defence continue with coolness and method under Engineer Serko's superintendence. These pirates are obviously certain that they will be able to annihilate their assailants as soon as the latter enter the dangerous zone. Their confidence in Roch's fulgurator is absolute. Absorbed by the idea that these warship are powerless against them, they think neither of the difficulties nor menaces held out by the future.

I surmise that the trestles have been set up on the northwest coast with the grooves turned to send the engines to the north, west, and south. On the east, as already stated, the island is defended by the chain of reefs that stretches away to the Bermudas.

About nine o'clock I venture out of my cell. They will pay little attention to me, and perhaps I may escape notice in the obscurity. Ah! if I could get through that passage and hide behind some rock, so that I could witness what goes on at daybreak! And why should I not succeed

now that Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, Captain Spade, and the pirates have taken their posts outside?

The shores of the lake are deserted, but the entrance to the passage is kept by Count d'Artigas' Malay. I saunter, without any fixed idea, towards Thomas Roch's laboratory. This reminds me of my compatriot. I am, on reflection, disposed to think that he knows nothing about the presence of a squadron off Back Cup. Probably not until the last moment will Engineer Serko apprise him of its proximity, not till he brusquely points out to him the vengeance he can accomplish.

Then I conceive the idea of enlightening Thomas Roch, myself, of the responsibility he is incurring and of revealing to him in this supreme hour the character of the men who want him to co-operate in their criminal projects.

Yes, I will, attempt it, and may I succeed in fanning into a flame any spark of patriotism that may still linger in his rebellious soul!

Roch is shut up in his laboratory. He must be alone, for never does he allow any one to enter while he is preparing his deflagrator.

As I pass the jetty I notice that the tug is moored in its accustomed place. Here I judge it prudent to walk behind the first row of pillars and approach the laboratory laterally--which will enable me to see whether anybody is with him. When I have gone a short distance along the sombre avenue I see a bright light on the opposite side of the

lagoon. It is the electric light in Roch's laboratory as seen through a narrow window in the front.

Except in that particular spot, the southern shore of the lake is in darkness, whereas, in the opposite direction, the Beehive is lit up to its extremity at the northern wall. Through the opening in the dome, over the lake I can see the stars shining. The sky is clear, the tempest has abated, and the squalls no longer penetrate to the interior of Back Cup.

When near the laboratory, I creep along the wall and peep in at the window.

Thomas Roch is there alone. The light shines full on his face. If it is somewhat drawn, and the lines on the forehead are more pronounced, his physiognomy, at least, denotes perfect calmness and self-possession. No, he is no longer the inmate of Pavilion No. 17, the madman of Healthful House, and I ask myself whether he is not radically cured, whether there is no further danger of his reason collapsing in a final paroxysm.

He has just laid two glass phials upon the table, and holds a third in his hand. He holds it up to the light, and observes the limpidity of the liquid it contains.

I have half a mind to rush in, seize the tubes and smash them, but I reflect that he would have time to make some more of the stuff. Better

stick to my first plan.

I push the door open and enter.

"Thomas Roch!" I exclaim.

He has not heard, nor has he seen me.

"Thomas Roch!" I repeat.

He raises his head, turns and gazes at me.

"Ah! it is you, Simon Hart!" he replies calmly, even indifferently.

He knows my name. Engineer Serko must have informed him that it was Simon Hart, and not Keeper Gaydon who was watching over him at Healthful House.

"You know who I am?" I say.

"Yes, as I know what your object was in undertaking such a position. You lived in hopes of surprising a secret that they would not pay for at its just value!"

Thomas Roch knows everything, and perhaps it is just as well, in view of what I am going to say.

"Well, you did not succeed, Simon Hart, and as far as this is concerned," he added, flourishing the phial, "no one else has succeeded, or ever will succeed."

As I conjectured, he has not, then, made known the composition of his deflagrator.

Looking him straight in the face, I reply:

"You know who I am, Thomas Roch, but do you know in whose place you are?"

"In my own place!" he cries.

That is what Ker Karraje has permitted him to believe. The inventor thinks he is at home in Back Cup, that the riches accumulated in this cavern are his, and that if an attack is made upon the place, it will be with the object of stealing what belongs to him! And he will defend it under the impression that he has the right to do so!

"Thomas Roch," I continue, "listen to me."

"What do you want to say to me, Simon Hart?"

"This cavern into which we have been dragged, is occupied by a band of pirates, and--"

Roch does not give me time to complete the sentence--I doubt even whether he has understood me.

"I repeat," he interrupts vehemently, "that the treasures stored here are the price of my invention. They have paid me what I asked for my fulgurator--what I was everywhere else refused--even in my own country--which is also yours--and I will not allow myself to be despoiled!"

What can I reply to such insensate assertions? I, however, go on:

"Thomas Roch, do you remember Healthful House?"

"Healthful House, where I was sequestered after Warder Gaydon had been entrusted with the mission of spying upon me in order to rob me of my secret? I do, indeed."

"I never dreamed of depriving you of the benefit of your secret, Thomas Roch. I would never have accepted such a mission. But you were ill, your reason was affected, and your invention was too valuable to be lost. Yes, had you disclosed the secret during one of your fits you would have preserved all the benefit and all the honor of it."

"Really, Simon Hart!" Roch replies disdainfully. "Honor and benefit! Your assurances come somewhat late in the day. You forget that on the pretext of insanity, I was thrown into a dungeon. Yes, it was a pretext; for my reason has never left me, even for an hour, as you can



see from what I have accomplished since I am free."

"Free! Do you imagine you are free, Thomas Roch? Are you not more closely confined within the walls of this cavern than you ever were at Healthful House?"

"A man who is in his own home," he replies angrily, "goes out as he likes and when he likes. I have only to say the word and all the doors will open before me. This place is mine. Count d'Artigas gave it to me with everything it contains. Woe to those who attempt to attack it. I have here the wherewithal to annihilate them, Simon Hart!" The inventor waves the phial feverishly as he speaks."

"The Count d'Artigas has deceived you," I cry, "as he has deceived so many others. Under this name is dissembled one of the most formidable monsters who ever scoured the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. He is a bandit steeped in crime--he is the odious Ker Karraje!"

"Ker Karraje!" echoes Thomas Roch.

And I wonder if this name has not impressed him, if he remembers who the man is who bears it. If it did impress him, it was only momentarily.

"I do not know this Ker Karraje," he says, pointing towards the door to order me out. "I only know the Count d'Artigas."

"Thomas Roch," I persist, in a final effort, "the Count d'Artigas and Ker Karraje are one and the same person. If this man has purchased your secret, it is with the intention of ensuring impunity for his crimes and facilities for committing fresh ones. He is the chief of these pirates."

"Pirates!" cries Roch, whose irritation increases the more I press him. "The real pirates are those who dare to menace me even in this retreat, who tried it on with the Sword--for Serko has told me everything--who sought to steal in my own home what belongs to me, what is but the just price of my discovery."

"No, Thomas Roch, the pirates are those who have imprisoned you in this cavern of Back Cup, who will utilize your genius to defend it, and who will get rid of you when they are in entire possession of your secrets!"

Thomas Roch here interrupts me. He does not appear to listen to what I say. He has a fixed idea, that of vengeance, which has been skilfully worked upon by Engineer Serko, and in which his hatred is concentrated to the exclusion of everything else.

"The bandits," he hisses, "are those who spurned me without a hearing, who heaped injustice and ignominy upon me, who drove me from country to country, whereas I offered them superiority, invincibleness, omnipotence!"

It is the eternal story of the unappreciated inventor, to whom the indifferent or envious refuse the means of testing his inventions, to pay him the value he sets upon them. I know it well--and also know all the exaggeration that has been written upon this subject.

It is clearly no time for reasoning with Thomas Roch. My arguments are entirely lost upon the hapless dupe of Ker Karraje and his accomplices. In revealing to him the real name of the Count d'Artigas, and denouncing to him this band and their chief I had hoped to wean him from their influence and make him realize the criminal end they have in view. My hope was vain. He does not believe me. And then what does he care whether the brigand's name is Count 'd'Artigas or Ker Karraje? Is not he, Thomas Roch, master of Back Cup? Is he not the owner of these riches accumulated by twenty years of murder and rapine?

Disarmed before such moral degeneracy, knowing not how I can touch his ulcerated, irresponsible heart, I turn towards the door. It only remains for me to withdraw. What is to be, will be, since it is out of my power to prevent the frightful dénouement that will occur in a few hours.

Thomas Roch takes no more notice of me. He seems to have forgotten that I am here. He has resumed his manipulations without realizing that he is not alone.

There is only one means of preventing the imminent catastrophe. Throw myself upon Roch, place him beyond the power of doing harm--strike him--kill him--yes, kill him! It is my right--it is my duty!

I have no arms, but on a near-by shelf I see some tools--a chisel and a hammer. What is to prevent me from knocking his brains out? Once he is dead I have but to smash the phials and his invention dies with him. The warships can approach, land their men upon the island, demolish Back Cup with their shells. Ker Karraje and his band will be killed to a man. Can I hesitate at a murder that will bring about the chastisement of so many crimes?

I advance to the shelf and stretch forth my hand to seize the chisel.

As I do so, Thomas Roch turns round.

It is too late to strike. A struggle would ensue. The noise and his cries would be heard, for there are still some pirates not far off, I can even now hear some one approaching, and have only just time to fly if I would not be seen.

Nevertheless, I make one last attempt to awaken the sentiment of patriotism within him.

"Thomas Roch," I say, "warships are in sight. They have come to destroy this lair. Maybe one of them flies the French flag!"

He gazes at me. He was not aware that Back Cup is going to be attacked, and I have just apprised him of the fact. His brow darkens and his eyes flash.

"Thomas Roch, would you dare to fire upon your country's flag--the tricolor flag?"

He raises his head, shakes it nervously, and with a disdainful gesture:

"What do you mean by 'your country?' I no longer have any country, Simon Hart. The inventor spurned no longer has a country. Where he finds an asylum, there is his fatherland! They seek to take what is mine. I will defend it, and woe, woe to those who dare to attack me!"

Then rushing to the door of the laboratory and throwing it violently open he shouts so loudly that he must be heard at the Beehive:

"Go! Get you gone!"

I have not a second to lose, and I dash out.