

## CHAPTER XVII.

### ONE AGAINST FIVE.

For a whole hour I wander about among Back Cup's dark vaults, amid the stone trees, to the extreme limit of the cavern. It is here that I have so often sought an issue, a crevice, a crack through which I might squeeze to the shore of the island.

My search has been futile. In my present condition, a prey to indefinable hallucinations it seems to me that these walls are thicker than ever, that they are gradually closing in upon and will crush me.

How long this mental trouble lasts I cannot say. But I afterwards find myself on the Beehive side, opposite the cell in which I cannot hope for either repose or sleep. Sleep, when my brain is in a whirl of excitement? Sleep, when I am near the end of a situation that threatened to be prolonged for years and years?

What will the end be as far as I am personally concerned? What am I to expect from the attack upon Back Cup, the success of which I have been unable to assure by placing Thomas Roch beyond the possibility of doing harm? His engines are ready to be launched, and as soon as the vessels have reached the dangerous zone they will be blown to atoms.

However this may be, I am condemned to pass the remaining hours of the

night in my cell. The time has come for me to go in. At daybreak I shall see what is best for me to do. Meanwhile, for aught I know I may hear the thunder of Roch's fulgurator as it destroys the ships approaching to make a night attack.

I take a last look round. On the opposite side a light, a single light, is burning. It is the lamp in Roch's laboratory and it casts its reflection upon the waters of the lake.

No one is about, and it occurs to me that the pirates must have taken up their lighting positions outside and that the Beehive is empty.

Then, impelled by an irresistible instinct, instead of returning to my cell, I creep along the wall, listening, spying, ready to hide if I hear voices or footsteps.

I at length reach the passage.

God in heaven! No one is on guard there--the passage is free!

Without giving myself time to reflect I dart into the dark hole, and grope my way along it. Soon I feel a fresher air--the salt, vivifying air of the sea, that I have not breathed for five months. I inspire it with avidity, with all the power of my lungs.

The outer extremity of the passage appears against the star-studded sky. There is not even a shadow in the way. Perhaps I shall be able to

get outside.

I lay down, and crawl along noiselessly to the orifice and peer out.

Not a soul is in sight!

By skirting the rocks towards the east, to the side which cannot be approached from the sea on account of the reefs and which is not likely to be watched, I reach a narrow excavation about two hundred and twenty-five yards from where the point of the coast extends towards the northwest.

At last I am out of the cavern. I am not free, but it is the beginning of freedom.

On the point the forms of a few sentries stand out against the clear sky, so motionless that they might be mistaken for pieces of the rock.

On the horizon to the west the position lights of the warship show in a luminous line.

From a few gray patches discernable in the east, I calculate that it must be about five o'clock in the morning.

November 18.--It is now light enough for me to be able to complete my notes relating the details of my visit to Thomas Roch's laboratory--the last lines my hand will trace, perhaps.

I have begun to write, and shall dot down the incidents of the attack as they occur.

The light damp mist that hangs over the water soon lifts under the influence of the breeze, and at last I can distinguish the warships.

There are five of them, and they are lying in a line about six miles off, and consequently beyond the range of Roch's engines.

My fear that after passing in sight of the Bermudas the squadron would continue on its way to the Antilles or Mexico was therefore unfounded. No, there it is, awaiting broad daylight in order to attack Back Cup.

There is a movement on the coast. Three or four pirates emerge from the rocks, the sentries are recalled and draw in, and the entire band is soon assembled. They do not seek shelter inside the cavern, knowing full well that the ships can never get near enough for the shells of the big guns to reach, the island.

I run no risk of being discovered, for only my head protrudes above the hole in the rock and no one is likely to come this way. The only thing that worries me is that Serko, or somebody else may take it into his head to see if I am in my cell, and if necessary to lock me in, though what they have to fear from me I cannot conceive.

At twenty-five minutes past seven: Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko and

Captain Spade advance to the extremity of the point, where they sweep the north-western horizon with their telescopes. Behind them the six trestles are installed, in the grooves of which are Roch's autopropulsive engines.

Thirty-five minutes past seven: Smoke arises from the stacks of the warships, which are getting under way and will soon be within range of the engines.

Horrible cries of joy, salvos of hurrahs--howls of wild beasts I might more appropriately say--arise from the pirate horde.

At this moment Engineer Serko quits Ker Karraje, whom he leaves with Captain Spade, and enters the cavern, no doubt to fetch Thomas Roch.

When Ker Karraje orders the latter to launch his engines against the ships will he remember what I told him? Will not his crime appear to him in all its horror? Will he refuse to obey? No, I am only too convinced of the contrary. It is useless to entertain any illusion on the subject. The inventor believes he is on his own property. They are going to attack it. He will defend it.

The five warships slowly advance, making for the point. Perhaps they imagine on board that Thomas Roch has not given up his last and greatest secret to the pirates--and, as a matter of fact, he had not done so when I threw the keg into the lagoon. If the commanders propose to land storming parties and the ships advance into the

zone of danger there will soon be nothing left of them but bits of shapeless floating wreckage.

Here comes Thomas Roch accompanied by Engineer Serko. On issuing from the passage both go to the trestle that is pointing towards the leading warship.

Ker Karraje and Captain Spade are awaiting them.

As far as I am able to judge, Roch is calm. He knows what he is going to do. No hesitation troubles the soul of the hapless man whom hatred has led astray.

Between his fingers shines the glass phial containing the deflagrator liquid.

He then gazes towards the nearest ship, which is about five miles' distant.

She is a cruiser of about two thousand five hundred tons--not more.

She flies no flag, but from her build I take her to belong to a nation for which no Frenchman can entertain any particular regard.

The four other warships remain behind.

It is this cruiser which is to begin the attack.

Let her use her guns, then, since the pirates allow her to approach, and may the first of her projectiles strike Thomas Roch!

While Engineer Serko is estimating the distance, Roch places himself behind the trestle. Three engines are resting on it, charged with the explosive, and which are assured a long trajectory by the fusing matter without it being necessary to impart a gyratory movement to them--as in the case of Inventor Turpin's gyroscopic projectiles. Besides, if they drop within a few hundred yards of the vessel, they will be quite near enough to utterly destroy it.

The time has come.

"Thomas Roch!" Engineer Serko cries, and points to the cruiser.

The latter is steaming slowly towards the northwestern point of the island and is between four and five miles off.

Roch nods assent, and waves them back from the trestle.

Ker Karraje, Captain Spade and the others draw back about fifty paces.

Thomas Roch then takes the stopper from the phial which he holds in his right hand, and successively pours into a hole in the rear-end of each engine a few drops of the liquid, which mixes with the fusing matter.

Forty-five seconds elapse--the time necessary for the combination to be effected--forty-five seconds during which it seems to me that my heart ceases to beat.

A frightful whistling is then heard, and the three engines tear through the air, describing a prolonged curve at a height of three hundred feet, and pass the cruiser.

Have they missed it? Is the danger over?

No! the engines, after the manner of Artillery Captain Chapel's discoid projectile, return towards the doomed vessel like an Australian boomerang.

The next instant the air is shaken with a violence comparable to that which would be caused by the explosion of a magazine of melinite or dynamite, Back Cup Island trembles to its very foundations.

The cruiser has disappeared,--blown to pieces. The effect is that of the Zalinski shell, but centupled by the infinite power of Roch's fulgurator.

What shouts the bandits raise as they rush towards the extremity of the point! Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade remain rooted to the spot, hardly able to credit the evidence of their own eyes.



As to Thomas Roch, he stands with folded arms, and flashing eyes, his face radiant with pride and triumph.

I understand, while I abhor his feelings.

If the other warships approach they will share the same fate as the cruiser. They will inevitably be destroyed. Oh! if they would but give up the struggle and withdraw to safety, even though my last hope would go with them! The nations can consult and arrive at some other plan for destroying the island. They can surround the place with a belt of ships that the pirates cannot break through and starve them to death like so many rats in a hole.

But I know that the warships will not retire, even though they know they are going to certain death. One after the other they will all make the attempt.

And I am right. Signals are exchanged between them. Almost immediately clouds of black smoke arise and the vessels again advance.

One of them, under forced draught, distances the others in her anxiety to bring her big guns quickly into action.

At all risks I issue from my hole, and gaze at the on-coming warship with feverish eyes, awaiting, without being able to prevent it, another catastrophe.

This vessel, which visibly grows larger as it comes nearer, is a cruiser of about the same tonnage as the one that preceded her. No flag is flying and I cannot guess her nationality. She continues steaming at full speed in an effort to pass the zone of danger before other engines can be launched. But how can she escape them since they will swoop back upon her?

Thomas Roch places himself behind the second trestle as the cruiser passes on to the surface of the abyss in which she will in turn soon be swallowed up.

No sound disturbs the stillness.

Suddenly the rolling of drums and the blare of bugles is heard on board the warship.

I know those bugle calls: they are French bugles! Great God! She is one of the ships of my own country's navy and a French inventor is about to destroy her!

No! it shall not be. I will rush towards Thomas Roch--shout to him that she is a French ship. He does not, cannot, know it.

At a sign from Engineer Serko the inventor has raised the phial.

The bugles sound louder and more strident. It is the salute to the

flag. A flag unfurls to the breeze--the tricolor, whose blue, white and red sections stand out luminously against the sky.

Ah! What is this? I understand! Thomas Roch is fascinated at the sight of his national emblem. Slowly he lowers his arm as the flag flutters up to the mast-head. Then he draws back and covers his eyes with his hand.

Heavens above! All sentiment of patriotism is not then dead in his ulcerated heart, seeing that it beats at the sight of his country's flag!

My emotion is not less than his. At the risk of being seen--and what do I now care if I am seen?--I creep over the rocks. I will be there to sustain Thomas Roch and prevent him from weakening. If I pay for it with my life I will once more adjure him in the name of his country. I will cry to him:

"Frenchman, it is the tricolor that flies on yonder ship! Frenchman, it is a very part of France that is approaching you! Frenchman, would you be so criminal as to strike it?"

But my intervention will not be necessary. Thomas Roch is not a prey to one of the fits to which he was formerly subject. He is perfectly sane.

When he found himself facing the flag he understood--and drew back.

A few pirates approach to lead him to the trestle again. He struggles and pushes them from him.

Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko run up. They point to the rapidly advancing ship. They order him to launch his engines.

Thomas Roch refuses.

Captain Spade and the others, mad with rage, menace him--curse him--strike him--try to wrest the phial from him.

Roch throws it on the ground and crushes it under foot.

Then panic seizes upon the crowd of wretches. The cruiser has passed the zone and they cannot return her fire. Shells begin to rain all over the island, bursting the rocks in every direction.

But where is Thomas Roch? Has he been killed by one of the projectiles? No, I see him for the last time as he dashes into the passage.

Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko and the others follow him to seek shelter inside of Back Cup.

I will not return to the cavern at any price, even if I get killed by staying where I am.

I will jot down my final notes and when the French sailors land on the point I will go--

END OF ENGINEER SIMON HART'S NOTES.