

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON BOARD THE "TONNANT."

After the failure of Lieutenant Davon's mission with the Sword, the English authorities waited in vain for the expedition to return, and the conviction at length gained ground that the bold sailors had perished; but whether the Sword had been lost by striking against a rock or had been destroyed by Ker Karraje's pirates, could not, of course, be ascertained.

The object of the expedition, based upon the indications of the document found in the keg that was thrown up on the shore at St. George, was to carry off Thomas Roch ere his engines were completed. The French inventor having been recovered--without forgetting Engineer Simon Hart--he was to be handed over to the care of the Bermudan authorities. That done, there would be nothing to fear from his fulgurator when the island was attacked.

When, however, the Sword had been given up for lost, another expedition of a different kind, was decided upon.

The time that had elapsed--nearly eight weeks--from the date of the document found in the keg, had to be taken into consideration. It was thought that during the interval, Ker Karraje might have gained possession of Roch's secrets.

An entente concluded between the maritime powers, resulted in the sending of five warships to Bermudan waters. As there was a vast cavern inside Back Cup mountain, it was decided to attempt to bring the latter down like the walls of a bastion, by bombarding it with powerful modern artillery.

The squadron assembled at the entrance to the Chesapeake, in Virginia, and sailed for the archipelago, which was sighted on the evening of November 17.

The next morning the vessel selected for the first attack, steamed forward. It was about four and a half miles from the island, when three engines, after passing the vessel, swerved round and exploded about sixty yards from her. She sank immediately.

The effect of the explosion, which was superior to any previously obtained by new explosives, was instantaneous. Even at the distance they were from the spot where it occurred, the four remaining ships felt the shock severely.

Two things were to be deduced from this sudden catastrophe:

- 1.--The pirate Ker Karraje was in possession of Roch's fulgurator.
- 2.--The new engine possessed the destructive power attributed to it by its inventor.

After the disappearance of the unfortunate cruiser, the other vessels lowered boats to pick up a few survivors who were clinging to the floating wreckage.

Then it was that the signals were exchanged and the warships started towards the island.

The swiftest of them, the Tonnant, a French cruiser, forged ahead while the others forced their draught in an effort to catch up with her.

The Tonnant, at the risk of being blown to pieces in turn, penetrated the danger zone half a mile, and then ran up her flag while manoeuvring to bring her heavy guns into action.

From the bridge the officers could see Ker Karraje's band scattered on the rocks of the island.

The occasion was an excellent one for getting a shot at them before the bombardment of their retreat was begun, and fire was opened with the result that the pirates made a rush to get into the cavern.

A few minutes later there was a shock terrific enough to shake the sky down.

Where the mountain had been, naught but a heap of smoking, crumbling

rocks was to be seen. Back Cup had become a group of jagged reefs against which the sea, that had been thrown back like a gigantic tidal wave, was beating and frothing.

What was the cause of the explosion?

Had it been voluntarily caused by the pirates when they realized that escape was impossible?

The Tonnant had not been seriously damaged by the flying rocks. Her boats were lowered and made towards all that was left of Back Cup.

The landing parties explored the ruins, and found a few horribly mangled corpses. Not a vestige of the cavern was to be seen.

One body, and one only, was found intact. It was lying on the northeast side of the reefs. In one hand, tightly clasped, was a note-book, the last line of which was incomplete.

A close examination showed that the man was still breathing. He was conveyed on board the Tonnant, where it was learned from the note-book that he was Simon Hart.

For some time his life was despaired of, but he was eventually brought round, and from the answers made to the questions addressed to him the following conclusion was reached:

Moved to his very soul at the sight of the tricolor flag, being at last conscious of the crime of lèse-patrie he was about to commit, Thomas Roch rushed through the passage to the magazine where a considerable quantity of his explosive was stored. Then, before he could be prevented, brought about the terrible explosion which destroyed the island of Back Cup.

And now Ker Karraje and his pirates have disappeared--and with them Thomas Roch and the secret of his invention.

THE END.

End of the Voyage Extraordinaire