

slight resistance to shocks in her crippled condition, so that the great waves might prove fatal to her.

Gacquoil stood thoughtfully at the helm. To face ill fortune with a bold front is the habit of those accustomed to rule at sea.

La Vieuville, who was the sort of man that becomes gay in the midst of disaster, accosted Gacquoil.

"Well, pilot," said he, "the squall has missed fire. Its attempt at sneezing comes to nothing. We shall get out of it. We shall have wind, and that is all."

Gacquoil replied seriously—"Where there is wind there are waves."

Neither laughing or sad, such is the sailor. The response had a disquieting significance. For a leaky ship to encounter a high sea is to fill rapidly. Gacquoil emphasised his prognostic by a frown. Perhaps La Vieuville had spoken almost jovial and gay words a little too soon after the catastrophe of the gun and its gunner. There are things which bring bad luck at sea. The ocean is secretive; one never knows what it means to do; it is necessary to be always on guard against it.

La Vieuville felt the necessity of getting back to gravity. "Where are we, pilot?" he asked.

The pilot replied—"We are in the hands of God."

A pilot is a master; he must always be allowed to do what he will, and often he must be allowed to say what he pleases. Generally this species of man speaks little.

La Vieuville moved away. He had asked a question of the pilot; it was the horizon which replied. The sea suddenly cleared.

The fogs which spread across the waves were quickly rent; the dark confusion of the billows spread out to the horizon's verge in a shadowy half-light, and this was what became visible.

The sky seemed covered with a lid of clouds, but they no longer touched the water; in the east appeared a whiteness, which was the dawn; in the west trembled a corresponding pallor, which was the setting moon. These two ghostly presences drew opposite each other narrow bands of pale lights along the horizon, between the sombre sea and the gloomy sky. Across each of these lines of light were sketched black profiles upright and immovable.

To the west, against the moonlit sky, stood out sharply three lofty rocks, erect as Celtic cromlechs.

To the east, against the pale horizon of morning, rose eight sail ranged in order at regular intervals in a formidable array.

The three rocks were a reef; the eight ships a squadron.

Behind the vessel was the Minquiers, a rock of an evil renown; before her, the French cruisers. To the west, the abyss; to the east, carnage; she was between a shipwreck and a combat.

For meeting the reef, the corvette had a broken hull, rigging disjointed, masts tottering in their foundations; for facing battle, she had a battery where one-and-twenty cannon out of thirty were dismantled, and whose best gunners were dead. The dawn was yet faint; there still remained a little night to them. This might even last for some time, since it was principally made by thick high clouds presenting the solid appearance of a vault. The wind, which had succeeded in dispersing the lower mists, was forcing the corvette towards the Minquiers. In her excessive feebleness and dilapidation, she scarcely obeyed the helm; she rolled rather than sailed, and smitten by the waves, she yielded passively to their impulse. The Minquiers, a dangerous reef, was still more rugged at that time than it is now. Several towers of this citadel of the abyss have been razed by the incessant chopping of the sea. The configuration of reefs changes; it is not idly that waves are called the swords of the ocean; each tide is the stroke of a saw. At that period, to strike on the Minquiers was to perish.

As for the cruisers, they were the squadron of Cancale afterwards so celebrated under the command of that Captain Duchesne whom Loquillo called "Father Duchesne."

The situation was critical. During the struggle of the unchained carronade, the corvette had, unobserved, got out of her course, and sailed rather towards Granville than Saint Malo. Even if she had been in a condition to have been handled and to carry sail, the Minquiers would have barred her return towards Jersey, and the cruisers would have prevented her reaching France.

For the rest, tempest there was none. But, as the pilot had said, there was a swell. The sea, rolling under a rough wind and above a rocky bottom, was savage.

The sea never says at once what it wishes. The gulf hides everything, even trickery. One might almost say that the sea has a plan; it advances and recoils; it proposes and contradicts itself; it sketches a storm and renounces its design; it promises the abyss and does not hold to it; it threatens the north and strikes the south.

All night the corvette *Claymore* had had the fog and the fear of the storm; the sea had belied itself, but in a savage fashion; it had sketched in the tempest, but developed the reef. It was shipwreck just the same, under another form.

So that to destruction upon the rocks was added extermination by combat—one enemy complementing the other.

La Vieuville cried amidst his brave merriment—"Shipwreck here—battle there! We have thrown double-fives!"

VIII.—9 = 380.

The corvette was little more than a wreck.

In the wan, dim light, amidst the blackness of the clouds, in the confused, changing line of the horizon, in the sullenness of the waves, there was a sepulchral solemnity. Except for the hissing breath of the hostile wind, all was silent. The catastrophe rose with majesty from the gulf. It resembled rather an apparition than an attack. Nothing stirred among the rocks; nothing moved on the vessels. It was an indescribable, colossal silence. Had they to deal with something real? One might have believed it a dream sweeping across the sea. There are legends of such visions; the corvette was in a manner between the demon reef and the phantom fleet.

Count du Boisberthelot gave orders in a half-voice to La Vieuville, who descended to the gun-deck; then the captain seized his telescope and stationed himself at the stern by the side of the pilot.

Gacquoil's whole effort was to keep the corvette to the wind; for if struck on the side by the wind and the sea she would inevitably capsize.

"Pilot," said the captain, "where are we?"

"Off the Minquiers."

"On which side?"

"The bad one."

"What bottom?"

"Small rocks."

"Can we turn broadside on?"

"We can always die," said the pilot.

The captain levelled his glass towards the west and examined the Minquiers; then he turned to the east and studied the sail in sight.

The pilot continued, as if talking to himself—"It is the Minquiers. It is where the laughing sea-mew and the great black-hooded gull rest, when they make for Holland."

In the meantime the captain counted the sail.

There were, indeed, eight vessels, drawn up in line, and lifting their warlike profiles above the water. In the centre was seen the lofty sweep of a three-decker.

The captain questioned the pilot. "Do you know those ships?"

"Indeed, yes!" replied Gacquoil.

"What are they?"

"It is the squadron."

"Of France?"

"Of the devil."

There was a silence. The captain resumed—"The whole body of cruisers are there."

"Not all."

In fact, on the 2nd of April, Valasé had announced to the Convention that ten frigates and six ships of the line were cruising in the channel. The recollection of this came into the captain's mind.

"Right," said he; "the squadron consists of sixteen vessels. There are only eight here."

"The rest," said Gacquoil, "are lagging below, the whole length of the coast, and on the look-out."

The captain, still with his glass to his eye, murmured—"A three-decker, two first-class frigates, and five second-class."

"But I too," growled Gacquoil, "have marked them out."

"Good vessels," said the captain; "I have done something myself towards commanding them."

"As for me," said Gacquoil, "I have seen them close by. I do not mistake one for the other. I have their description in my head."

The captain handed his telescope to the pilot.

"Pilot, can you make out the three-decker clearly?"

"Yes, captain: it is the *Obé d'Or*."

"Which they have re-baptized," said the captain. "She was formerly the *Etats de Bourgogne*. A new vessel. A hundred and twenty-eight guns."

He took a pencil and note-book from his pocket and made the figure 128 on one of the leaves.

He continued—"Pilot, what is the first sail to larboard?"

"It is the *Expérimentée*. The"

"First class frigate. Fifty-two guns. She was fitted out at Brest two months since."

The captain marked the figures 52 on his note-book.

"Pilot," he asked, "what is the second sail to larboard?"

"The *Dryade*."

"First-class frigate. Forty eighteen-pounders. She has been in India. She has a good naval reputation."

And beneath the 52 he put the figure 40; then lifting his head—"Now to starboard."

"Commander, those are all second-class frigates. There are five of them."

"Which is the first, starting from the vessel?"

"The *Résolue*."

"Thirty-two pieces of eighteen. And the second?"

"The *Richemont*."

"Same. The next?"

"The *Athéiste*."

"Odd name to take to sea. What next?"

"The *Calypso*."

"And then?"

"The *Preneuse*."

"Five frigates, each of thirty-two guns."

The captain wrote 160 below the first figures.

"Pilot," said he, "you recognise them perfectly."

"And you," replied Gacquoil, "you know them well, captain. To recognise is something, to know is better."

The captain had his eyes fixed on his note book, and added between his teeth—"One hundred and twenty-eight; fifty-two; forty; a hundred and sixty"

At this moment La Vieuville came on deck again.

"Chevalier," the captain cried out to him, "we are in sight of three hundred and eighty cannon."

"So be it," said La Vieuville.

"You come from the inspection, La Vieuville: how many guns exactly have we fit for firing?"

"Nine."

"So be it," said Boisberthelot, in his turn.

He took the telescope from the pilot's hands and studied the horizon.

The eight vessels, silent and black, seemed motionless, but they grew larger.

They were approaching imperceptibly.

La Vieuville made a military salute. "Commander," said he, "this is my report. I distrusted this corvette *Claymore*. It is always annoying to embark suddenly on a vessel that does not know you or that does not love you. English ship—traitor to Frenchmen. That slut of a carronade proved it. I have made the round. Anchors good. They are not made of half-finished iron, but forged bars soldered under the till-hammer. The flukes are solid. Cables excellent: easy to pay out; regulation length, a hundred and twenty fathoms. Munitions in plenty. Six gunners dead. A hundred and seventy-one rounds apiece."

"Because there are but nine pieces left," murmured the captain.

Boisberthelot levelled his telescope with the horizon. The squadron was still slowly approaching.

The carronades possess one advantage—three men are enough to work them; but they have one inconvenience—they do not carry so far or aim so true as guns. It would be necessary to let the squadron get within range of the carronades.

The captain gave his orders in a low voice. There was silence throughout the vessel. No signal to clear for battle had been given, but it was done. The corvette was as much disabled for combat with men as against the waves. Everything that was possible was done with this ruin of a war-vessel. By the gangway near the tiller-ropes were heaped all the hawsers and spare cables for strengthening the masts in case of need. The cockpit was put in order for the wounded. According to the naval use of that time, the deck was barricaded, which is a guaranty against balls, but not against bullets. The ball-gauges were brought, although it was a little late, to verify the calibres; but so many incidents had not been foreseen. Each sailor received a cartridge-box, and stuck into his belt a pair of pistols and a dirk. The hammocks were stowed away, the artillery pointed, the musketry prepared, the axes and grapples laid out, the cartridge and bullet stores made ready, and the powder-room opened. Every man was at his post. All was done without a word being spoken, like arrangements carried on in the chamber of a dying person. All was haste and gloom.

Then the corvette showed her broadside. She had six anchors, like a frigate. The whole six were cast; the cock-bill anchor forward, the kedger aft, the flood-anchor towards the open, the ebb-anchor on the side to the rocks, the bower-anchor to starboard, and the sheet-anchor to larboard.

The nine carronades still in condition were put into form; the whole nine on one side, that towards the enemy.

The squadron had on its part not less silently completed its manœuvres. The eight vessels now formed a semicircle, of which the Minquiers made the chord. The *Claymore*, enclosed in this semicircle, and into the bargain tied down by her anchors, was backed by the reef—that is to say, by shipwreck.

It was like a pack of hounds about a wild boar, not yet giving tongue, but showing their teeth.

It seemed as if on the one side and the other they awaited some signal.

The gunners of the *Claymore* stood to their pieces.

Boisberthelot said to La Vieuville, "I should like to open fire."

"A coquette's whim," replied La Vieuville.

To be continued.

\* Marine Archives: State of the Fleet in 1793.

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